

Eric Pattison is an architect whose home and office are located in New Westminster. He specializes in restoration and adaptation of historic structures, including many in New Westminster. He is a member of the city's Public Art Advisory Committee. The major themes of this interview are the history of New Westminster, building restoration, and businesses in New Westminster.

Interviewed by: Jane French

Date: Spring 2014

Date Range: 1920s – 2014

Sound Recording Length: 01:08:26

Eric Pattison is an architect. He owns Pattison Architecture, a firm located in New Westminster. This interview is primarily concerns Pattison's work restoring two of New Westminster's historically significant buildings: the Columbia Theatre and the BC Electric Railway depot (currently occupied by the Salvation Army store). His firm has done historic work on the Brooklyn Pub, the Queens Hotel, the Bank of Montreal, and the Trapp and Holbrook condominium project. Pattison is a resident of New Westminster who moved to the city in 1989 from Victoria.

The interview was conducted as part of History 461 – Oral History Practicum at Simon Fraser University. The sound level of the recording was extremely low, making the interview difficult to hear.

Section 0:00 – 11:00

In this section of the interview Pattison describes the history of the Columbia Theatre and New Westminster, starting from World War II. He describes how in its heyday, Columbia Street, was known as the "golden mile." He asserts there were more retail businesses along the street and more revenue per square inch than anywhere west of Winnipeg. He reports that Columbia Street was considered "downtown" for residents from Burnaby and the Fraser Valley, which were "just empty suburbs" during that time. People took the interurban rail to downtown New Westminster for banking and shopping. The theatre was renamed to the Burr Theatre (after actor Raymond Burr), but the name has since been changed back to the Columbia Theatre. Pattison discusses the several changes in ownership of the theatre building. Originally built as a movie house, it also hosted some live performances. In 1985 or 1986, Famous Players sold the building to the Fraternal Order of the Eagles club, a service club, whose building on Fourth Street was lost when the Columbia Skytrain station was built. The City purchased the building for a performing arts theatre. Sometime after 2007, the City sold the theatre building to Barry Buckland, who operates the theatre as Lafflines Comedy Club.

Section 11:01 – 19:13

In this section of the interview Pattison discusses how he came to find the original architectural drawings and photographs for the Columbia Theatre. These drawings and photographs allowed his team to restore the building with "authority."

Section 19:13 – 32:31

In this section of the interview Pattison describes the process for creating a statement of significance (SOS) for a building in order for it to be recognized by Parks Canada as a place of significance. Local governments get SOSs together and send them to the provincial government, which send them to the federal government. He observes that the question of social significance is not always obvious, and that it is not always the date of the building's construction. The Columbia building he explains captures aesthetic, social, and historical values. However, the BC Electric Railway building, was much more complicated and it turned out that 1911, when it first opened and 1954, when the building became the Wosk Furniture store, were both dates of significance. He explains that the research and information one gathers, the physical site itself, helps inform the final SOS. He asserts that New Westminster has an important commercial history.

Section 32:32 – 46:27

In this section of the interview Pattison gives his opinion on urban development in New Westminster, asserting a connection to the influence of the urbanist Jane Jacobs. He believes that cities are not entities that are supposed to be “done,” like a finished state of perfection. He briefly discusses the history of Queensborough and the economic stimulus that the longshore industry brought to New Westminster. He states that when container shipping came in the 1970s, New Westminster's downtown took a blow, as the work moved to Surrey Fraser Docks. He also states that when malls were built it killed urban retail. He discusses the development of Queensborough and how they are about to lose (the no longer operating) Star Shipyard, which he calls the last historic site in the area.

Section 46:27 – 53:49

In this section of the interview Pattison gives his opinions of Westminster Pier Park, the conflicts between making the waterfront accessible to the public and ensuring that industry does not get displaced. He is a supporter of the New Westminster Greenway Project, but hopes that the waterfront can be accessible and still maintain its industrial heritage. He talks about pollution, and believes that we need to make improvements in refining oil, and that we should be redefining the problem of pollution.

Section 53:50 – 1:00:26

In this section of the interview Pattison describes the ways his firm's projects try to engage the public at some level, unless they are working on a derelict residential building. He discusses the process of getting permits, rezoning land use, and engaging whatever stakeholders are appropriate. He emphasizes that it is important for people and the community to be involved during these processes.

Section 1:00:27 - 01:08:26

In this section of the interview Pattison shares history about the BC Electric Railway depot, and how the site supplied power for the entire block. He reports that historically New Westminster was supposed to be the provincial capital, but lost out to Victoria.