

## Vancouver Special Sunset Project

**V**ancouver Specials were designed in the early 1960s to house a burgeoning immigrant population from Europe who arrived looking for quick, inexpensive housing for extended families. With their boxy shape, size engulfing almost the entire lot, faux brick and decorative lions, they are sneered at by many Vancouverites. Love them or hate them, they are here to stay because to demolish 10,000 homes is not sustainable. The large floor plate of

Vancouver Specials allows home buyers to renovate without making structural changes. Their floor plan is flexible, adapting to diverse lifestyles. With cosmetic changes such as paint, new kitchens and bathrooms, and the removal of non-supporting interior walls, owners are left with a light-flooded open plan home. Energy efficiency upgrades to mechanical systems, windows, appliances and insulation adds further value. Vancouver Specials are part of the architectural and social

history of Vancouver. They tell the stories of generations of immigrants who arrived looking for a better life. One group of immigrants for whom Vancouver Specials were a perfect fit was the South Asian population. This case study examines the renovation of one Vancouver Special in the Sunset neighbourhood. The study focuses on the history of the Sunset South Asian population and the renovation goals of energy efficiency and affordability at 860 East 61st Avenue.

### Project at a Glance

Building Type  
**Vancouver Special**

Location  
**860 East 61st Ave**

Original Build  
**1982**

Owner  
**Shaun St-Amour**

Architect  
**Metis Design Build**

Contractor  
**Footprint Sustainable Housing**

Use  
**Residential (with basement suite and proposed laneway attached)**

### Citations

Illustration (Top):

Illustration provided by  
Erick Villagomez



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Summer 2013 | McFaul | Page 27

## Citations

Images (Bottom  
From Left):

Matthew, James Skitt.  
City of Vancouver  
Archives. AM54-S4-:  
Str P119

**Main Street and 64th  
Looking West.** 1911.

Matthew, James Skitt.  
City of Vancouver  
Archives. AM54-S4-:  
Str P122.

**Main Street and 64th  
Looking North.** 1911.

Unknown. City of  
Vancouver Archives.  
AM54-S4-: Str P1334  
**Fraser Street  
Between 50th and  
51st.** 1911.

# Vancouver Special History

**1907** Despite South Asians being legally allowed to vote in elections because they were British subjects, the Government of British Columbia denied South Asian immigrants the right to vote in municipal, provincial, and later, federal elections.<sup>1</sup>

**1914** The Komagata Maru Incident occurred, when a passenger ship from Punjab, India and its passengers were turned away from Vancouver's harbour because of their Southeast Asian heritage.<sup>1</sup>

**1929** The Municipality of South Vancouver is incorporated into the City of Vancouver.<sup>2</sup>

**1910** Initial development in the Sunset Community (referred to then as the City of South Vancouver) begins, with a small commercial development at South Hill (Fraser Street and 49th)<sup>2</sup>

**1920** Initial development begins in the South Main area (what is later to become the Punjabi Market [49th and Main]).<sup>2</sup>

**1947** South Asian immigrants gain the right to vote in municipal elections, leading to the adoption of similar laws at provincial and federal levels soon after.<sup>1</sup>





## Citations

Information for  
Timeline:

<sup>1</sup>Sarjeet, Singh, Jagpal. **Becoming Canadians.** Madeira Park. Harbour Publishing, 1994. Print.

<sup>2</sup>Macdonald, Bruce. **Vancouver A Visual History.** Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1992. Print

<sup>3</sup>Pettit, Barbara Ann. **Zoning and the Single-Family Landscape: Large New Houses and Neighbourhood Change In Vancouver.** Thesis, School of Community and Regional Planning, University of British Columbia. ProQuest/ UMI, 1993. Print.

<sup>4</sup>Unknown. **The Vancouver Special Competition.** Vancouver. Alcan, 1988. Print

**1960** Vancouver  
Specials begin  
appearing on city streets<sup>3, 4</sup>

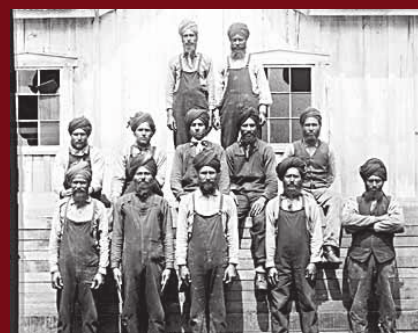
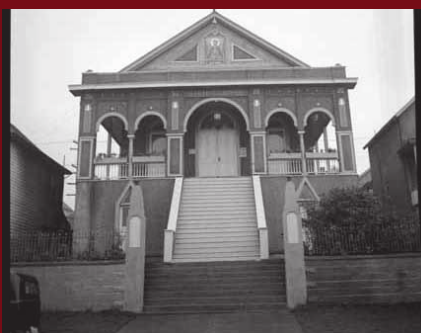
**1985** Vancouver ceases  
to build new  
Vancouver Specials<sup>3, 4</sup>

**2013** Phase One:  
redesign of  
exterior is completed

**1982** Construction of  
the Vancouver  
Special at 860 East 61st Ave.  
is completed

**2012** Vancouver  
Special is  
purchased by Shaun St-  
Amour. Planning, designing  
and renovation begins on  
phase one of the project

**2013** Phase Two:  
Renovation of the  
rear of the Vancouver Special  
and construction of the  
Laneway House is underway



# Vancouver Special Sunset

## Citations

Images (Bottom  
From Left Page 25):

Dundas, Todd.  
Vancouver Public  
Library. VPL\_2051  
**Imperial Cannery -  
Unloading Fish.** 1913.

Artay. Vancouver Public  
Library. 80809.  
**Exterior Vancouver  
Sikh Temple** 194\*.

Timms, Phillip.  
Vancouver Public  
Library. VPL\_7641. **Sikh  
Sawmill Workers.**  
190\*

Images (Top Page  
25):

Matthew, James Skitt.  
City of Vancouver  
Archives. AM54-S4-:  
Str P1567  
**Main Street Looking  
North Between 50th  
and 51st.** 1911.

The Sunset Community is the home to one of Canada's largest South Asian communities. Prior to the 1960s, South Asians immigrating to Canada faced extreme racism occurring both socially and legally. From denying South Asian populations the right to vote (despite immigrating

from a British colony), to denying them the right to immigrate at all (Komagata Maru) and denying them the opportunity to fairly participate in much of what defines Canadian culture, the South Asian population has faced racism. As a result, this community tended to band together into smaller ethnic enclaves, where similar

religion, food, dress etc. was not only permitted, but celebrated. These customs were eventually integrated into Canadian culture, but it was during the years of racism that places like the Sunset community sprouted up.







“Many people felt that the houses were ugly and worthless.”

- Keith Higgins<sup>1</sup>

It was not until the 1970s and 1980s that South Asian immigration began to rapidly increase. Between 1970 and 1980, over 60,000 immigrants from South Asia arrived in Canada, many settling on the west coast (Vancouver in particular). The locations chosen to settle were the neighbourhoods that already had a South

Asian community inhabiting them. These communities grew considerably, but they would only continue to grow if the residents had access to cheap housing. One solution was the Vancouver Special. Due to the ease of construction (a slab with no basement, single structural wall etc.), adaptable design (“the interiors permitted customization through a kind of modularity”<sup>2</sup>) and affordability (by renting out the bottom floor), these new immigrants to Canada found a large home that suited

their needs of cheap, large homes. A high concentration of Vancouver Specials were built in the Sunset Area, our case study being one of them. The houses facilitated the growth of a concentrated ethnic enclave, which in turn stimulated the growth of the Punjabi Market. Without the Vancouver Special, the South Asian community would have been unable to expand in such close proximity to the centre of Vancouver, in turn meaning that the Punjabi Market would not likely exist today.

## Citations

### Text (Page 26):

Sarjeet, Singh, Jagpal. **Becoming Canadians.** Madeira Park. Harbour Publishing, 1994. Print.

Macdonald, Bruce. **Vancouver A Visual History.** Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1992. Print

<sup>1</sup> Higgins, Keith. **How to Look at a Vancouver Special.** Vancouver. Publication Studio. 2005. Print.

<sup>2</sup> Macdonald, Chris. “The Vancouver Special Redux” **The Canadian Architect.** 49 (2004). 22 - 26. Web. Thurs. July 18th 2013. Print

### Image (Top Left):

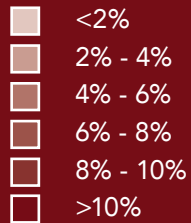
Unknown. Vancouver Public Library. 86540. **Sikh Religious Parade.** 1905.



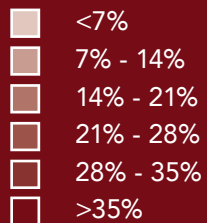
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## Legend

1 - South Asian Population/Census Tract:



2 - Percentage of Total South Asian Vancouver Population:



3 - South Asian Population Density/km<sup>2</sup>:



1.



2.



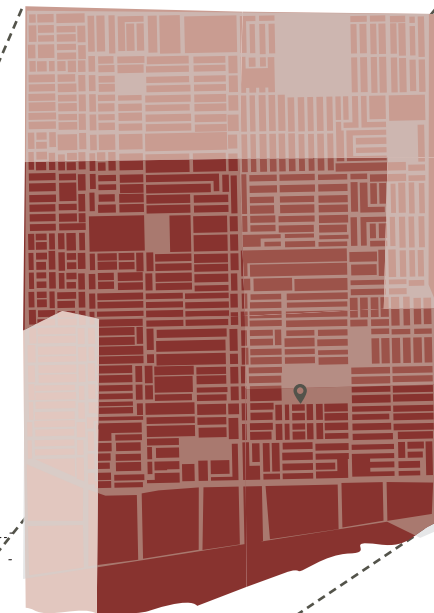
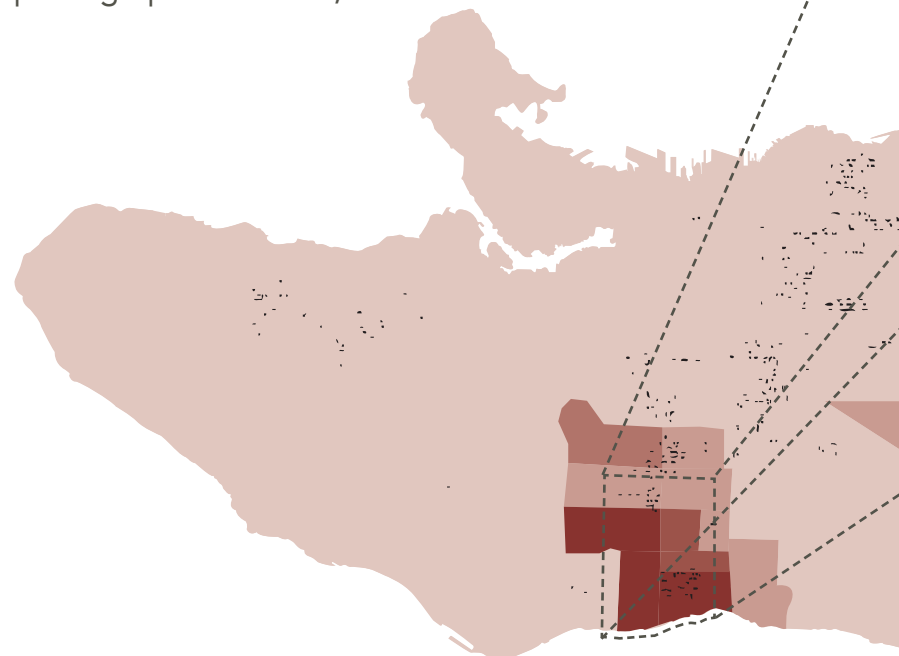
3.



## Map Below:

Below is the same map showing South Asian population density per km<sup>2</sup> as the 3rd map located to the above right. On top of this map is Keith Higgins' map of the Vancouver Specials he has photographed to date, shown

in the black dots. Notice the correlation between the high density South Asian census tracts and the situation of the pocket of Vancouver Specials which 860 East 61st sits.



The map above is showing South Asian population density per census tract in the Sunset neighbourhood.







## Sunset Community

Located in South Vancouver, Sunset contains two major commercial corridors: Fraser Street and Main Street. We are discussing the development of Main Street because the residents of these Vancouver Specials were of predominantly South Asian descent.

- 1: 41st Street
- 2: 49th Street
- 3: South Hill Market
- 4: Punjabi Market
- 5: Moberly Park
- 6: 860 East 61st Ave.
- 7: Fraser Street
- 8: Main Street

## Citations

Original Photo  
(Left):

Matthew, James Skitt.  
City of Vancouver  
Archives. AM54-S4-: LP  
153.2

**Vancouver Oblique  
View North.** 1948.

Population Maps  
(Page 30):

Higgins, Keith.  
"Vancouver Special  
Map." **Vancouver  
Special.** n.d. Web. July  
18th 2013.

Statistics Canada.  
2012. GeoSearch.  
2011 Census. Statistics  
Canada Catalogue no.  
92-142-XWE. Ottawa,  
Ontario. Data updated  
October 24, 2012.



## Further Reading

Maps and Graph  
(Right Page 30 and 31):

The maps on the top of the pages are depicting the commercial growth in the Sunset Neighborhood as well as depicting the relative number and location of Vancouver Specials. On the bottom is a graph depicting the total number of South Asian immigrants into Canada from 1930 to 1980.

## Citations

Maps (Right Page 30 and 31):

Macdonald, Bruce.  
**Vancouver A Visual History.** Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1992. Print.



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**1930** Low South Asian immigrant population due to social and institutional racism. Initial development in Sunset begins with a small commercial development on Main and 49th (as well as Fraser Street).

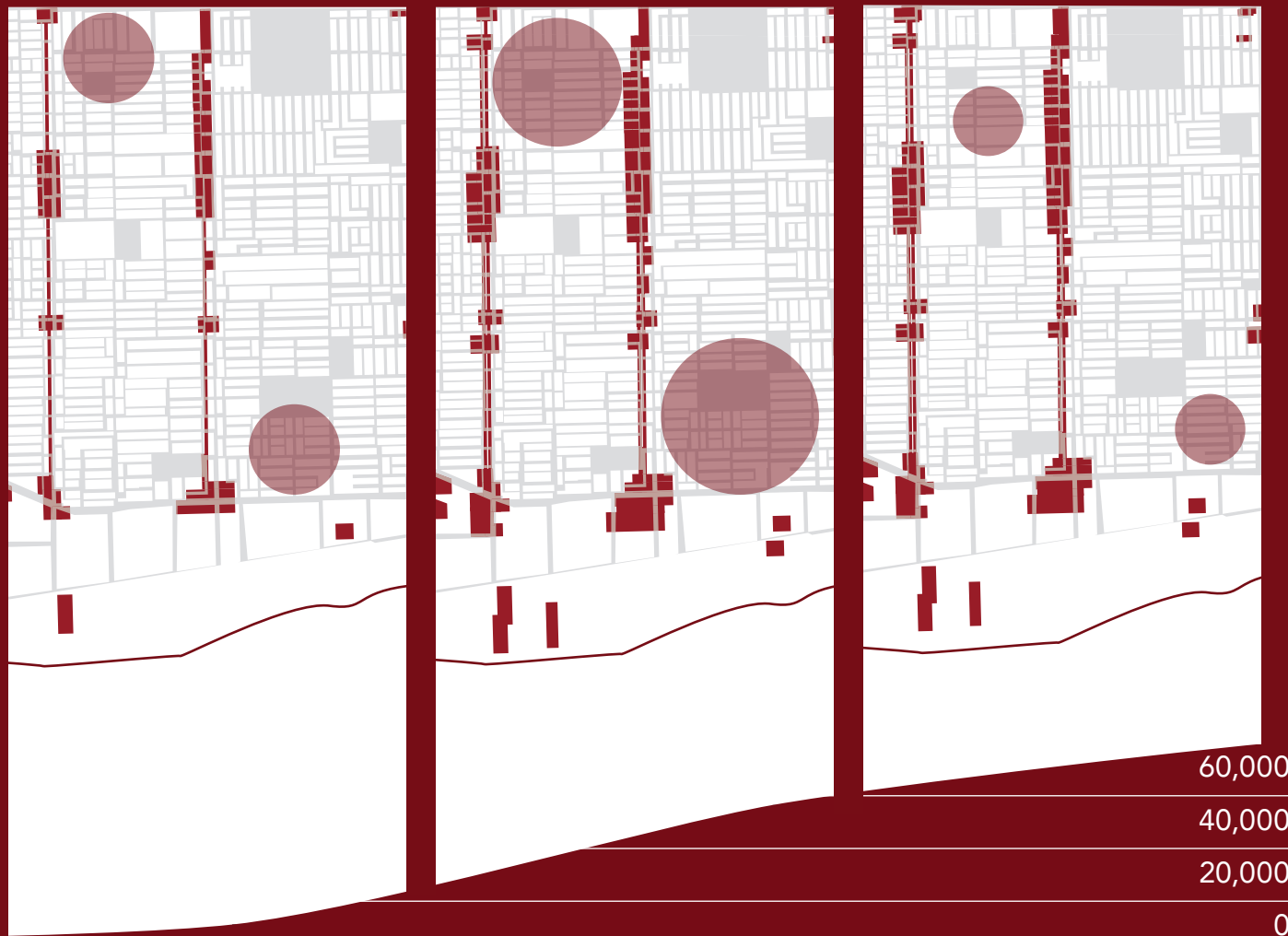


**1940** South Asian immigrant population remains low and the South Main commercial strip continues to grow.



**1950** The South Main commercial strip does not grow considerably, nor does the South Asian immigrant community.





**1960** As South Asian immigration begins to grow, the Vancouver Specials begin mass development. The small community of the South Asian enclave (originally Sikh) grows considerably.

**1970** Immigration and the number of Vancouver Specials continues to grow in the 70s. The term the 'Punjabi Market' is commonly used and many of the market's older buildings are replaced.

**1980** South Asian immigration remains high and the construction of new Vancouver Specials declines. The Punjabi Market is fully established as an ethnic enclave.

## Citations

Vancouver Special Maps (Left):

Higgins, Keith. "Vancouver Special Map." **Vancouver Special**. n.d. Web. July 18th 2013.

Graph (Centre Left Page 30 and 31):

Statistics Canada. 2012. GeoSearch. 2011 Census. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 92-142-XWE. Ottawa, Ontario. Data updated October 24, 2012.

Southeast Asian Canadian Immigrant Population



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## Further Reading

Footprint  
Sustainable  
Housing

**"Step gently, Build Well"**

The motto says it all. Footprint Sustainable Housing is brothers Shaun and Richard and their father Steve St-Amour's contracting firm. They work closely as a family to achieve the goal of sustainable, energy efficient housing and construction.

For More  
Information Go To:

**www.  
homesbyfootprint.  
com**



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# Vancouver Special St-Amours

"This house is a model for what is possible for Vancouver Specials" - Shaun St-Amour, Owner and Contractor

Shaun St-Amour, his wife and two daughters had bought the Vancouver Special at 860 East 61st with a massive amount of work to

do. The dream is to renovate this special including the construction of a laneway house, creating a model for other renovations. As a business strategy, this house serves not only as home for Shaun and his family, but as an example of what can be achieved with Vancouver Specials. In terms of affordability, the project is not elaborate, instead it

is quite the opposite with Shaun naming affordability as one of his major goals. What was done on this Special can easily be transferred to others as most Vancouver Specials are built almost the same (two floors, gradually peaked roof and one structural interior wall). This project serves as a prime example for DIY homeowners and professionals alike.





## Further Reading

### Metis Design Build

Established in 2000, by founder Erick Villagomez (B. Arch. Sci., M. Arch), Metis Design Build offers both design and construction services to clients who desired creating environmentally sensitive homes on tight budgets. It covers anything from small scale residential work to urban design to illustration.

For More Information Go To:

[www.metisdb.com](http://www.metisdb.com)

"We had wanted to work on a project for quite a while and this just seemed the natural fit" - Erick Villagomez, Architect

**E**rick Villagomez and Shaun St-Amour had, for a long time, been trying to find a project they could tackle together as a builder and designer team. Erick, founder of Vancouver based firm Metis Design Build, associate professor at

the School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture at UBC and writer for magazines, newspapers and websites alike, worked with Shaun to lay out a series of principals to guide the design from the onset. They chose to go with a series of simple design decisions that implemented their idea of frugality and simplicity into the built form. They wanted to preserve as much as possible, and keep intact the positive aspects of the Vancouver Special. They

wanted to make only a few subtle changes to enhance not only the interior but the street facing facade. Aesthetically, they chose a modern design that was simple, clean and functional. Functionally, they chose a design that correlates with the needs of a young Vancouver family in 2013.



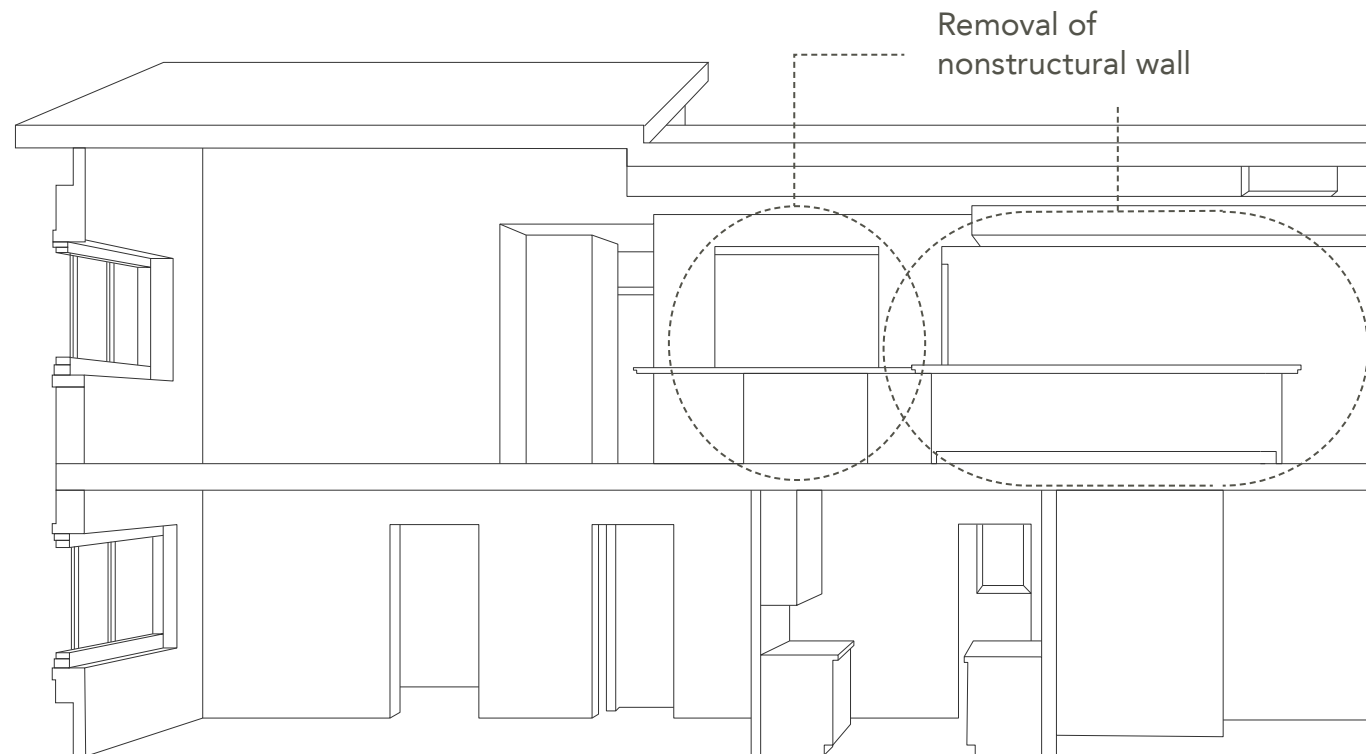
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## Citations

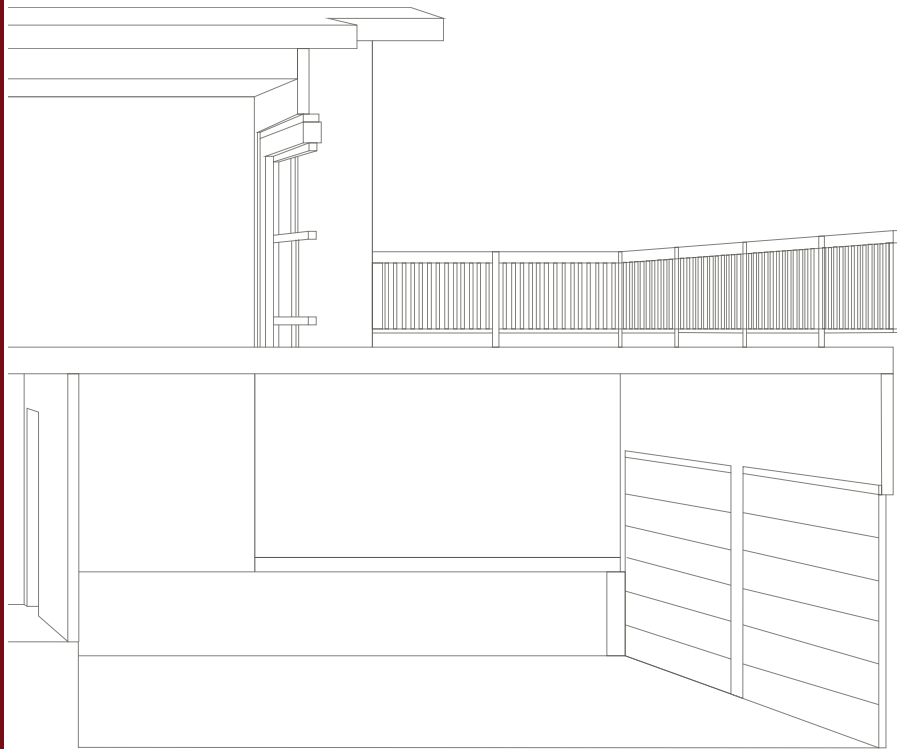
### The Bar:

The images on the bottom of page 35 are describing what Erick and Shaun refer to as 'the bar'. With a lower ceiling, higher counter and dimmer lights, the bar offers a unique dynamic to a residential home and separates the kitchen from the hall.

# Vancouver Special Design







"We made a series of small surgical incisions"  
- Erick Villagomez,  
Architect

**T**hrough a series of small surgical incisions, the interior of the second floor was opened up to allow for better air flow, communication and light. This Vancouver Special consists of a bisected plan (a main structural interior wall running up the centre). This wall makes the house easy and affordable to build, and in terms of usable space, it divides the interior of the building in half. In an attempt to get around this, all non structural elements of this wall were removed, opening up the interior to light, conversation and ventilation.

## Further Reading

### The Garage:

The next major step in the renovation of the Vancouver Special is converting this garage (seen left) into a sunken living room. This will add considerable space to the bottom floor suite. The distance that the garage projects from the rear of the house will change with the finalization of the design for the laneway house.



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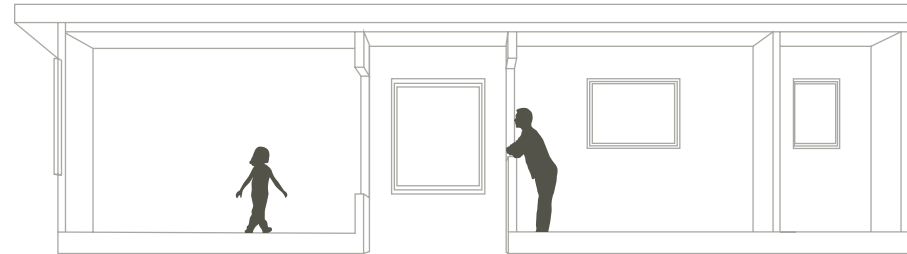
## Citations

Text:

Pettit, Barbara Ann. **Zoning and the Single-Family Landscape: Large New Houses and Neighborhood Change In Vancouver.** Thesis, School of Community and Regional Planning, University of British Columbia. ProQuest/UMI, 1993. Print.



"The reuse of the windows was both an aesthetic and functional decision" - Shaun St-Amour, Owner and Contractor



The project implemented a series of sustainable design decisions (On Demand Hot Water, Dual Flush toilets etc.), but most notable is the Heat Recovery Ventilation System (HRV) system for circulating air. The majority of the building has been 'air sealed' to maintain

pressure and temperature within the building in colder months. This is done to minimize heat loss, but still allow for air circulation in the winter. This is ideal for the colder winter months, but during the summer, the buildings needs an efficient way of cooling itself. The solution was to use the

original exterior windows on the interior, to allow the air to flow right through the building, cooling it and negating the 'air tight' seal during the hot summer months. But, just as these windows could be opened, they could also be shut, restoring the seal in the winter.





Balcony Removal

**"It served no function"**

The balcony was too small to have any functional use so it was removed dropping the window by a foot.



Box Out

**"West Coast Modern"**

The window where the porch once stood was boxed out to achieve a west coast modern design aesthetic.



Gabled Roof Removal

**"Functional and Aesthetic"**

Removal of the peak allowed for a more modern aesthetic and a more efficient roof drainage.

## Citations

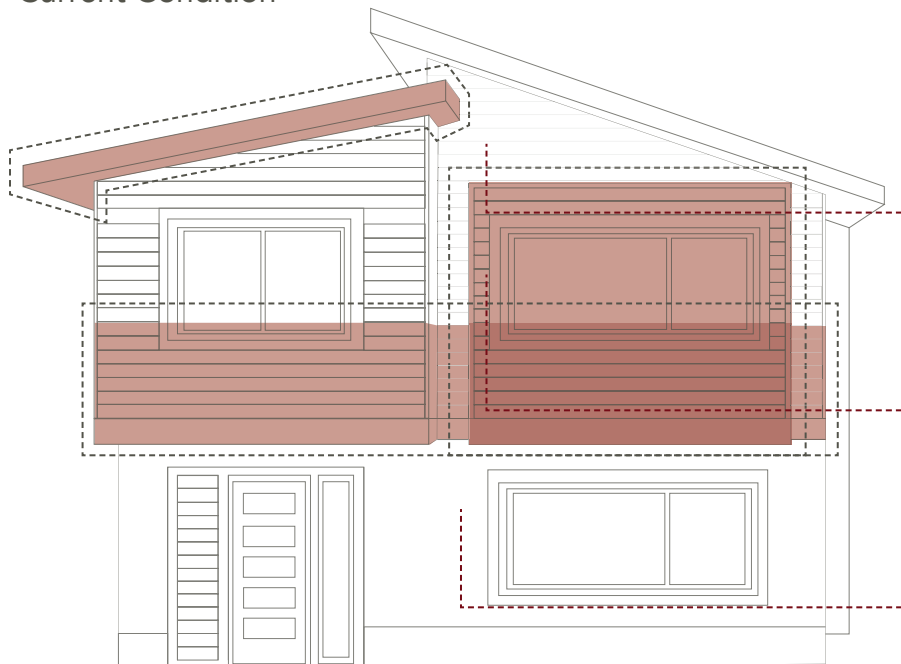
Text (Left):

Designer's Guide to Ceiling-Based Air Diffusion, Rock and Zhu, ASHRAE, Inc., New York, USA, 2002

Images and Quotes (Top From Left):

All images and quotes provided by Shaun St-Amour

Current Condition



## Material Choices



Painted Tongue Cedar



Exposed Tongue Cedar



Painted Original Brick



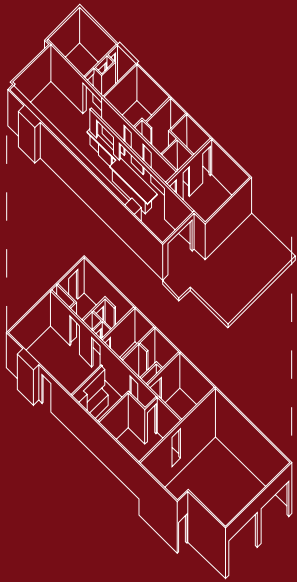
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# Vancouver Special Light

## Further Reading

Illustration (Below):

Axonomic Drawing of the Van Special



"We needed to open up the interior" - Erick Villagomez, Architect

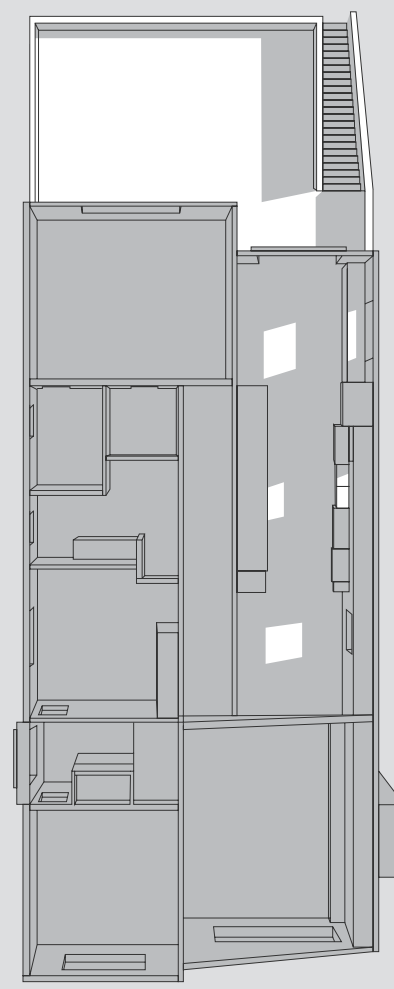
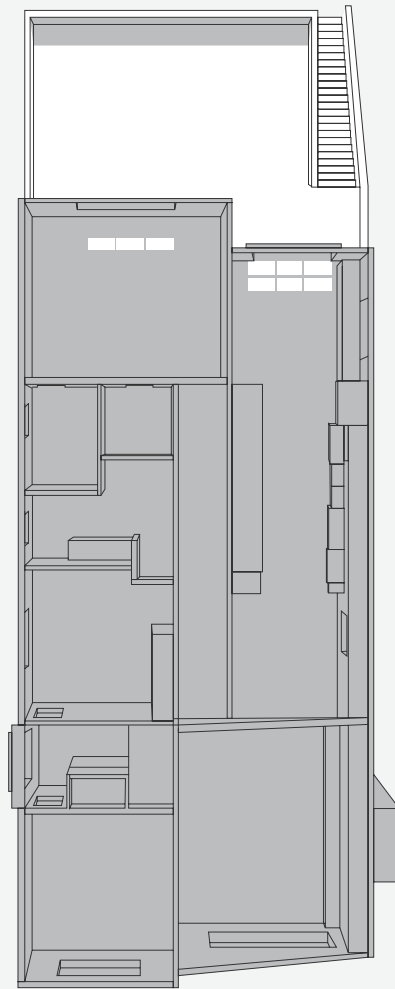
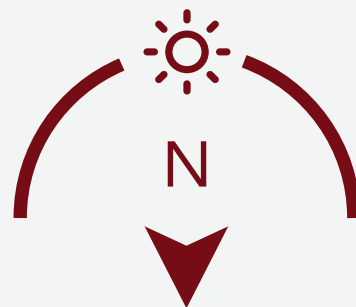
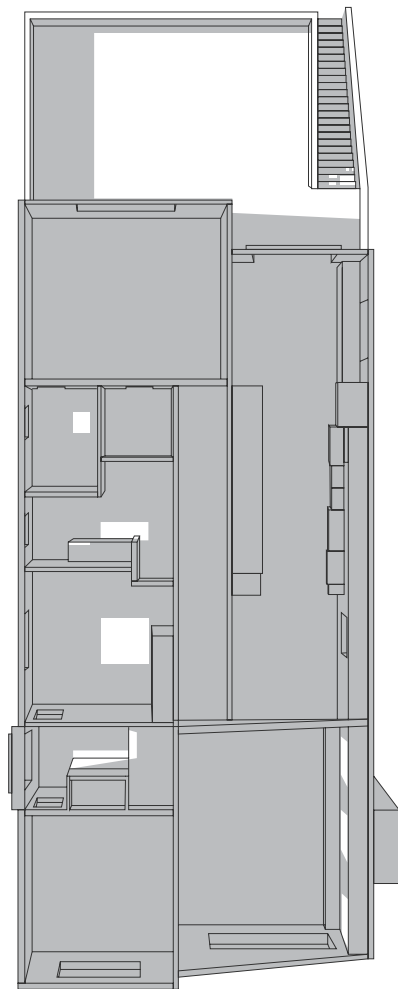
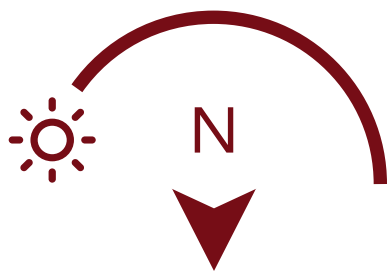
One of the great things about Vancouver Specials is that the main living quarters are located on the second floor upstairs. This is done for many reasons, one of which is because it

enables more natural light to reach the main living area, which was a specific decision for Vancouver's low light weather. The problem Shaun and Erick found was that this Vancouver Special had a very compartmentalized bisected plan, limiting access to light (meaning the building was split down the middle and the sides were further broken down into small rooms).

To maximize natural light, they opened up the eastern bisect allowing more free flow of light, cut the nonstructural portions of the centre wall to brighten the interior with indirect light and added larger windows on the south face of the building to maximize southern exposure to direct light.







## Further Reading

### Diagrams (Left):

Diagrams depicting areas of direct sunlight from 8:00am to 4:00pm on June 21st:



8:00am  
June 21



12:00pm  
June 21



4:00pm  
June 21



North  
Arrow



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## Citations

### Text:

Hamilton, Janet. **In My Back Yard: A Back Lane Approach To Zoning And Density.** Thesis, School of Architecture Landscape Architecture, University of British Columbia. ProQuest/UMI, 2006. Print.

City of Vancouver. **Laneway Housing - How-to Guide.** City of Vancouver. COV Online. [www.vancouver.ca/home-property-development/laneway-houses-and-secondary-suites.aspx](http://www.vancouver.ca/home-property-development/laneway-houses-and-secondary-suites.aspx). Updated: June 2013. Web. July 29th 2013.

### Illustrations (Page 41 Bottom Right):

Illustrations provided by Erick Villagomez

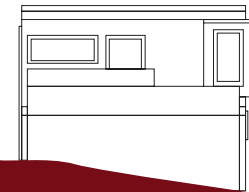
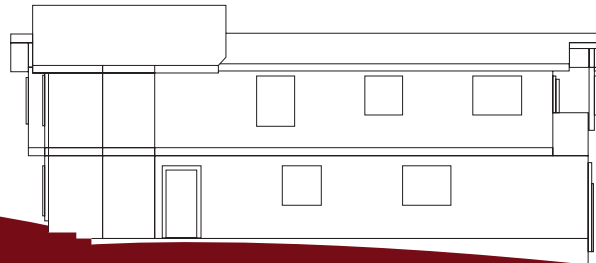
# Lanehome Topography

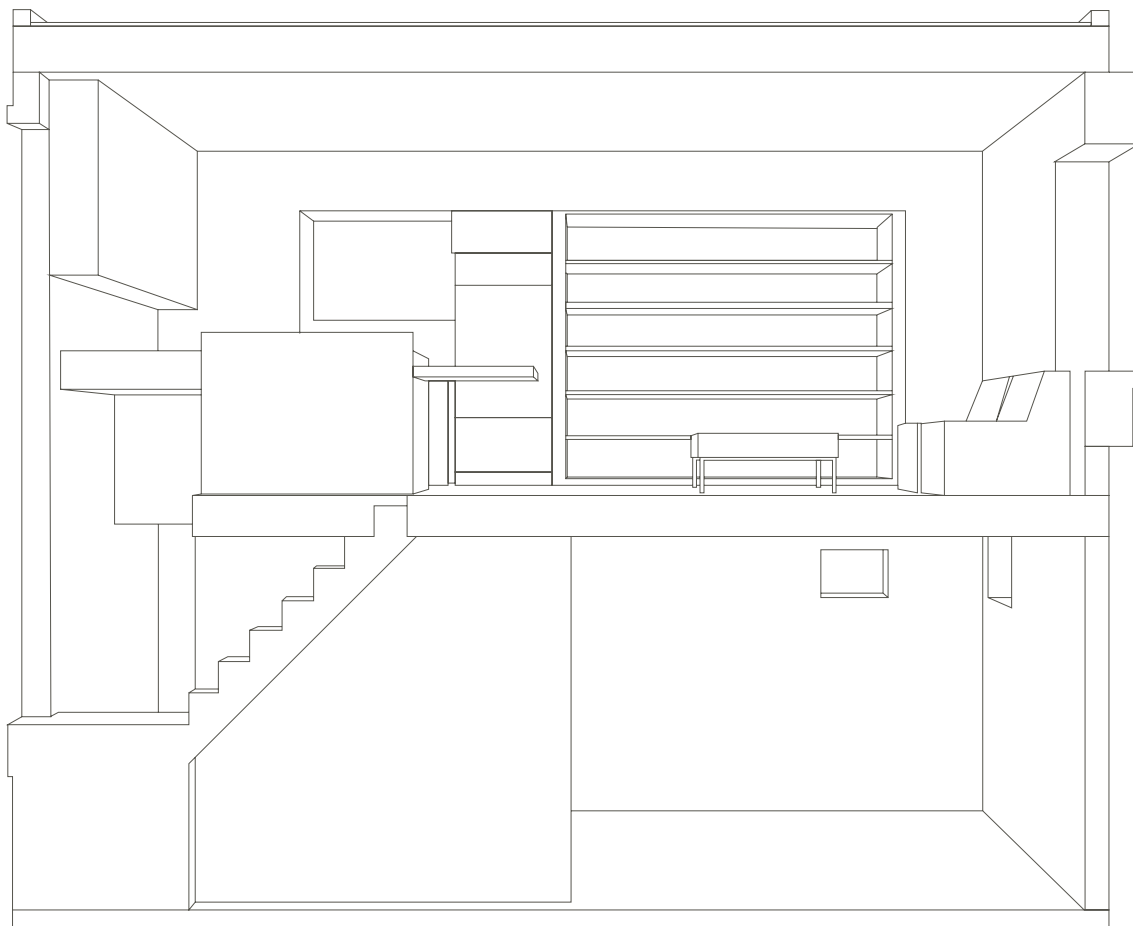
"The saving grace is the topography" - Erick Villagomez, Architect

**B**uilding the lanehome to fit the natural topography was both a deliberate aesthetic decision as well as an explicit functional decision. By fitting the unique topography of the property

and neighbouring properties, not only is the amazing view of Richmond and South Vancouver preserved for the St-Amours, but for their neighbours on both sides as well. This lanehome is tall in comparison to many lanehomes across the city. Usually lanehomes are one storey (12ft - 15ft approx height of a garage) while this is an 18ft structure. One of

the main factors that allowed for its approval was the fact that it is sunk down into the natural topography. The two storey design allows the lanehome to create a cascade from one neighbours deck to the next without causing visual disturbance. This lanehome will be exciting to see when completed and will make a beautiful addition to a beautiful Vancouver Special.

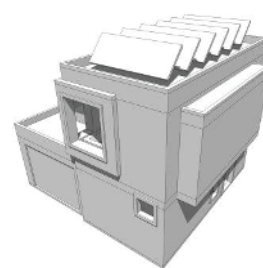
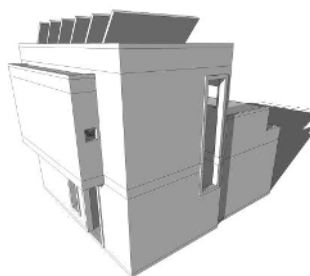
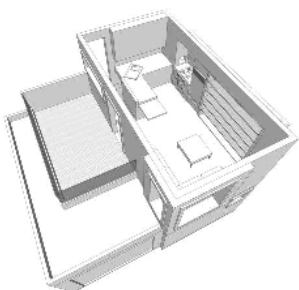
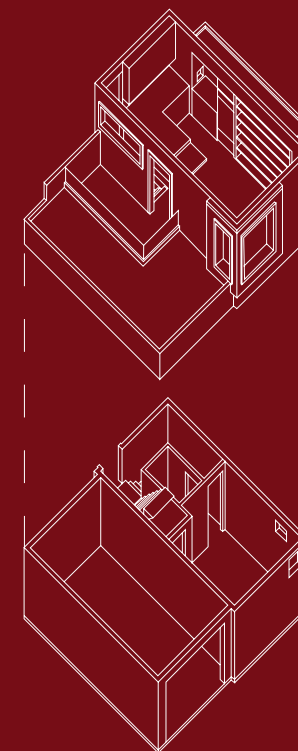




## Further Reading

Illustration (Below):

Axonometric Drawing of the Lanehome



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## Further Reading

### South Asian Population Across Greater Vancouver:

Surrey has the highest concentration of South Asian immigrants in all of Greater Vancouver. In order, the next three municipalities with the highest percentage of foreign born of South Asian origin are Vancouver (4.8%), Richmond (4.3%) and Burnaby (3.5%).

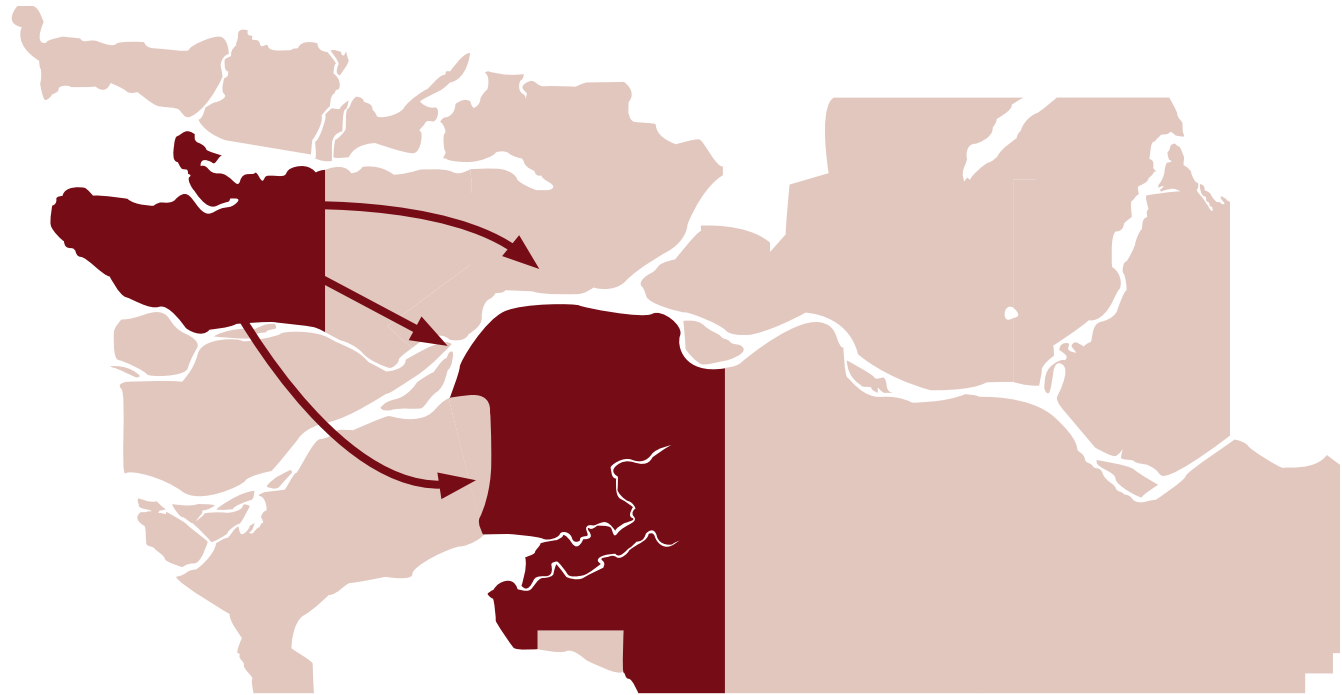
## Citations

Text (Above and Right):

Statistics Canada. 2012. GeoSearch. 2011 Census. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 92-142-XWE. Ottawa, Ontario. Data updated October 24, 2012.



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When the St-Amours bought this Vancouver Special, they had purchased it from a South Asian couple who, in turn, had purchased it from the South Asian builders of the house. The South Asian community is still very strong in Sunset, however, a major shift is occurring in the in this Community. South Asian immigrants to Vancouver, and Canada, are settling predominantly in Surrey as compared to South Vancouver

and Sunset in particular. Immigrants arriving from India made up 41.9% of all foreign born newcomers in Surrey. In a municipality where 38.3% of the total population of 392,500 was foreign-born, this translates to a significant portion (16.07%) of Surrey's population. Meanwhile in Vancouver, only 2.19% of the population are foreign born and originating from India. This makes Shaun's work on his Vancouver Special all the more important. Not only does renovating this old

Vancouver Special and adding the lanehome behind serve as an example to current and potential homeowners, but it helps to revitalize the Sunset community that he and his family are a part of. This revitalization serves to both attract new immigrants to the Sunset neighbourhood, where ethnicity and diversity are celebrated and, perhaps in the future, bring South Asian Canadians back to the streets that historically defined their identity as Vancouverites and Canadians.