

# Canada's First Shopping Centre: The Early Evolution of West Vancouver's Park Royal

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April 29th, 2016

Report prepared at the request of the West Vancouver Historical Society, in partial fulfillment of  
UBC Geography 429: Research in Historical Geography, for Dr. David Brownstein.

### Abstract

The introduction of shopping centres to the retail environment in Canada in the twentieth century was an idea both innovative and risky. Up until the 1950's, Canadian retail had been centralized within the urban cores, an organizational trait which would be altered following the addition of Canada's first shopping centre, Park Royal, in 1950. Park Royal was a thoughtfully crucial component in the success of West Vancouver as a desirable residential neighbourhood situated within the periphery of Vancouver's cityscape. The addition of regional shopping centres like Park Royal altered the shopping experience for suburban residents by localizing goods and services which had previously only been accessible outside of resident's immediate areas. Shopping centres were modelled after existing shopping districts in North America which tended to cater towards the automobile-owning middle and upper class consumer. Eventually, the success of the shopping centre could be seen in mass adoption of retail development nationwide. In support of the West Vancouver Historical Society's next book, this composition will explore the urban development in Park Royal Shopping Centre's first thirty years of growth.

## Introduction

In the period before the addition of Canada's first shopping centre, the retail environment in suburban spaces was minimal. Retail activity was focused primarily within the various shopping districts of the urban cores, to which consumers would flock to purchase goods both for necessity and, less commonly, for leisure. It was not until 1950, when Park Royal was completed, that a shift in retail locale was witnessed, prompting a phenomenon which soon after spread rapidly across Canada like it had years previous within both the urban and suburban spaces of our neighbours to the south. Through consideration of West Vancouver's history of investment and development and an understanding of the history of retail itself, I will argue that Park Royal was a thoughtfully crucial component in the success of West Vancouver as a desirable residential neighbourhood situated within the periphery of Vancouver's cityscape. The success of the shopping centre itself can be attributed to its location, suburban planning techniques used by the West Vancouver municipality, and the forces, both social and economic, which proved essential to the growth of regional shopping centres nationwide.

## A Brief History of West Vancouver

The early years of West Vancouver's history were those of slow pace and limited development. Residency of the area was primarily during the summer months when patrons would flock to the southern facing beaches and set up home in cottage-style constructs along the shoreline between Ambleside and Caulfeild's Point Atkinson.<sup>1</sup> There were few full-time residents, and for the most part the population of West Vancouver fluctuated in accordance with the seasons. For the large majority of West Vancouver's early history however, the area was

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<sup>1</sup> Harold Kalman, Ron Phillips, and Robin Ward, *Exploring Vancouver: The Essential Architectural Guide* (Vancouver, B.C.: UBC Press, 1993); Bruce Ramsey, *A Place of Excellence: A Chronicle of West Vancouver, 1912-1987* (West Vancouver: Corporation of the District of West Vancouver, 1986).

“sparsely populated”.<sup>2</sup> The main industry, linked inherently to development, was logging, which was pursued throughout the densely forested North Shore mountains since soon after the earliest contact of European settlers to Vancouver in the late 1700’s.<sup>3</sup> On February 27th, 1912, the West Vancouver municipality, which at the time was home to “only a few hundred persons”, was established.<sup>4</sup> Soon after, increased interest from various investors became apparent and the municipality was quick to sell off portions of land conceivably in the hope of increasing the little residency it had.

#### The British Pacific Properties Limited.

The most dominant company of the investors interested in purchasing and developing land in West Vancouver was the British Pacific Properties Limited. Financially backed by the Guinness brewing family, combined with enticement from civil engineer Alfred J. T. Taylor, the company purchased over 4,000 acres of land from the West Vancouver municipality for \$80,000, roughly \$20 per acre.<sup>5</sup> A portion of this area would become the site of the company’s first venture in West Vancouver: the British Properties neighbourhood. Situated within the forested valley along the western side of the Capilano River, as depicted in fig. 1, the British Properties juxtaposed the city landscape seen directly south through the trees. In a Town Planning Act of 1926 a decision to keep West Vancouver “exclusively residential” was reached, subsequently “[banning] industry” outright.<sup>6</sup> Development of the British Properties, or Capilano

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel Francis, *L.D: Mayor Louis Taylor and the Rise of Vancouver* (Vancouver, B.C: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Francis Mansbridge, *Cottages to Community: The Story of West Vancouver’s Neighbourhoods* (West Vancouver: West Vancouver Historical Society, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Peter H. Oberlander and Ira M. Robinson, “Living and Working in West Vancouver, British Columbia: An Economic Analysis, As a Basis for Community Planning” (Corporation of the District of West Vancouver, 1954), District of West Vancouver Archives.

<sup>5</sup> Bruce Macdonald, *Vancouver: A Visual History*, (Vancouver, BC: Talonbooks, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> Harold Kalman, Ron Phillips, and Robin Ward, *Exploring Vancouver: The Essential Architectural Guide* (Vancouver, B.C: UBC Press, 1993).

Estates as they were formerly known, began in 1931.<sup>7</sup> The Properties boasted a “country atmosphere” with privacy and pristine wilderness, while still remaining conveniently accessible from Downtown Vancouver.<sup>8</sup> The development of the neighbourhood, which occurred within a post-Depression era teeming with hardship, “helped the municipality pull through the hardest years...[and] provided employment [in the area]...when it was badly needed”.<sup>9</sup>



*Fig. 1. Aerial view of Capilano Golf Course and British Properties development, West Vancouver, BC, 1955. Photo by British Pacific Properties Ltd., West Vancouver Archives, British Pacific Properties fonds. West Vancouver Archive Collection. Reference code 55.011.WVA.BPP.*

Soon after the British Properties neighbourhood began to pick up momentum amongst Vancouver’s affluent business class, the second venture for the British Pacific Properties Limited was conceived. The Lions Gate Bridge, as seen in fig. 2, proved to be the crucial linkage of the British Properties to Vancouver, and it effectively minimized the commute from

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<sup>7</sup> British Pacific Properties Ltd, *Capilano Estates*, West Vancouver Archives Collection (Vancouver: British Pacific Properties Ltd, 1938).

<sup>8</sup> West Vancouver Archives, “British Properties: Overlooking the Blue Pacific”, West Vancouver Archives Collection, ref. no. 0038.WVA.DOC. (West Vancouver: 1938-1950).

<sup>9</sup> Peter H. Oberlander and Ira M. Robinson, “Living and Working in West Vancouver, British Columbia: An Economic Analysis, As a Basis for Community Planning” (Corporation of the District of West Vancouver, 1954), District of West Vancouver Archives.

West Vancouver to the city to a mere ten minutes drive.<sup>10</sup> Before the addition of the bridge, those included in West Vancouver's "commuter community" did so by means of passenger ferry.<sup>11</sup> As early as 1909, the ferry service transported individuals from Ambleside to the city and back.<sup>12</sup> A year after the bridge's opening, however, ferry usage dropped by twenty-five percent, and within ten years it was eventually phased out.<sup>13</sup> Mass influx of visitors and eventually increased residency of the area can be attributed to the construction of the bridge, as it allowed a direct and very fast alternative linkage for commuters.



Fig. 2. Vancouver 904 over Lions Gate Bridge, West Vancouver, BC, October 4, 1938. Photo by Joseph Leyland, West Vancouver Archives, Joseph Leyland fonds. West Vancouver Archive Collection. Reference code 129.WVA.LEY.

<sup>10</sup> British Pacific Properties Ltd, "Your Guide to Park Royal Shopping Centre, West Vancouver, B.C.", West Vancouver Archives Collection, ref. no. 2101.02.WVA.BPP. (West Vancouver: March, 1951); Lilia D'Acres and Donald Luxton, *Lions Gate*, Talonbooks, 1999.

<sup>11</sup> Peter H. Oberlander and Ira M. Robinson, "Living and Working in West Vancouver, British Columbia: An Economic Analysis, As a Basis for Community Planning" (Corporation of the District of West Vancouver, 1954), District of West Vancouver Archives.

<sup>12</sup> Harold Kalman, Ron Phillips, and Robin Ward, *Exploring Vancouver: The Essential Architectural Guide* (Vancouver, B.C: UBC Press, 1993).

<sup>13</sup> Peter H. Oberlander and Ira M. Robinson, "Living and Working in West Vancouver, British Columbia: An Economic Analysis, As a Basis for Community Planning" (Corporation of the District of West Vancouver, 1954), District of West Vancouver Archives.

The third, and arguably most risky, venture for the British Pacific Properties Limited was Park Royal Shopping Centre, which was completed in 1950. Both the British Properties and Lions Gate Bridge had succeeded in growing the residential occupancy of West Vancouver, seen by vast population growth in the region. In the thirty years prior to the shopping centre's opening, West Vancouver saw a 97% increase in population between 1921 and 1931, and subsequent 75% and 67% increases in the following two decades.<sup>14</sup> This growth rate was consistently higher than in any other municipality across Metro Vancouver at this time. Not only was the community of West Vancouver gaining popularity amongst those looking to own property in the area, it was also in the beginning stages of urban development, veering towards a separate and substantially sustained city in itself. Although very much a "pioneer" project,<sup>15</sup> it was hoped by developers and urban planners alike that Park Royal would achieve in localizing consumption to its retail establishments, altering the normal shopping activity known to Canadians up to this point.

### Park Royal Shopping Centre

There were two major phases of Park Royal's development: the North and the South, named as such due to their location on either side of West Vancouver's "main [traffic] artery" Marine Drive.<sup>16</sup> Park Royal North, which was completed in 1950, cost the British Pacific

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<sup>14</sup> Peter H. Oberlander and Ira M. Robinson, "Living and Working in West Vancouver, British Columbia: An Economic Analysis, As a Basis for Community Planning" (Corporation of the District of West Vancouver, 1954), District of West Vancouver Archives.

<sup>15</sup> Siri Bertelsen, "The Transformation of the Regional Shopping Centre: An Examination of Six Case Studies in Vancouver B.C.", Unpublished MA Thesis, Department of Geography, University of British Columbia (Vancouver: 1993).

<sup>16</sup> Peter H. Oberlander and Ira M. Robinson, "Living and Working in West Vancouver, British Columbia: An Economic Analysis, As a Basis for Community Planning" (Corporation of the District of West Vancouver, 1954), District of West Vancouver Archives, 2.

Properties Limited a total of \$1.5 million to construct.<sup>17</sup> It was 11.5 acres in size and contained 125,000 square feet of retail space.<sup>18</sup> The vision of architect C. B. K. Van Norman, seen alongside engineer E. Richardson in fig. 3, was that of a spacious and open one-story structure. Modelled off of various shopping districts across Canada, such as Toronto's Yonge Street, Montreal's St. Catherine Street and Vancouver's Granville and Hastings Streets,<sup>19</sup> and existing shopping centres in the western United States in both Oregon and California, the main motivation for Park Royal's location at the north end of the Lions Gate Bridge was attracting the wealth and prosperity known to be held within the West Vancouver community. Essentially, the new addition aimed to aid in disintegrating the suburban community's reliance on Vancouver for goods and services. In its opening year Park Royal offered thirty-three stores, including Woodward's Department Store, Wendy's, Royal Bank of Canada, Kenwood Furs, Soon's Market, Roger's Stationary and a multitude of others. Park Royal is classified as a regional shopping centre, which includes providing "general merchandise, apparel, furniture, and home furnishing in depth and variety, as well as a range of services and recreational facilities".<sup>20</sup> Other aspects unique to the regional shopping centre model are the shopping centre's reliance on a single department store and its expansive available retail space<sup>21</sup>, like that of Park Royal's inclusion of Woodward's in its initial construction.

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<sup>17</sup> The Lions Gate Times, "Grand Opening of Park Royal", West Vancouver Archives Collection, ref. no. 2101.05.WVA.BPP. (West Vancouver: September 7, 1950).

<sup>18</sup> British Pacific Properties Ltd, "Your Guide to Park Royal Shopping Centre, West Vancouver, B.C.", West Vancouver Archives Collection, ref. no. 2101.02.WVA.BPP. (West Vancouver: March, 1951).

<sup>19</sup> The Lions Gate Times, "Grand Opening of Park Royal", West Vancouver Archives Collection, ref. no. 2101.05.WVA.BPP. (West Vancouver: September 7, 1950).

<sup>20</sup> Siri Bertelsen, "The Transformation of the Regional Shopping Centre: An Examination of Six Case Studies in Vancouver B.C.", Unpublished MA Thesis, Department of Geography, University of British Columbia (Vancouver: 1993).

<sup>21</sup> James Lorimer, *The Developers*, (Toronto: J. Lorimer, 1978).



*Figure 3. British Pacific Properties architect C.B.K. Van Norman and engineer E. Richardson, West Vancouver, BC, December 1949. Photo by Photograph by Steffens-Colmer Studios Ltd. Negative No. 59993-2. West Vancouver Archive Collection. Reference code 49.039.WVA.BPP.*

The 1950's represented a period of substantial social and economic change in both Canada and the United States, and a growth of the middle class was noticed and attributed in part to the increased prevalence of women in the workforce, which in turn improved household income and spending potential.<sup>22</sup> Mass production and mass consumption were common place and tied closely with the retail sector. Put simply, "shopping centres became the new tool for reaching consumers and convincing them to part with their money".<sup>23</sup> Another major change witnessed in the first half of the twentieth century was the advent of the automobile. According to 1951 Canadian Census figures, there were 2,710 automobiles owned in West Vancouver, a staggering statistic amounting to roughly one car to every five residents.<sup>24</sup> During this time, it is

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<sup>22</sup> Siri Bertelsen, "The Transformation of the Regional Shopping Centre: An Examination of Six Case Studies in Vancouver B.C.", Unpublished MA Thesis, Department of Geography, University of British Columbia (Vancouver: 1993).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>24</sup> Peter H. Oberlander and Ira M. Robinson, "Living and Working in West Vancouver, British Columbia: An Economic Analysis, As a Basis for Community Planning" (Corporation of the District of West Vancouver, 1954), District of West Vancouver Archives.

estimated that close to 2,000 automobiles crossed the Lions Gate Bridge southbound from the North Shore suburbs on a daily basis.<sup>25</sup> Notice of this “rapid increase in car ownership” was incorporated into the design of many shopping centres in North America,<sup>26</sup> including Park Royal.



*Fig. 4. Aerial photograph of Park Royal Shopping centre north, West Vancouver, BC, 1950s. Photo by Aero Surveys Limited, Sea Island Airport, Vancouver, Canada. Identification No. BO-50-148. West Vancouver Archive Collection. Reference code 49.039.WVA.BPP.*

Compared to existing retailers located at Ambleside and Dundarave along Marine Drive, Park Royal North, seen in fig. 4, included a large expanse of easily accessible parking. As both Ambleside and Dundarave’s parking was limited to parallel stalls along the street front, a common trait of street-oriented shopping districts like those mentioned in Toronto and Montreal, these regions were disadvantaged when compared to Park Royal. In a 1958 document put out by the Planning Office of the District of West Vancouver, Park Royal North was noted as having “one and a half square feet of parking for each square foot of store area”.<sup>27</sup> Despite having only 33 total business establishments in Park Royal at this time, compared to 168 in Ambleside and

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<sup>25</sup> Peter H. Oberlander and Ira M. Robinson, “Living and Working in West Vancouver, British Columbia: An Economic Analysis, As a Basis for Community Planning” (Corporation of the District of West Vancouver, 1954), District of West Vancouver Archives.

<sup>26</sup> Siri Bertelsen, “The Transformation of the Regional Shopping Centre: An Examination of Six Case Studies in Vancouver B.C.”, Unpublished MA Thesis, Department of Geography, University of British Columbia (Vancouver: 1993) 1.

<sup>27</sup> “Ambleside District Planning Study (Revised)”, Planning Office, District of West Vancouver (West Vancouver: April, 1958) 27.

45 in Dundarave,<sup>28</sup> the advantage of parking availability outweighed any possible pull that a larger variety of retailers may have posed. In other words, shoppers tended to favour an experience more easily and readily accessible. Even though Ambleside contained “over 70% of the total number of retailers”, when compared to Park Royal the area was disadvantaged due in part to the “ribbon type development along both sides of Marine Drive” which forced consumers to walk the 3,000 feet of frontage to obtain goods as well as having a “lack of convenient parking space”.<sup>29</sup> Park Royal Shopping Centre enabled a centralized shopping experience.

Although major department stores, like Woodward’s, initially valued walkable storefront and saw that the move from the “busy downtown to the distant suburbs...replacing sidewalks with large parking lots” was a “novel and...risky” endeavour, the success of Park Royal, being the first try at this concept Canada-wide, could be noted in the multitude of new shopping centre constructs in the years following.<sup>30</sup> By 1956, there were sixty-four newly constructed regional shopping centres in Canada,<sup>31</sup> and a study conducted by Statistics Canada noted that by 1961 that number had more than quadrupled at 281.<sup>32</sup> Needless to say, the age of travelling far distances in order to purchase goods and services was behind Canadians and a new era of consumption, one that occurred exceptionally closer to home, had commenced.

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<sup>28</sup> “Ambleside District Planning Study (Revised)”, Planning Office, District of West Vancouver (West Vancouver: April, 1958) 27.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>30</sup> Siri Bertelsen, “The Transformation of the Regional Shopping Centre: An Examination of Six Case Studies in Vancouver B.C.”, Unpublished MA Thesis, Department of Geography, University of British Columbia (Vancouver: 1993) 14.

<sup>31</sup> James Lorimer, *The Developers*, (Toronto: J. Lorimer, 1978).

<sup>32</sup> Siri Bertelsen, “The Transformation of the Regional Shopping Centre: An Examination of Six Case Studies in Vancouver B.C.”, Unpublished MA Thesis, Department of Geography, University of British Columbia (Vancouver: 1993) 14.



*Fig. 5. Park Royal south mall, West Vancouver, B.C., January 4th, 1963. Photograph by Eric Cable. West Vancouver Archive Collection. Reference code 60S.026.WVA.BPP.*

Park Royal South was added to the existing shopping centre in 1962. With it came a new design, more parking, and further diversification of West Vancouver's retail climate. The new development cost the British Pacific Properties a total of \$7 million, in part due to its larger size.<sup>33</sup> Peter J. Finch, the President of Park Royal at this time, noted the new construction included the use of newer building techniques and a more defined "interior environment" equipped with "artificial illumination".<sup>34</sup> Finch, alongside architect Peter Blewett, actually toured over forty North American shopping centres before constructing the new phase of Park Royal aiming to keep Park Royal competitive within the design realm of shopping centres. Eventually, contrary to these visits, Park Royal was known to have its own "unique style".<sup>35</sup> The expansion also saw the addition of Super-Valu, as seen in fig. 5, and Eatons, two large retailers.<sup>36</sup> Whereas in the 1950's the building's form tended to be "honest in the sense that it signified it's

<sup>33</sup> The Citizen Newspaper, "Rediscover Park Royal" (West Vancouver: November, 1969) 2A.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 3A.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 2A.

<sup>36</sup> James Lorimer, *The Developers*, (Toronto: J. Lorimer, 1978).



*Fig. 6. Aerial photograph of the Park Royal Shopping Centre and North Vancouver, West Vancouver, BC, October 16, 1962. Photograph by David Birley. West Vancouver Archive Collection. Acc. no. 2031-10. Reference code 62.027.WVA.BPP.*

function”, by the 1960’s “the professional planning practice had a dominant influence on the modern landscape” and this was evident in alterations made to the shopping centre.<sup>37</sup>

## Conclusion

Park Royal was the final piece to the British Pacific Properties Limited’s puzzle of a self-contained and functional community. It’s success can be attributed to many factors, including its location, planning, the retail climate which it was designed within, and various social and economic changes that the twentieth century endured. The British Pacific Properties Limited’s clear vision allowed for slow and conscious development of West Vancouver, and succeeded in creating a community which was both self reliant and thriving. Park Royal was able to access the wallets of not only the residents of the British Properties, but also those of North Shore and

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<sup>37</sup> Siri Bertelsen, “The Transformation of the Regional Shopping Centre: An Examination of Six Case Studies in Vancouver B.C.”, Unpublished MA Thesis, Department of Geography, University of British Columbia (Vancouver: 1993) 32.

surrounding municipalities residents, and transformed the retail climate across Canada. Further research will include contemporary history of the shopping centre, detail newer construction phases, as well as analyze the politics of land ownership. Although the latter is perhaps beyond the scope of this assignment, investment in this topic may help to shed light on developmental decisions and motivations pertaining to the mall and its development on land owned by the Squamish Indian Band.

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