



## Gow Block Cedar Cottage Townhomes

“If we didn’t buy it, it would have been demolished” - Norah Johnson

**D**espite the accidental discovery of the building, the potential disrepair of the structure and the daunting task of restoring a project of this scale, Jerry Prussin and Norah Johnson fell in love with the Gow Block immediately. The Gow block is a mixed use wood

frame Edwardian structure built in 1910 that sits on 3589 Commercial Street (the Northwestern corner of Commercial Street and 20th) that has seen its history of renovations. After a significant renovation process, Norah and Jerry not only had a beautifully restored Heritage Registered Building that speaks to both the history of the building and neighbourhood, but a new townhome building behind as well!

### Project at a Glance

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Building Name  
Gow Block

Location  
3589 Commercial Street

Original Build  
1910 - 1911

Program  
Commercial/Residential

Site  
8,061 sq. ft

F.S.R.  
2.5

### Citations

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Illustration:

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Bob Worden.  
Illustration For Gow Block. 2009. Ramsay Worden Architects.  
Jerry Prussin Blog.  
Web. Fri. May 24th 2013.



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# Gow Block History

## Further Reading

The Gow Block got its name from the original owner and developer of the building who bore the last name Gow.

## Citations

Images (Bottom From Left):

Unknown. City of Vancouver Archives. AM54-S4-2-: CVA 371-821  
Bank of Hamilton and Cedar Cottage Realty. 1913.

Matthew, James Skitt. Vancouver Public Library. 7383.  
Interurban arriving at Cedar Cottage station. 1913.

Matthew, James Skitt. City of Vancouver Archives. 270.10  
Looking southwest from the 3400 Block Cedar Cottage Road . 1907.

**1891** Completion of The Interurban Line linking Vancouver with New Westminster. "Its first stop is at Cedar Cottage" (1627 Vanness Ave.)<sup>1</sup>

**1910** Construction of the Gow Block. Residents and Commercial services begin inhabiting the building (including the Bank of Hamilton). South Vancouver was growing at a rate of 200 families per month<sup>2</sup>

**1924** Bank of Hamilton merged with the Canadian Bank of Commerce. With greater reliance on the car, business is pulled further away from the Commercial St. village and onto the Kingsway thoroughway<sup>2</sup>

**1909** The South Vancouver Street Railway Agreement was approved which lead to the extension of the street car system throughout the municipality<sup>2</sup>

**1913** A small independent village (post office, school etc.) had sprung up around the Interurban Cedar Cottage stop (Findley and Commercial St.)<sup>2,3</sup>

**1954** The Cedar Cottage Interurban Line was discontinued. Smaller light industry moved into what was once the 3300 - 3600 blocks of the Commercial St. Village<sup>2</sup>





**1960** Prior owners (unknown) move out and Ernie's Grocery moves in<sup>2</sup>

**2005** Gow Block is bought by Jerry Prussin and Norah Johnson and restoration begins

**2010** The Gow Block renovation is completed and construction of the western building begins<sup>4</sup>

**1985** The Skytrain is built in response to Vancouver's Expo in 1986 using the Interurban Line Route as the blueprint for the path of the Expo Line. Unlike the Interurban Line however, there was no stop built at 1627 Vanness Ave., leaving the Commercial St. Village relatively quiet<sup>3</sup>

**2009** Vancouver City Council added the building to the Vancouver Heritage Register in the 'B' evaluation category<sup>4</sup>

**2012** Construction on the Cedar Cottage Townhomes is completed<sup>4</sup>

## Citations

### Information for Timeline:

<sup>1</sup>Davis, Chuck and Mooney, Shirley. "Vancouver - An Illustrated Chronology" Windsor Publications. 1986. Final Ed.: Print.

<sup>2</sup>Luxton, Donald. "Conservation Plan - Gow Block" Donald Luxton and Associates Inc. Dec. 2008. Final Ed.: A4. Print.

<sup>3</sup>Conn, Heather and Ewert, Henry. "Vancouver's Glory Years" Whitecap Books. 2003. Final Ed.: Print.

<sup>4</sup>Jerry Prussin, Norah Johnson and the COV Council Zoning Report

### Images Top Right:

Images provided by VHF and Jerry Prussin and Norah Johnson



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## Further Reading

### Interurban Line:

A light rail form of transportation, separated from the street. The interurban line ran from Vancouver to New Westminster along a path very similar to what is now the Expo Line.

## Citations

<sup>1</sup>Davis, Chuck and Mooney, Shirley. "Vancouver - An Illustrated Chronology" Windsor Publications. 1986. Final Ed.: A4. Print

<sup>2</sup>Luxton, Donald. "Conservation Plan - Gow Block" Donald Luxton and Associates Inc. Dec. 2008. Final Ed.: A4. Print.

# Gow Block

"Cedar Cottage had a delightful small-town ambience"<sup>1</sup>

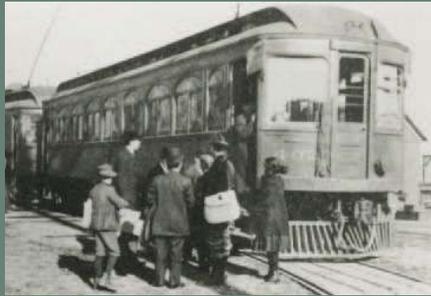
The story of the Gow block is as much the story of a building as it is about the Commercial Street Village and the City of Vancouver. The Commercial Street Village was populated and

# Cedar Cottage

depopulated as a part of a series of larger transportation systems within the Lower Mainland: the Interurban Line, the Kingsway Thoroughfare and the Skytrain. The village came about from the Interurban Line which was a transit line that ran across the Lower Mainland (in this case from Vancouver to New Westminster). It was separated from the street,

unlike the streetcar system, which meant it could get from city to city faster than other forms of transport. The arrival of the Interurban Line preceded the growth of the car, thus those who lived in the Lower Mainland depended on the Interurban Line for daily life both within and between the cities, resulting in its high usage.





## Citations

### Images (Left):

Top:  
Unknown. City of Vancouver Archives. 330-27. Cedar Cottage Looking North of our house. 1909.

Bottom (From Left):  
Matthew, James Skitt. Vancouver Public Library. 2293 New Westminister Interurban Line Stop. 1913.

Unknown. New Westminister Interurban Line. 1910. Coast Mountain Bus Company.

Matthew, James Skitt. Vancouver Public Library. 2627 New Westminister Interurban Line. 1913.

As a result of the busy passenger traffic, small commercial 'villages' emerged at the Interurban Line stops. Above you can see three of the Interurban cars that passed through Cedar Cottage and the Commercial Street Village. One of these stops was at 18th and Vanness, referred to as the Commercial Street Village. Built in 1905, this stop served the community of Cedar Cottage. The Commercial Street Village received so much traffic

that it caught the interest of big downtown businesses, one of them being the Bank of Hamilton. The Village was chosen as a site for development by the Bank because the community was attracting significant traffic, not only from Vancouver, but from all over the Lower Mainland. This was the first time the Bank of Hamilton had built a location outside of the business district which attests to the success of the Village in relation to the city.

The Bank of Hamilton chose the Gow Block, within the Village as their new location. Originally built as mixed use (residential above and commercial below), the Gow Block became an integral part of the community, being both one of the first buildings constructed in the community and sitting on the highly visible corner of 20th and Commercial. On this corner the Bank of Hamilton found its home.



## Further Reading

### Legend:



Expo Line/  
Interurban Line  
Stop



Location of  
Gow Block



Expo Line/  
Interurban Line  
Route

## Citations

<sup>1</sup>Luxton, Donald.  
"Conservation Plan -  
Gow Block" Donald  
Luxton and Associates  
Inc. Dec. 2008. Final  
Ed.: A4. Print.

<sup>2</sup>Conn, Heather  
and Ewert, Henry.  
"Vancouver's Glory  
Years" Whitecap Books.  
2003. Final Ed.: Print.



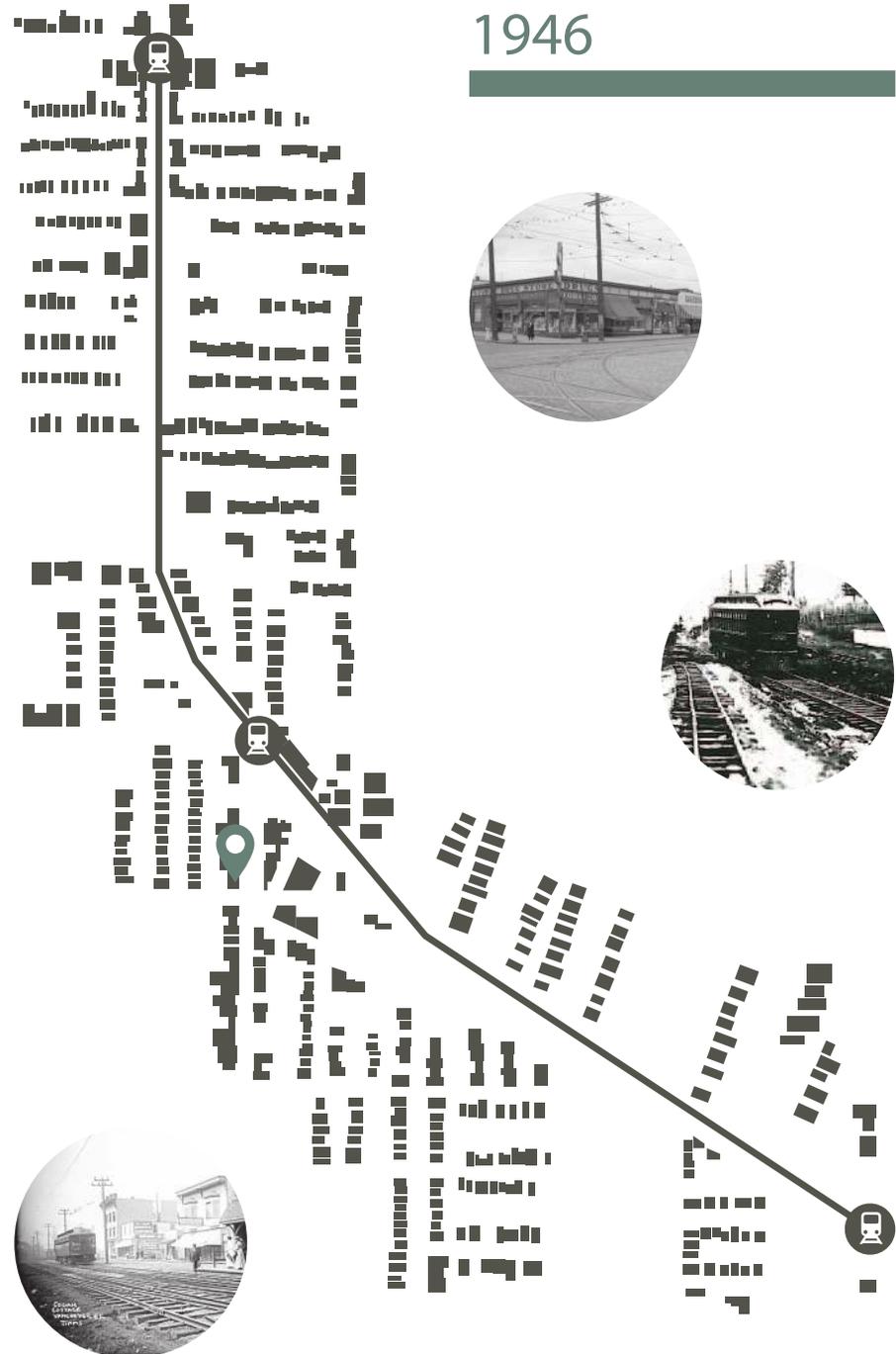
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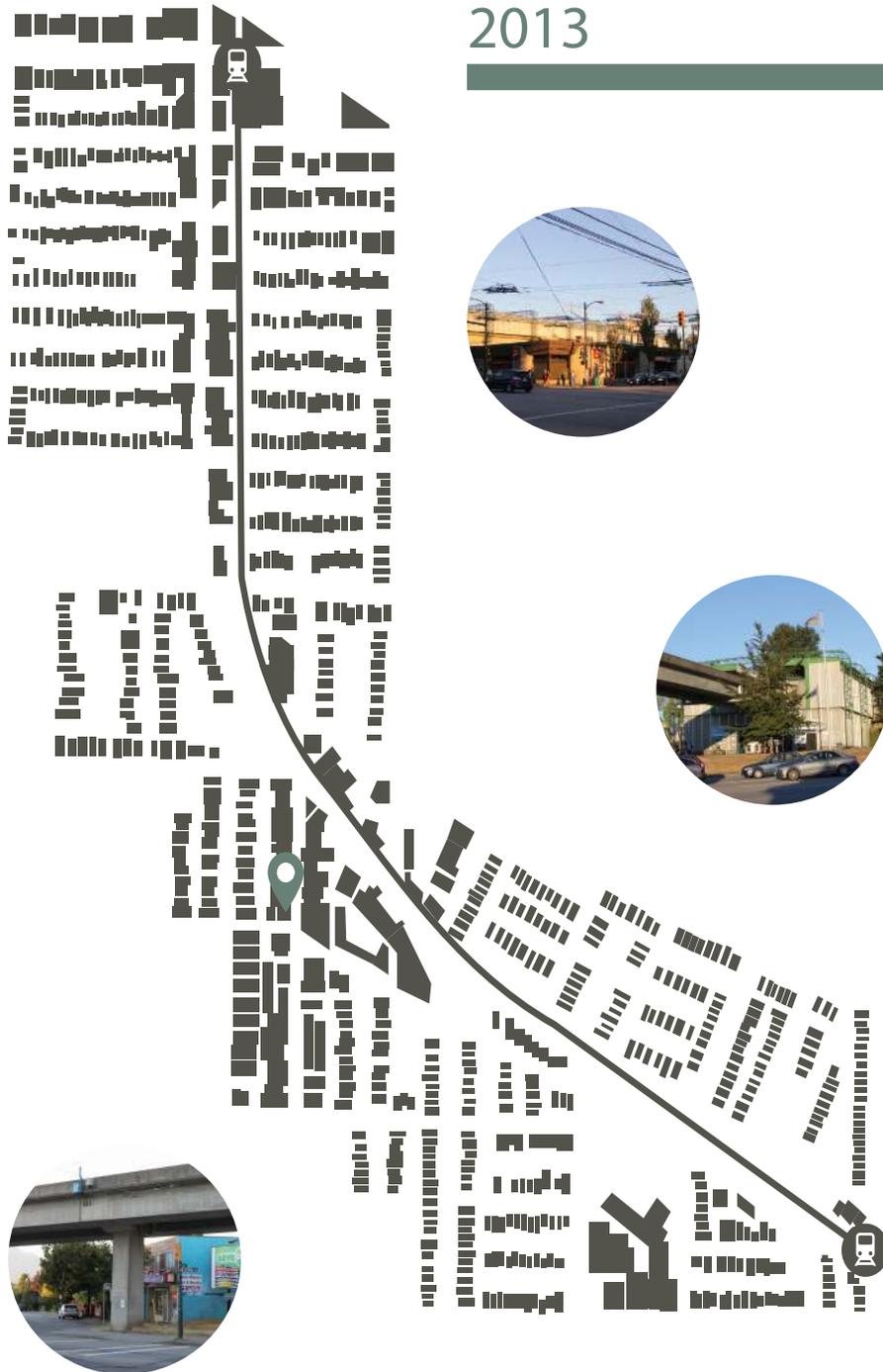
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"As the automobile became more popular... Kingsway became a major thoroughfare drawing business further away from the old village centre of Commercial Street"<sup>1</sup>

The Commercial Street Village continued to grow and become more popular, until the emergence of the car. The car allowed for individual mobility over long distances and was faster than by horse. With the growth of the Kingsway Thoroughfare, which ran parallel to the Interurban Line, traffic on the Line began to decrease and by the 1950s it had all but ceased. In 1958 the Interurban Line performed its last run and was shut down. With the decline of the Interurban so too came the decline of the Commercial Street Village, leaving it to become a site of light industry, a corner store and office space. Only the old structures, with their peeling paint remained.

# 1946





## 2013

“A large portion of the east-west route formed a blueprint for the path of the Skytrain”<sup>2</sup>

But there was hope again for the Commercial Street Village in the 1980s, with the Expo Line, which proposed to run from Vancouver to New Westminster along the same route as the once active and popular Interurban Line. However, these hopes were dashed when the location of the Skytrain stops were chosen to be at Broadway and Commercial, and Nanaimo and Vanness, bypassing Commercial Street. Thus the community sat and waited, hoping help would come along. That help came in the form of music store owners Jerry Prussin and Norah Johnson. Without intending it, their work on the building was not only trying to restore their building, but the whole community as well. And that is just what they did...

## Citations

Images (Page 6 From Top):

Matthew, James Skitt. Vancouver Public Library. 25019.

View looking Southeast in 2500 block Commercial from Broadway. 1939.

Unknown. Interurban line passes just East of Cedar Cottage 1910. Coast Mountain Bus Company.

Matthew, James Skitt. Vancouver Public Library. 7383. Interurban arriving at Cedar Cottage station. 1913.

Images (Page 7 From Top):

Broadway and Commercial: 2013

Vanness and Nanaimo: 2013

Vanness and 18th Ave.:



## Further Reading

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### Awards

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Built Green - Gold  
[www.builtgreen.ca/canada.ca](http://www.builtgreen.ca/canada.ca)

Heritage Status B  
[www.vancouver.ca/home-property-development/find-a-registered-heritage-building](http://www.vancouver.ca/home-property-development/find-a-registered-heritage-building)

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### Prussin Music

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Jerry and Norah are owners of Prussin Music at 3607 West Broadway. They originally discovered the Gow Block by accident, trying to find a recording studio to work in conjunction with their store.

# Gow Block Jerry and Norah

“Little did we know we would be putting so much money in the Bank”  
- Jerry Prussin

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**J**erry Prussin and Norah Johnson were looking for a project that they could work on together, that could be restored and

that would, in the long term, pay for their retirement. They were looking to find a music recording studio, in addition to their Kitsilano music store, Prussin Music at 3607 West Broadway, when they first walked by the Gow Block. Despite the bright red stucco, the makeshift street-level living quarters and the rot in the foundation, they had

a dream. The dream, which got them through the more difficult parts of the project, was to “restore it, and do it together”. It wasn’t until their second visit to the potential music studio that they noticed a new for sale sign in front of the Gow Block. “What the Heck,” they thought and they bought it.





## The Team

Owners:  
Jerry Prussin and  
Norah Johnson

Architects:  
Ramsay Worden

Contractors  
Blue West Contracting

Landscape Architects:  
Viewpoint Landscape  
Architects

Engineer  
Brad Alberts

## Citations

All images provided  
by Jerry Prussin and  
Norah Johnson and  
Vancouver Heritage  
Foundation

“We had no idea what we were getting into” - Jerry Prussin

The plan was to “nickel and dime” their way through it, getting permitting approval as they went, earning and renting out the units as they restored the building. However, upon early inspection, they realized this was simply not possible. The whole foundation for the building would have to be redone. “There was hardly a

floor at some points,” Jerry and Norah reminisced. Despite having experience in restoration (Jerry and Norah’s Kitsilano home and Prussin Music store), they felt daunted by the weight of taking on a project on such a large scale. Even with the intimidating task of trying something completely new, the work began. The intention

to “permit as we went” however, did not necessarily go according to plan. For the new owners, permitting became a nightmare.



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# Gow Block Original

1910



## Further Reading

### The Robbery

In late August of 1912 the Bank of Hamilton was held up by armed robbers who "escaped in a flurry of lead" - Chris Bouthillier.

## Citations

Images (Bottom From Left):

Timms, Phillip.  
Vancouver Public Library.  
7387.  
Interurban Cedar Cottage. 1913.

Matthew, James Skitt.  
City of Vancouver Archives. AM54-S4-: LGN 504.  
Looking North from Commercial St. and 20th Ave. 1913.

Timms, Phillip.  
Vancouver Public Library.  
7385.  
Cedar Cottage Interurban. 1913.



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# Gow Block Prior Restoration

2005



## Further Reading

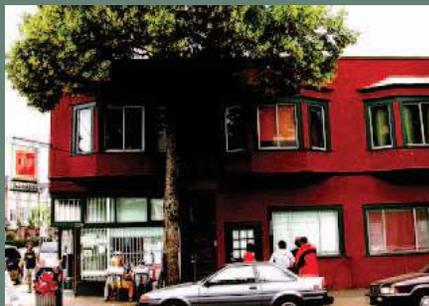
### Additional Residential Units

By the time Jerry and Norah purchased the Gow Block, three of the four commercial units on the first floor had been converted to residential units (the corner was left as a grocery). The entranceway insets had been removed and made flush with the outermost windows. Many of the first floor windows were removed and the wooden cladding was covered over in stucco and painted red.

## Citations

### Images (Below Left):

Images provided by Jerry Prussin and Norah Johnson



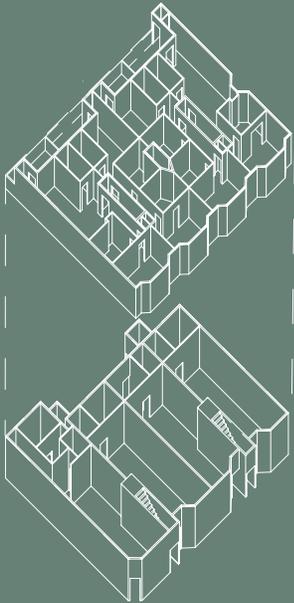
# Gow Block After Restoration

2010

## Further Reading

Below:

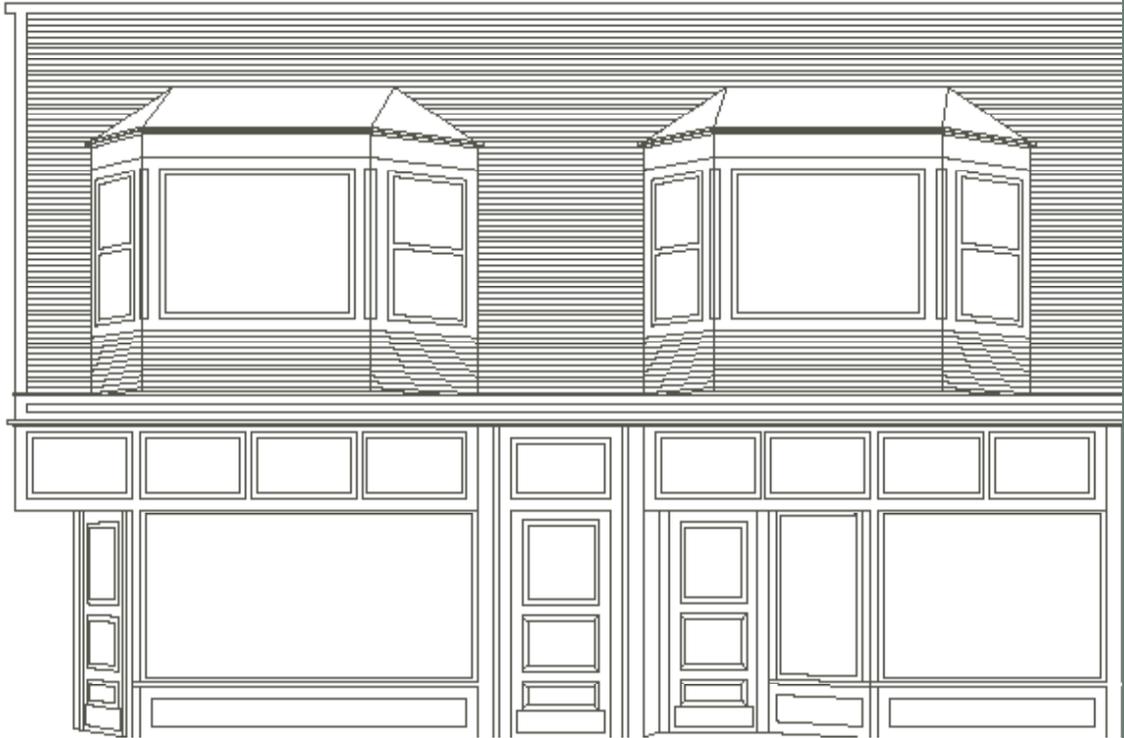
Axonometric Drawing showing the assembly of the Gow Block



## Citations

Image (Right):

Original image derived from photo documentation

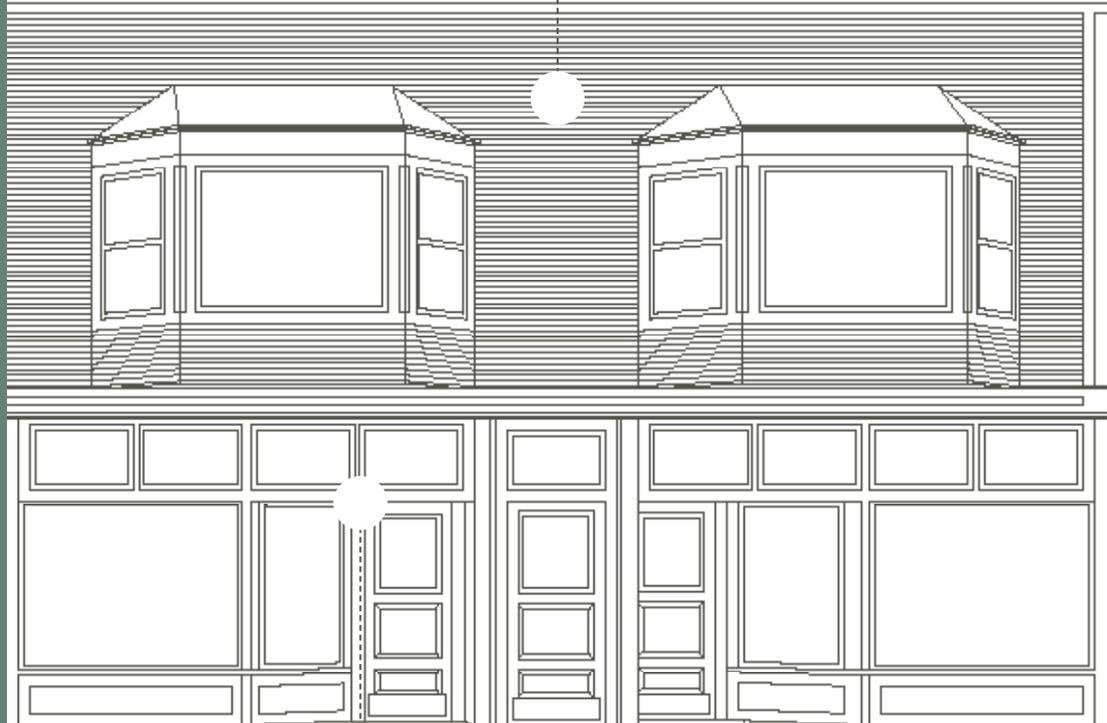
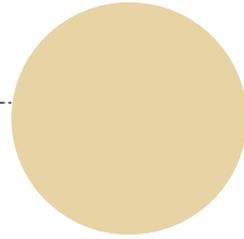


The Gow Block has had its history of renovations. Jerry and Norah's was the renovation to undo all the others. The first things they did was a rehabilitation of the foundation, which was much worse than they had expected. Next they converted the ground floor

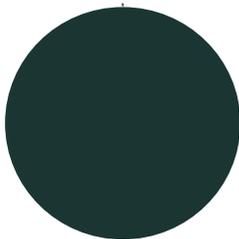
residential units back into commercial units. As a part of this reconversion, the exterior of the first floor was restored with the inset wood detail between the two floors and window and frames that existed in the original build. Jerry and Norah's restoration removed the red stucco,

replacing it with wooden cladding in the original style. In addition to restoring the cladding, they painted the exterior with the original colours of the building with the support of a True Colours Grant provided by Vancouver Heritage Foundation.

**K**itsilano Gold. This is the original colour for the second story wooden cladding.



**C**omox Green. This is the original colour for all the trim around windows



## Further Reading

### True Colours

True colours is an exterior paint granting program of Vancouver Heritage Foundation, undertaken since 1999 in partnership with Benjamin Moore & Co., Ltd. As part of the True Colours Program, the original colour of each chosen building is thoroughly documented and matched through visual and microscopic analysis.

Note: Colours may not appear accurately due to printer or viewer settings

For more information go to:

[www.vancouverheritagefoundation.org/special-projects/true-colours-palette/](http://www.vancouverheritagefoundation.org/special-projects/true-colours-palette/)



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## Citations

### Images (Right):

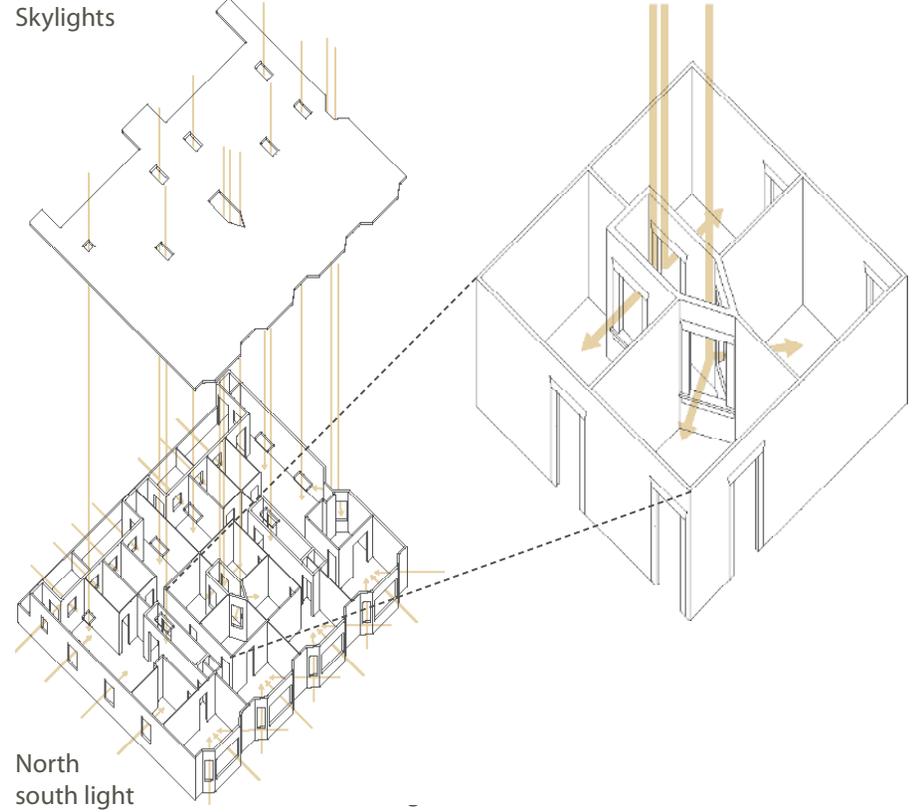
All images provided by Vancouver Heritage Foundation

### Drawing:

Original axonometric drawing derived from sections and plans provided by Ramsay Worden Architects. The yellow arrows on the diagram depict the flow of natural light and how light enters into all corners of the structure itself. The roof and the top floor are shown to describe how light enters the interior through a wide selection of skylights on the exterior.



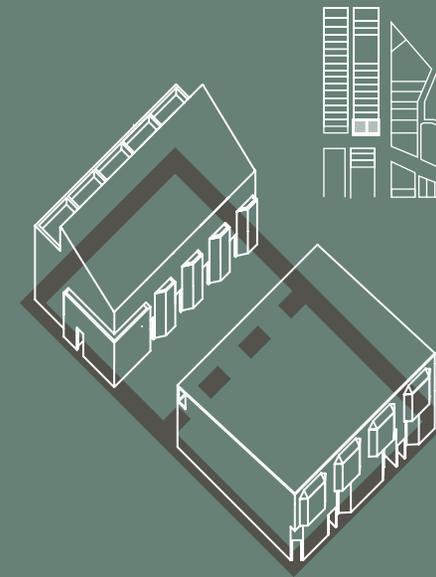
Residential units need accessibility to natural light. The Gow Block is no different. It contains four units side by side and is neighbored on the north side by a three story building. This means only the southernmost unit would receive natural light from a north/south direction if it weren't for the presence of light wells. These light wells were a part of the original design and were preserved in Jerry and Norah's renovation. They provide light and air flow into areas that would otherwise be dark and stagnant. Working with the large quantity of skylights and East/West windows, every room and corner of the second floor of the Gow Block has access to natural light and air.



## Original Subdivision



## New Subdivision



### Legend:

|  |                  |
|--|------------------|
|  | Property Outline |
|  | Subdivision Line |
|  | Building Outline |
|  | Site Location    |

“A subdivision is proposed to allow separate ownership of ‘The Gow Block’ and reduce building bylaw upgrades”<sup>1</sup>

The property the Gow Block sits on was comprised of two lots running east-west. Behind the Gow Block sat a garden and an empty parking lot. The bureaucracy involved in building a new structure across two lots would “have

been a nightmare.” So Jerry and Norah reoriented the lots. There was an extensive notification period where 250 surrounding owners were informed of the proposed changes. There were no outright objections stated, although one letter had expressed concern that “approval will likely increase traffic and parking impacts in the area,” and that the proposal “should be consistent with heritage policies.”

Ramsay Worden responded to these concerns by incorporating parking within the building design with five permanent parking spots, ensuring that the new building followed the City of Vancouver’s Heritage Guidelines as well as The Standards and Guidelines for the Conservation of Historic Places in Canada (further information see page 16).

## Further Reading

### Alternative Parking:

In the proposal it was also outlined very clearly that “a nominal increase in parking would occur, as would be the case if the site was redeveloped without the proposed heritage building.”

## Citations

### Maps:

Derived from City of Vancouver’s Planning Department Map of South Vancouver (1946) and Vanmaps (2013)

<sup>1</sup>City of Vancouver Planning Department. “Design and Heritage Revitalization Agreement. 3589 Commercial Street” City of Vancouver. Feb. 2009. Final Ed.: A4. Print.



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## Citations

### Illustration:

Bob Worden.  
Illustration for Gow  
Block. 2009. Ramsay  
Worden Architects.  
Jerry Prussin Blog.  
Web. Fri. May 24th  
2013.

### Text Right:

<sup>1</sup>City of Vancouver  
Planning Department.  
"Design and Heritage  
Revitalization  
Agreement. 3589  
Commercial Street"  
City of Vancouver. Feb.  
2009. Final Ed.: A4.  
Print.



# Cedar Cottage Townhomes

"The most viable option to retain and conserve the heritage building is to permit the development of the rear portion"<sup>1</sup>

**T**he Cedar Cottage Townhomes sought out to achieve three goals: build a green/sustainable structure, while maintaining the heritage character of the development and keeping the project at a low cost. These goals were successfully achieved

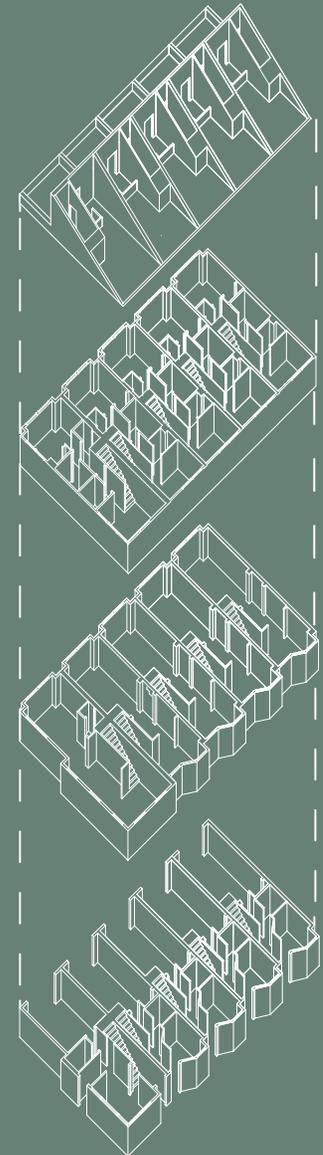
through the innovative use of materials, circulation systems and simple aesthetic choices such as paint colour. For example, the townhomes were painted with the same colour palette as the Gow Block (Comox Green and Kitsilano Gold) and fitted with HRV systems, and On Demand Hot Water in coordination with the build to Green Gold Standard. The Cedar Cottage Townhomes' design decisions allow for ample access to green space. Each unit is

connected to a communal outdoor space in a front courtyard on the east side and private outdoor space in the back on an open air deck on the fourth floor. This project contributes a positive face for the Commercial Street Village by developing a new green structure that maintains the aesthetic style of the neighbourhood while still having its own unique visual identity as well.





The studio in the southernmost unit (see axonometric diagram, far left) allows it to be used not only as a place of residence, like the other four townhomes, but as a place of work as well. The large windows and the corner position on 20th allow for a well lit work area, while also providing ample commercial display space visible to people passing by. The separate entrance into the studio that faces out onto the street, allows for the studio to be rented out independently. Meanwhile the internal entrance into the studio (from the unit itself), provides the opportunity for the studio to be used by the unit's residents as a live work space. This flexibility of the studio largely dictated its design.



## Further Reading

### Fibre Cement Siding

Fibre cement siding (in this project HardiePlank Lap Siding was used) is a cladding material used to cover the exterior of commercial and domestic buildings. It is a composite mixture derived from sand, cement and cellulose fibres. It is quite commonly used to replace wood siding.

## Citations

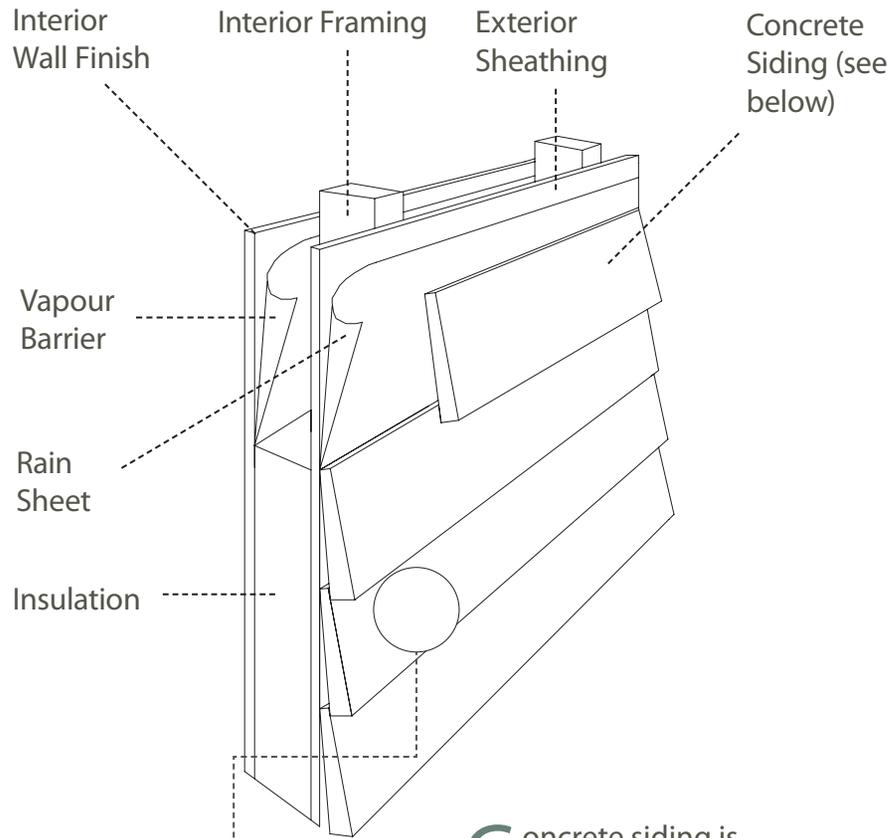
Text:

James Hardi.  
HardiePlank Lap Siding.  
New York: James Hardi.  
2012. Web. 14th June.  
2013



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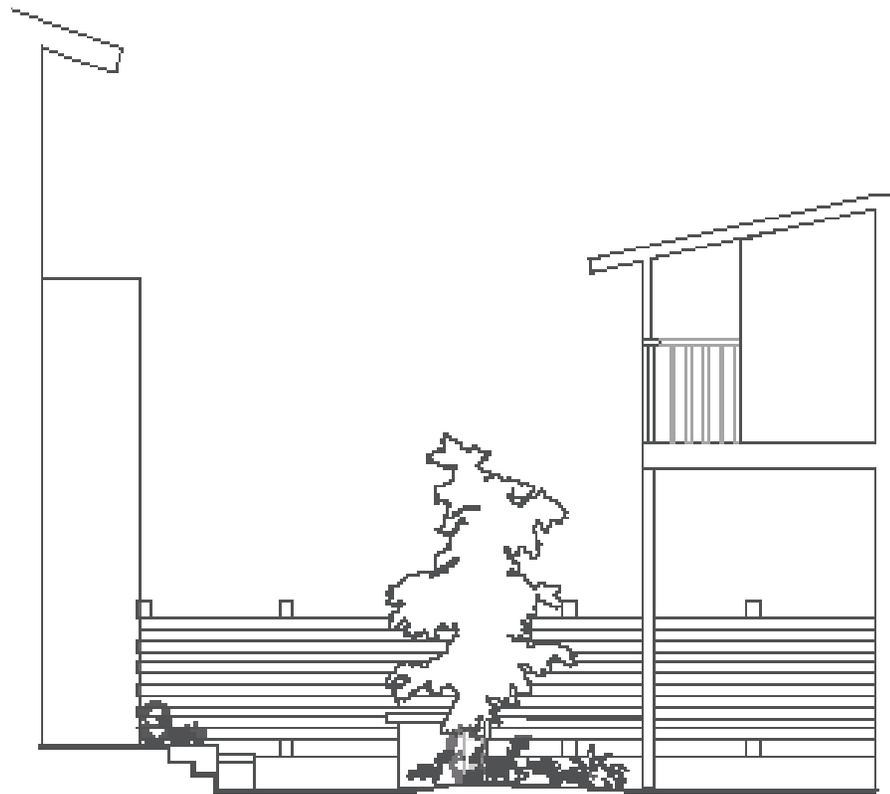


Concrete siding is effective economically, environmentally and aesthetically. It is cheaper in installation and reduces costs through the lifespan of the project with the lower rates of heat loss etc. Environmentally, concrete siding insulates better. Aesthetically, the siding appears the same as wood, and can be painted (preserves paint longer), in keeping with the visual style of the Gow block.



# Gow Block Heritage Garden

Seating was a major focus for the landscaping portion of this project. The benches, galleries and deck furniture work together to form small gathering areas that feed into a larger space. The garden to brings everyone on the site from all the suites in both buildings together. The back of the Gow Block and the benches in the front of the townhomes have a specific relationship with one another. They allow residents to be close enough for conversation but far enough away that they still feel private, encouraging the idea of this collective gathering space



## Further Reading

### “Heritage Garden”

One of the major goals for the landscaping portion of this project was to restore the plant life to what would have grown on the site prior to development. The idea was to restore the garden, like the restoration of the Gow Block, by using local plants that grow in the forests of British Columbia.

Note: The three plants shown to the left are a sample from the garden (wider selection in planting plan). Not all plants are local

## Citations

### Images (Left):

Images provided by, Viewpoint, Jerry Prussin and Norah Johnson



Dwarf Strawberry Bush

*Arbutus unedo* 'Compacta'



Western Sword Fern

*Polystichum munitum*



White Bleeding Heart

*Dicentra spectabilis* 'Alba'



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## Further Reading

### Community Vision

This Vision describes the community that people who live and work in Kensington-Cedar Cottage want it to become over the next 10 to 20 years, and how CityPlan directions should be implemented.

### Citations

City of Vancouver. KCC Community Vision. City of Vancouver Community Plan. 1998. Web. 14th June. 2013.

# Gow Block Cedar Cottage

The Commercial Street Village will never be the popular hub of activity from all across the Lower Mainland that it once was. The Interurban Line ceases to exist and the Skytrain doesn't stop at this little pocket of development. But, looking to the future, the community is moving towards an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable

goal by focussing on how the village can serve the neighbouring community. The Community Vision for the Cedar Cottage Area outlines a series of goals for the neighbourhood regarding what residents and the city want the community to be. The Gow Block is evidence of these goals leaving their mark on the built environment. It aids in revitalizing the

neighbourhood and bringing the Commercial Street Village closer to the popular locus it could be, although this time, the popular locus is oriented around immediate neighbours rather than commuters from across the Lower Mainland. The Gow Block works in coordination with the community by acting out the goals outlined in the Community Vision.

## Kensington-Cedar Cottage Community Plan Goals

### Cleaner Greener Neighbourhoods

"There should be higher standards of maintenance and cleanliness for private and public property, to deal with litter, dumping, graffiti, and neglected properties."<sup>1</sup>

The improved "construction techniques and quality of materials" not only meant that the new restored structure would "be easier to maintain and look good longer" but also that "litter and graffiti" would decrease because the Gow block set a higher standard for the community.

### Single Family Neighbourhoods

"Most single family areas should be kept as now, maintaining the sense of community that residents value. In areas with 'character'.<sup>1</sup>

The Gow Block's restoration not only maintains but actually improves "the sense of community that residents value". Its 'character' was so well preserved it was kept right down to its original colours. All in all, the restoration gives value to the residents who have lived in this neighbourhood for years.

### New Housing Choices

"Include rowhouses, four and sixplexes, and duplexes... This new housing should be attractive and fit into the existing neighbourhoods."<sup>1</sup>

The Gow Block not only maintained the rentable units that were already within the building, but added four more living units on what was once an unused parking lot. This new rowhouse unit was Built to Green Gold Standard, it added density to the neighbourhood and maintained visual consistency with the Gow Block out front.

