A Future For Vic High

In the next few weeks and months, the future of Vic High will be decided.

The Greater Victoria School District has announced that it is planning for seismic upgrades to the school and had asked the community for their views before a decision is taken by the Board of Education on what will be done. The three options laid out include demolition of the current school and construction of a new school, seismic upgrading with interior renovations, retaining the current façade while building a new structure within the façade.

The Vic High Alumni Association has participated in the District's open houses and has also sought input and views from its membership – the 15,000 graduates and supporters of the school. Despite only having general descriptions from the School Board of the options, the response from the public and alumni strongly agreed that there were two things that they wanted to guide the decisions makers.

- Having a school that will meet students' current and future needs, and
- Respecting the heritage that the school represents and its importance to the built environment of this city and the Fernwood neighbourhood.

How then can these two goals be met? To answer that question, start by looking at the current situation.

Seismic Risk and Building Needs

The current seismic rating for the school is H1, the highest risk rating in BC's seismic ranking program. Earlier seismic assessments had concluded that the extension added to the school in the 1950s is even less seismically sound than the original 1914 building.

The school's structural needs do not end with seismic upgrades. Significant mechanical and operational systems also need replacement or modernization. The

School Board has discussed the challenge of the heating system that needs to be replaced at very considerable cost, particularly if done as a stand-alone project. As well, school activities are limited by the current configuration that was not designed in a way that is consistent with many contemporary educational activities. Whether it is more individualized instruction, the use of modern technologies in learning or simply new areas of instruction that need specialized facilities, a renewed learning environment should include some changes.

One part of the school, the Fairey Tech wing, was built in 2011 and excels at meeting a specialized need in a sympathetically designed and seismically sound structure. A similar area of strength for Vic High, and one that would benefit from specialized facilities, is music and performing arts. As another example, the spaces for physical education within the school as well as the track and field do not meet contemporary standards.

Heritage Considerations[1]

Vic High is historic.

It was the first public high school in Western Canada and has contributed enormously to both Victoria and the province. The current Vic High building is now a century old and is a wonderful example of our built heritage. It exemplifies the commitment of those a century ago who wanted to honour public education with this wonderful building. It stands today, a source of pride to the neighbourhood and the whole city.

During the public consultation process, the Alumni Association asked participants what they meant by "heritage." Their concern was with the Vic High building and many of its traditional features. We did not see any indication that transferring the

[1] Although we asked many participants at the open houses what they meant by heritage and summarize their responses in this section, we have also included as an appendix, the section of a report commissioned for the Vancouver School Board that discusses various dimensions of heritage.

war memorial casting and a few other surface elements to a new school would satisfy those heritage concerns.

While over the years, Victoria has lost much of its built heritage, there have also been other examples of saving that heritage – each contributing to a liveable and exciting city that can grow without losing its sense of place and history. We need only look at the way in which many of the older parts of downtown have been retained, adding to a vibrant core where locals and tourists can walk, work, shop and enjoy.

We can look at St Ann's Academy for a recent example where the Victoria Accord retained a signature building that anchors the built heritage of a neighbourhood while continuing as a well-functioning building.

Looking at the Options

The Board of Education has presented three options for seismic work at Vic High. Although we have little information about what would be entailed in each option, we can outline the likely characteristics of the high school with each option. We will address each briefly and then offer a hybrid approach that we believe can satisfy the multiple goals that are very important in setting the future course for Vic High and the community.

1. **New School.** This option should respond well to the educational needs of current and future students. On the other hand, even if some of the historic signs and memorial plaques from the current building are included, this will do little more than pay lip service to important heritage considerations.
2. **Retain Exterior Facade.** If this is done in a manner similar to the recent work at Kitsilano Secondary (Kits High) in Vancouver, it would see an external façade retained with those walls serving a purely decorative function – detached from the new, internal school built behind that façade.

While that should meet modern students' instructional needs, it is far more expensive[2] than any other option and does not retain any of the rich heritage features inside the school.

3. **Seismic Work with Renovations and System Work.** This option has the potential to protect major heritage aspects for the students and the city while creating a modern facility that meets changing student and instructional needs. We can only know whether this will, in fact, be the case after there is much more information available on what work is planned as part of this option. There is the possibility that this could lock in place the current design of Vic High with its problems with meeting the changing needs of today's students.

This quick summary shows that there is no single option among those presented that is clearly preferable in meeting the dual goals that we believe are important. Therefore, given the lack of specific details about what will be included in each option, the Alumni Association has looked into recent experience elsewhere and suggests a number of specific elements that can inform design decisions as this project is planned. These may be thought of as making clear or expanding what could be included in the option to complete seismic work with renovations and systems work.

A Successful Example of Seismic Work with Educational Transformation

Before detailing these suggestions, we will briefly describe a recent and very successful combined seismic and upgrading project in a school building that has a remarkable resemblance to Vic High.

Lincoln High School in Portland, Oregon has a history that closely parallels that of Vic High. It was the first public high school in the Pacific North West and moved to a new school in 1912. The picture below shows its similarity to Vic High. The resemblance is not only external: the layout of the classrooms on the outer wall of

[2] When looking at these costs, we note that the Kits High project, which is quite recent, is budgeted at $62.2 million despite being a much larger school than Vic High (1,500 students).

the school with a large auditorium in the centre off the main corridor is very much like Vic High. The building became the hub for performing arts at Portland State University in 1952. Following a seismic evaluation, a major seismic retrofit and remodelling was finished in 2010 with a construction cost of $24.5 million (U.S. dollars). This included redesigning many interior areas of the building to studios and other performing-arts-related specialty areas. The building has an environmental platinum LEED certification[3].

We are not saying that we have to replicate the work at Lincoln Hall. We do, however, want the Board to be aware of the successes that can be achieved for modern functionality while honouring heritage.

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[3] Further information and photographs are available at http://www.architectmagazine.com/project-gallery/portland-state-university-lincoln-hall .

Alumni Association Thoughts on Achieving a Successful Revitalization

We begin with a disclaimer – we are neither engineers nor architects, but we have lived experience with Vic High and want to see the best for its students and its neighbourhood. Here, however, are some of the elements that we believe will lead to a successful project.

1. The original (1914) wing of the school is on the Victoria Register of Heritage Properties. For that wing, particularly the classroom and meeting rooms on the outside wall, try to retain those elements. The Lincoln Hall example retains those areas by having the critical seismic reinforcement structure closer to the interior of the building.
2. Consider restoring the main, front hall to its pre-'70s appearance by removing the acoustic tile and re-opening the stairwells to the natural light.
3. Try to retain the auditorium, although some of the systems in the auditorium (e.g., backstage, lighting and sound) should be modernized.
4. We assume that improving the heating, mechanical and electrical systems will require significant work on the internal structure, particularly in the lower areas. We do not know whether it will be possible or cost effective to retrofit the wing built in the '50s. Similarly, we do not know whether the current gyms will need to be dramatically changed or moved in order to effect the seismic and systems work. If there needs to be substantial change in those areas, consider substantially renovation with classrooms and specialized areas.
5. We suggest considering the construction of a new wing, probably to the west of the Fairey Tech wing. This might contain a gymnasium and physical education facilities, or other specialized facilities like those for performing arts, or technology labs. In the design of Kitsilano High project, the gymnasium and related facilities were set close to the Kitsilano Community Centre to facilitate community use of the high school while not having to open the whole school outside regular instructional hours. With extensive

renovation of the interior areas and the '50s addition, as well as a new wing, there will be a substantial increase in the capacity of the school,

6. If there were a new wing that encroaches on the current field and track, this would provide an excellent opportunity to renew the field and track and bring it up to contemporary standards. This would obviously benefit Vic High, but could also serve the community and the other schools in the catchment area, many of which do not have easy access to quality facilities. We have a recent example at Oak Bay High where the recent construction brought a new all-weather field, in addition to the high quality facilities that had been built there for the Commonwealth Games.
7. Finally, as design work commences, we hope that the School Board will continue to reach out for input from faculty and students at Vic High, the local community, and the Alumni Association.

The Cost of Heritage

The Alumni Association recognizes that the hybrid option we are putting forward will likely cost somewhat more than the option of tearing down the school and building a new one. We are concerned that the Ministry of Education may be constrained by narrow funding formulas that do not take into account such things as the importance of heritage conservation.

The government has a Heritage Strategy (administered by the Heritage Branch) that recognizes that "historic places . . . are crucial to our understanding and appreciation of the identity and character of our communities," with its goal "to help ensure British Columbia remains a leader in sustaining and benefitting from its heritage." Unfortunately, there is no capital allocation for heritage that the School Board or the Ministry of Education can draw on. Fortunately, there have been cases where the provincial government has recognized the unique character and value of our built heritage.

We hope that the School Board will recognize the educational and community values inherent in conserving the heritage dimensions of Vic High. Fundamentally, the decision on what to do about Vic High is a question of values.

We believe that this vital seismic work can be the gateway to ensuring that Vic High will excel. It can continue to be a source of pride to its students and the community for another century.

Appendix

Considering Heritage Value – Four Categories for Consideration

The following is an extract from a report prepared for the Vancouver School Board to assist them in assessing heritage values.[4]

> In 2007, VSB and the City of Vancouver collaborated in an evaluation of the heritage value of VSB schools.
> Commonwealth Historic Management Ltd. was retained to conduct a heritage evaluation, which is documented in a report entitled "Vancouver Schools: Establishing Their Heritage Value", September 2007.
> Commonwealth developed an approach that evaluated each school based on several dimensions of heritage value:
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> - Category A: Aesthetic and Functional Values. This category addresses criteria including architectural history, architectural quality, and significance as a landmark public building.
> - Category B: Educational Values. This category addresses the school's significance in terms of the physical manifestation of ideas about curriculum and pedagogy at the time of construction.
> - Category C: Historical Values. This category addresses the school's significance in a Vancouver and neighbourhood historical context, particularly the historic period when the school was built, its original and changing role in the community, and its association with significant civic people or events.
> - Category D: Social Values. This category addresses the school's significance in reflecting community history, ethnic diversity, changing gender roles, and other elements of the school's relationship to social networks and community history.

We believe that Vic High has substantial heritage value across all four of these dimensions.

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[4] Comprehensive Assessment of VSB School Buildings with Significant Seismic Risk. Coriolis Consulting Corp. Draft. Prepared for Vancouver Board of Education (SD 39)