

SPOTA's 'Special' Fight:

The story of a community that rallied against urban renewal in Vancouver and won

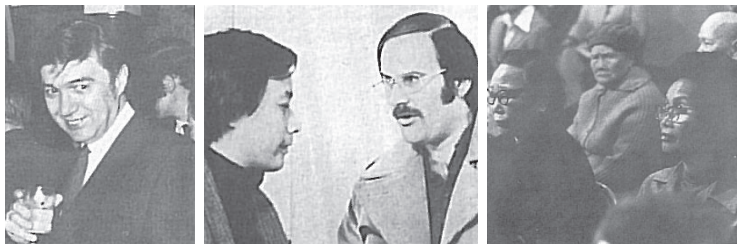


The Strathcona Property Owners and Tenants Association (SPOTA) was created in December 1968 out of a need for a strong community organization that could challenge the City's redevelopment plans in Strathcona. By this time, the City had already expropriated the land of many of Strathcona's long-time residents and levelled blocks of old homes to make way for two public housing projects. With more public housing and a freeway planned and the rest of the neighbourhood's existing buildings scheduled for demolition, it had become clear that a strong and unified voice from within the community was needed to maintain what was left of Strathcona.



Four blocks of homes demolished in 1968 for construction of a housing project. Source: VPL Special Collections 3235

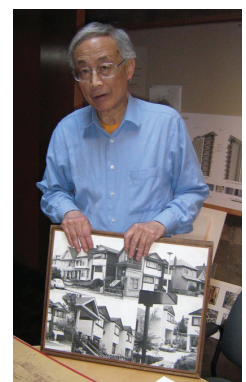
But it was not SPOTA alone that helped save Strathcona. SPOTA's success was made possible by the combined political will of the federal, provincial, and civic governments. In 1968, Robert Andras, the federal minister in charge of housing for Pierre Trudeau's new Liberal government, toured public housing projects in cities across the country. In Vancouver he met with SPOTA. The immediate result of Andras' visit was a halting of the City's existing redevelopment plan. What resulted was a \$5 million pilot project that engaged SPOTA in a planning process that involved each level of government and saw existing buildings, streets, and sidewalks in Strathcona get rehabilitated and new parks and a community centre built.



Robert Andras - Federal Minister; Joe Wai speaking with Mike Harcourt; concerned residents at a SPOTA meeting. Source: 'Opening Doors' by Marlatt & Itter

Following on the heels of the success of this initial rehabilitation project, in 1973 SPOTA created the Strathcona Area Housing Society (S.A.H.S.) to address the issue of infill housing for the neighbourhood's residents on the lots that had been left vacant after the City's redevelopment plans had been stopped. Known as 'Strathcona Infill Housing,' the project that S.A.H.S. administered was comprised of a mix of cooperative and affordable housing completed in four phases from 1974-1982. Joe Wai at Thompson, Berwick, Pratt and Partners designed 51 units in three phases from 1974-1979. These units consisted of duplexes, triplexes, as well as detached homes, many of which housed multi-generational

families. Later, from 1980-1982 Joe Wai Architects with Spaceworks Architects designed the Mau Dan Cooperative Housing Project which consisted of 120 units. "Joe Wai Specials," with their pitched roofs and versatile floorplans, are known for their ability to fit in with the existing character of the neighbourhood and accommodate the different needs of families who have lived in them. Many of the homes were designed with a kitchen in the middle of the main floor with hallways leading down the sides, a living room in the front, and a dining room that doubles as a family room in the back. The typical upstairs of a "Joe Wai Special" was designed with a master bedroom, a bathroom, and two smaller bedrooms. The homes also typically came with an unfinished basement, which many of the residents developed, and a finished concrete patio that led into the house with sliding glass doors.



Union Street Co-op circa 1974; Joe Wai at his office in 2011. Sources: COV Archives & Sam Mickelson

As much as "Joe Wai Specials" were suitable for the original families that lived in them, they have also proved amenable to being renovated to meet the changing needs of their residents, as the homeowners on this year's tour have done. Even as the exteriors and interiors of some of the homes have changed over time, "Joe Wai Specials" continue to stand as markers of a proud and determined community that refused to go away.

By Sam Mickelson, Student Intern, Vancouver Heritage Foundation, August 2011.



Before & After shots: left: Typical SPOTA house; right: Renovated Joe Wai Special on the VHF's Vancouver Special Tour 2011. Source: Diane Switzer

Thank you to Joe Wai and Pat Canning for taking the time to share their oral histories of SPOTA.

Sources:

Atkin, J. *Strathcona: Vancouver's First Neighbourhood*, Vancouver, Whitecap Books, 1994.

Marlatt, D. & Itter, C. *Opening Doors in Vancouver's East End: Strathcona*, eds. 2 ed. Madeira Park, Harbour Publishing, 2011.