



Heritage Vancouver

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An open letter from Heritage Vancouver to the public about the Balmoral Hotel

In late February, the City of Vancouver released its decision to demolish the historic Balmoral Hotel. Nearly 30 years ago, a statement prepared by researchers established the building's value to the city's history and period architecture. The hotel is currently on a municipal list of significant buildings.

The ideas and methods used by architects and historians to determine the value of older buildings such as the Balmoral formed the foundation of the city's heritage program. These ideas and city heritage policies have shaped public understandings of preservation and of what heritage is about and not about. In the case of the Balmoral Hotel, its Chicago-style architectural features and cultural associations with the period of economic prosperity during the development of early settler Vancouver define this building's value as heritage. It is a common assumption that any heritage response to the city's decision will be about the Balmoral's preservation.

But peoples' relationships to places are not that straightforward and our thinking is that heritage conversations therefore need to become much more nuanced.

Every year Heritage BC sets the theme across the province for heritage week, which just ended recently. "Altogether Inclusive" was this year's theme, a very intentional one to encourage the sector to be more inclusive. With this in mind, we would like to offer another way to think of what heritage can be about and how it could be practiced.

The question of who has the power to decide the meanings of the Balmoral Hotel matters a great deal. This is especially true because we know there are many people with real and difficult experiences with the Balmoral and the Downtown Eastside who are not in a position to see the building as an architectural gem. There is a very important and difficult urban history in the Downtown Eastside that is not part of the official heritage account.

In order to understand the Balmoral Hotel as a place, we feel it is important to not distance ourselves from its present social context and the history that led to today. We feel it is necessary to make space and have kind interactions and/or relationships with people who know this building in a very different way so that they are centred in conversations about neighbourhood social history, what this place means and what would serve them most.

We benefit society more if we open ourselves to the idea that heritage can be much more than only saving objects, and that positive heritage outcomes take different

forms. In this case, heritage could be a process that supports people directly impacted by the Balmoral and Downtown Eastside in ways they identify would help them work through their relationship to the building.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Bill Yuen', with a stylized, cursive script.

Bill Yuen
Executive Director, Heritage Vancouver