

Shelley Fralic: The age of the disposable legacy

Why are we throwing away our history?

BY SHELLEY FRALIC, VANCOUVER SUN NOVEMBER 4, 2015



This house on W. 16th is one of many that has fallen to the bulldozer in order to make way for a new one.

Photograph by: Jenelle Schneider, Vancouver Sun

Nearly 20 years ago, when this newspaper was decamping from 6th and Granville, the process of downsizing a four-storey publishing business, complete with an enormous printing press in the basement, was hard.

Moving hundreds of people was the easy part. Swish new downtown digs on the waterfront and a separate press operation in the suburbs made for an exciting transition.

What was most taxing — at least for those who believe a newspaper truly does provide history's first rough draft — was deciding how to move/store/cull all the artifacts that an almost century-old newspaper accumulates when it's called one place home for more than 30 years.

There were hundreds of metal desks, oak coat trees, Underwood typewriters, 10,000 Edith Adams recipe cards, cookbooks, framed awards, significant front pages, thousands of hard copy photographs, dozens of reference tomes, and a truckload of back shop relics like the Volkswagen-size typesetter, cases of wooden type and pneumatic tubes, grease pencils, wax rollers and, yes, pressmen's hats made of folded newspapers.

Some of the furniture was auctioned off to employees, some of the must-keeps went off-site (photo

negatives) but much of what had accumulated over those decades went to the landfill.

Among the treasures rescued from the garbage heap were boxes of newspapers headlining 100 years of historic events, along with a stash of vintage cameras, including wooden box cameras and a number of old Mamiya, Leica and Nikons, all of them used over the years by our staff photographers.

Someone had decided that none of these old things held much value, and thus there was no reason to keep them.

Except that, in purging our old house to move into our new, we were also throwing away not only a unique collection of our profession's history but, in a way, Vancouver's history, given that much of what was stashed in the nooks and crannies of 2250 Granville was, indeed, the first rough draft of our growing city.

One is reminded of that memory as yet another controversial study about the high price of Vancouver real estate hits the headlines this week, prompting yet another round of outrage and excuse from all manner of activists and politicians, realtors and researchers, all of whom continue to squabble over who's to blame — overseas investors, blind-eye banks and/or impotent bureaucrats — while no one does anything about it.

Meanwhile, a significant piece of the architectural history of our still young city is rapidly disappearing before our eyes.

In blithely allowing the wholesale bulldozing of perfectly good houses to make way for new, big and rich, we are ripping out our neighbourhood roots and filling them in with ghost houses and absentee owners, with streets devoid of families, of connectedness, of life.

We are killing communities.

It's true that nothing lasts forever and, yes, the physical evolution of a city is inevitable, but it's the astonishing pace of change we are witnessing, the brutally short-sighted and money-grubbing disregard for the past that is raising our collective hackles.

Slowly, but with clear intent, we are erasing our footprint and, as we watch another fine old house fall to a bulldozer, another neighbourhood fade to dark, one can only wonder what Rome and Paris and London and New York might look like today if such short-sightedness had prevailed in the name of urban progress.

A recent column I wrote on the death of family businesses in Metro Vancouver elicited a number of responses from readers mourning how quickly we rush to erase Vancouver's brief history, how readily we discard the importance of what once was.

An email from Chilliwack's Philip Tingey, who grew up near West Vancouver's Ambleside in the 1960s, said it best:

"It saddens me that often what we gain with progress is tempered by what we lose. And I think what we lose are values — honour, a sense of community, a sense of caring ... I'm not some Luddite who is against progress, but as writer Edward Abbey noted: 'Growth for the sake of growth is the ideology of the cancer cell.'

"That is where we must be cautious because part of me looks back, with clear glasses, not

rose-coloured ones, and thinks that it seemed to be a better world when we held firmly to what now seems to have been, to a large degree, discarded.”

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