

FHBRO Number 83-26

Vancouver, British Columbia

Customs Examining Warehouse

326 Howe Street

The Customs Examining Warehouse was constructed in 1911 to 1913. It was designed by a team under David Ewart, Chief Architect of the Department of Public Works. It is one of four federally-owned buildings on the site known as Block 15. Public Works and Government Services Canada is the custodian. See FHBRO Building Report 83-26.

Reasons For Designation

The Customs Examining Warehouse was designated Recognized because of its architectural integrity and importance, and its supporting role in the definition of Block 15.

Customs examining warehouses were prevalent federally-administered facilities in Canadian communities. They frequently assumed the form of an annex to the post office building. In large cities like Vancouver, work volumes created a need for large scale, heavily-constructed warehouses during the boom years preceding the First World War. The Vancouver Customs Examining Warehouse is one of four such buildings in Canada designed expressly as a customs warehouse by the Department of Public Works.

The building exhibits classical characteristics in its form, which is divided into three sections suggesting the base, shaft and capital of a column. The deeply rusticated base, the combination of rough faced stone and smooth brick, the shallow brick pilasters with segmented arches on the upper floors and the prominent cornice give the building a significant presence on Block 15. The steel frame and reinforced concrete structure of the building was a modern construction technique unique among Vancouver's warehouses at the time.

The Vancouver Customs Examining Warehouse is a good example of a warehouse located adjacent to the post office in a major city. Although the Customs Warehouse is a supplementary building to complete Block 15, its design adds to the visual cohesiveness of the block.

Character Defining Elements

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The heritage value of the Customs Examining Warehouse resides in its classically inspired design, in its use of modern materials and construction techniques, and in its relationship with the adjacent architecture to complete Block 15.

The exterior of the building exhibits the massing, vertical orientation and ornamentation typical of a classical facade designed for a functional use in the early twentieth century. The basement and ground floor levels are clad with rough-faced granite block laid in ashlar courses while the upper walls are faced with red clay brick trimmed with sandstone. A projecting cornice caps the building. Contrasting materials enliven the exterior wall surface of the building. The rustic base anchors the building to the sloping site. The giant shallow brick pilasters above support the segmented sandstone arches at the sixth floor windows. The massing, materials and arrangement of elements of the warehouse are integral to the design and should not be compromised.

The main entrance is framed by two bays of paired windows on either side. The entrances on the other three sides of the building vary with the functionality and importance of the facade. Consequently each facade is slightly different, reflecting the modern functional requirement of the building. The upper floor windows are framed within the classical pilasters on the facade. The pattern of windows and doors on the facade, their size, shape and operation are characteristic of the classical design and should be carefully protected and maintained. The classical underpinning of the design is reflected in the changing size of the windows, from the smaller punched windows on the ground floor to the lighter, larger windows on the upper levels of the building that culminate at the carved keystone in the segmented arch crowning the sixth floor windows. It is important that these relationships be maintained; for example, windows on the ground floor should not be made larger to accommodate storefront operations.

The classical elements of this functional warehouse echo the elements of the Post Office and Winch Building on Block 15. Variations within the classical design found on the four buildings on Block 15 should be protected and maintained. The masonry of the Vancouver Customs Examining Warehouse should be the subject of an ongoing maintenance program and appropriate conservation expertise involved in any programs of repair or restoration. Precedents of colour, proportion and material should be respected.

The exterior elevations of this warehouse have survived virtually intact. The pattern of elements should be carefully maintained. The removal of the two copper and glass canopies has not adversely affected the design, although it would be desirable to re-

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instate these elements if possible. Alterations of any element of the exterior elevations would have a negative impact on the heritage character of the building.

The superstructure of the Customs Warehouse is steel and reinforced concrete. Internal beams are connected to the exterior masonry walls through the use of shear keys. Warehouse construction in Vancouver at the time tended to favour timber construction due to the availability of low cost dimensional wood framing. This was one of the first structures in Vancouver to utilize the modern materials for steel framing and reinforced concrete floors. The structural system should be respected.

It is expected that the design of the interior of the building would reflect the building's functional exterior. Original finishes that can be determined should be retained. Effort should be made to preserve and protect the design integrity and individual elements of the interior that remain.

The urban landscape of the warehouse remains intact where the base of the building meets the sidewalk. Modifications should be resisted.

1997.11.13
