

Point Grey Secondary School and the Dawn of a New Era for Vancouver

By Heather Fawcett

Point Grey Secondary (PGS), located on Vancouver's West Side at East Boulevard and 37th Avenue, is difficult to miss. Looking out over the West Boulevard shopping area and the contentious Arbutus Corridor, the school's grand size and medieval-style architecture give it the feeling of an anchor for the Kerrisdale community. Locals incorporate the adjacent running track and grounds into their workouts and strolls, and Kerrisdale's summer/fall farmer's market is held in the school's large shadow.

An important part of this changing community, PGS also occupies a significant place in the history of Vancouver.

Below: PGS today, photo by author



Founding and History

Construction on the main building of PGS began in 1928 and concluded on March 30, 1929. It officially opened on September 27 of that year.¹ The total cost was a then-princely sum of almost half a million dollars (about \$7 million today).

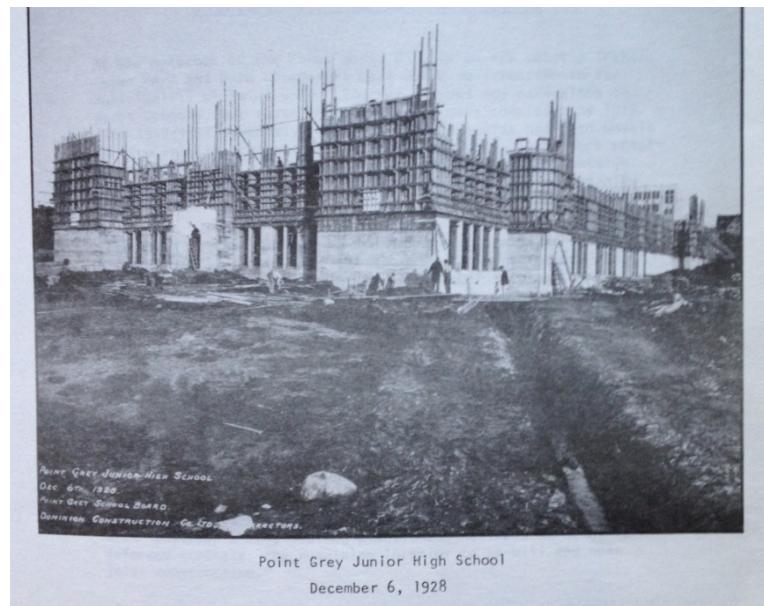
The school's impressive architectural style is termed "Collegiate Gothic,"² not a common sight in Vancouver. Collegiate Gothic is inspired by Medieval Gothic architecture, and was a leading building style in the 19th century, favoured for academic, political, and religious structures. It is characterized by pointed arches, buttresses (external supports projecting from the face of a wall), recessed entrances with statues or stone carvings, parapets, and tall and narrow windows (to name a few examples).³ Architecture enthusiasts will find many of these features on display at PGS.

Unsurprisingly, the City of Vancouver has designated the school as an “A” level heritage site⁴, meaning that it is an important example of a particular style or type of building, and/or is associated with a significant person, event, or early pattern of development. PGSS is on the Vancouver School Board’s lengthy list of early twentieth-century schools that will be seismically upgraded over the next few years.

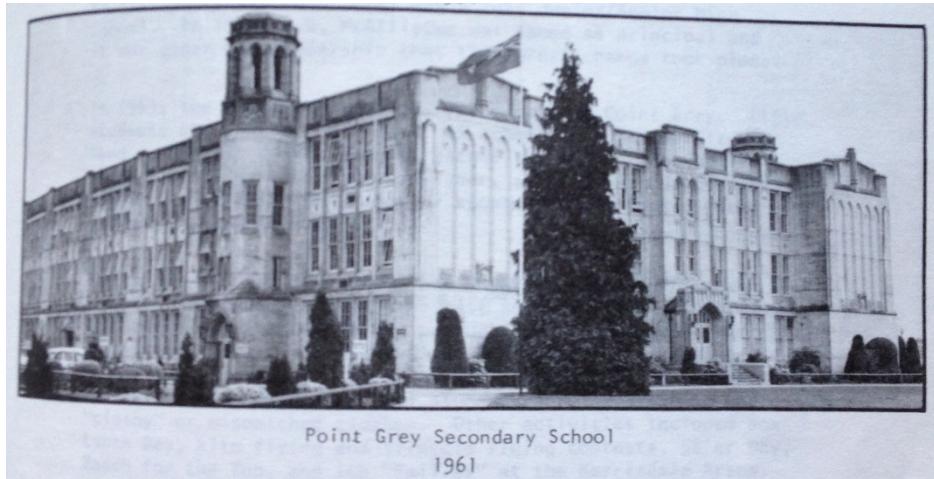
Below: The area before PGSS. Strathcona Station, 1916. 37th Ave and West Boulevard, looking Northeast. Bungalow on right was demolished to make way for school. Photo from Kluckner.



Below: Point Grey Junior High School, 1928 (under construction). Photo from Rose.



Below: PGSS, 1961. Photo from Rose.



PGS and the “New Vancouver”

Part of PGS’s heritage significance lies in its historical context. Ironically for a school that today services one of the wealthiest areas of Vancouver (and, by extension, North America), PGS’s birth coincided with the beginning of a period of unprecedented want and poverty.

The school opened its doors to students a month before the “Black Tuesday” stock market crash of 1929, which started the Great Depression. Its early years were marked by deprivations. Teachers did not always receive their salaries, as the School Board had limited money; students were asked to ration their use of paper and other items to help cut down on the costs of running the school.⁸ Employment opportunities for graduates were dismal, with the majority expecting to remain unemployed for up to two years after graduation.⁹

But PGS was also part of an important historical development for our city. Like South Vancouver, Point Grey was a unique municipality separate from Vancouver in the early decades of the twentieth century. Point Grey’s boundary ran south on Alma to 16th Avenue, along 16th to Cambie Street, and down Cambie to the river.⁷

On January 1, 1929, the districts amalgamated (bringing the total population to around 240,000).⁶ PGS, completed March 30, 1929, became the first school born into the new Vancouver—the city we know today. Upon completion, the school was heralded as “the finest school building in Western Canada”⁵, and today it remains an important feature of our city and its short but rich history.

¹Waites p128.

²Point Grey Secondary School.

³Loyola University Maryland.

⁴VSB (1).

⁵Rose p2.

⁶The History of Metropolitan Vancouver.

⁷Sandison 24.

⁸Rose p4.

⁹Rose p6.

References

Anonymous. *Point Grey Secondary School 1929-2004* (Commemorative pamphlet). 2004.

Heritage Canada (Website). Kitsilano Senior Secondary School.

<https://www.heritagecanada.org/en/issues-campaigns/top-ten-endangered/explore-past-listings/british-columbia/vancouver-kitsilano>. Accessed 23 August 2014.

The History of Metropolitan Vancouver (website). Sunspots (originally published by *The Vancouver Sun*).

http://www.vancouverhistory.ca/sunspots_jan.htm. Accessed 23 August 2014.

Kluckner, Michael. *Vanishing Vancouver*. North Vancouver: Whitecap, 1990.

Loyola University Maryland. *Characteristics of the Collegiate Gothic Style*.

<http://www.loyola.edu/academic/history/architecture/glossary>. Accessed 1 August 2014.

Parks Canada (Administrators). Canada's Historic Places (Website). Queen Mary Elementary.

<http://www.historicplaces.ca/en/rep-reg/place-lieu.aspx?id=11314>. Accessed 23 August 2014.

Point Grey Secondary School website. *History*. <http://pointgreysecondary.ca/history>. Accessed 1 August 2014.

Rose, Elizabeth A. *Point Grey Secondary School. The First Fifty Years: 1929-1979*. 1978.

Sandison, James M., ed. *Schools of Old Vancouver*. Vancouver Historical Society. Vancouver: Morrise, 1971.

VSB (1). 2013-2014 Capital Plan. <http://www.vsb.bc.ca/capital-projects>. Accessed 19 August 2014.

--- (2). Summary Table of Active Capital Projects (2013). <http://www.vsb.bc.ca/capital-projects>. Accessed 19 August 2014.

Waites, K.A., ed. *Vancouver High Schools, the First 50 Years (1890-1940)*. 1940.