

Appendix E

*Statement of Significance and
Condition Assessment for
63 Merivale Street*

Condition Assessment

April 2021



Catherine Armstrong House

63 Merivale Street ~ New Westminster BC

Elana Zysblat, CAHP - Ance Building Services ~ Heritage Consultant

Statement of Significance (Source: City of New Westminster 2004/04/05)

highlighted text recommended as additions or changes by author

DESCRIPTION OF HISTORIC PLACE

The Catherine Armstrong House is a large two-storey, shingle-clad wood-frame residence with a central entry and symmetrical front facade, located on Merivale Street near New Westminster's downtown core in the neighbourhood of Albert Crescent.

HERITAGE VALUE

The Catherine Armstrong House is associated with the turn-of-the-twentieth-century development of downtown New Westminster, marking a formative period in B.C.'s resource-based economy. Pioneer Joseph Charles Armstrong came to New Westminster in 1858, part of the rush up the Fraser River in search of gold, and settled in New Westminster in 1869. In 1885, he married Catherine Freese of San Francisco. After Joseph's death in 1916, Catherine (1862-1954) built this house to replace an older structure that had been their home since the 1890s.

Additionally, this residence is a significant early residential design by architects Townley and James Matheson. Fred Laughton Townley (1887-1966), had a prolific career that spanned many decades; in 1919, he formed a partnership with Robert Matheson and this partnership's best known commission was its design for Vancouver City Hall. The design of this residence reflects the influence of the Arts and Crafts movement in its use of materials, but it is rendered in a severe and functional expression indicative of wartime construction; there would have been little construction undertaken at the time due to the shortage of labour and materials.

The building's conversion into multiple suites in the post-WWII era reflects the changing economy and adaptation made to many surviving early grand houses during the post-war housing crisis. The enduring multi-family configuration (1955 until current) better represents both the demographic and built form of the Albert Crescent area of new Westminster's historic downtown which changed significantly after new low-rise apartment building zoning was brought to the area to respond to the housing crisis in the mid-20th-century.

CHARACTER-DEFINING ELEMENTS

- single family use from 1916 to 1954 and multi-family rental use since 1955
- prominent corner location on a steeply sloping site with views to the Fraser River
- residential form, scale and massing as expressed by its two-storey height (plus full basement) and regular, square plan with central entry and hall
- broad hipped roof with overhanging open eaves and central eyebrow feature above the entry
- exterior elements such as the cedar shingle siding, exposed rafter tails, columned entrance porch, projecting square ground floor bay with stained glass window; two internal brick chimneys, and glazed front door with sidelights
- fenestration, including 8-over-1 double-hung wooden-sash windows, in triple assembly on the ground floor front facade and a multi-paned feature window with wooden-sash casements on the second floor above the entry
- associated landscape features such as the grassed front yard with mature trees and shrubs, and an early hipped roof garage at the rear

Condition Assessment

The Catherine Armstrong House is overall in good condition.

Structure:

The building lines are true to the eye. There is no visual evidence of structural distortion. The old-growth wood frame roof structure and second storey ceiling timbers visible in the attic are all in good, dry condition and represent traditional, enduring construction practices and skill.



Above: photographs of the attic space showing the well constructed, dry roof structure and second floor ceiling beams.

Foundation:

The board-formed concrete foundation visible in the basement level is in good condition. No evidence of cracks, moisture damage or other deterioration was observed. The portion of the foundation visible on the exterior (south elevation) does have a few cracks but remains structurally sound.



Above: interior (left) and exterior (right) photographs of the board-formed concrete foundation.

Cladding:

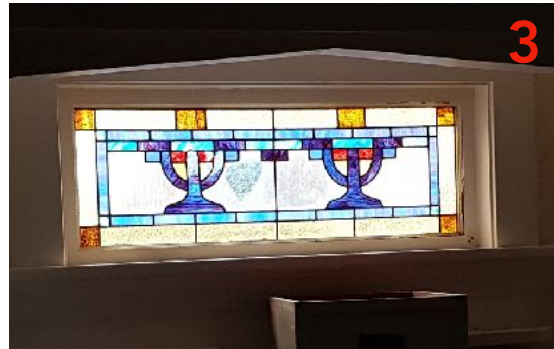
The entire exterior is clad in square butt cedar shingles. Their condition varies from elevation to elevation with the front (west) exhibiting the worst condition (poor). The same deteriorated condition of shingles is observable on an extension on the east (rear) corner. The shingles on the south elevation are in fair condition (except at the rear extension where they are poor) and those on the north elevation are in good condition. The shingles at the building corners, front porch, rear extension and where the shingles meet the foundation all appear to be warped/damaged beyond repair.



Above: front porch shingles (left) in the worst condition and north elevation (right) shingles in good condition.

Windows:

All the window openings are original as are the wood sashes in them. Some may have been replaced in the 1920s but the majority appear to date from 1916 making them 105 years old at this time. The assembly above the front entrance (#1) is the only evident case where a previously divided-light sash (one of six that make up this assembly) has been replaced with a single-light wood sash. Given their age, their functioning condition is remarkable. All sash conditions vary between poor and fair and all require repair and maintenance - especially with regards to putty replacement and repainting. One original art-glass window in excellent condition survives in the southern elevation projecting bay (#2 and #3). The operability of each of the windows was not assessed.



Chimneys:

The building has two internal brick chimneys, which project prominently from the roofline, and are in fair condition. Both chimneys are exhibiting mortar failure and require repointing.

**Finishes:**

It is evident that the building hasn't been painted in a long time. The finishes on the 'weather' sides of the building (west and south) have dried, flaked off and are practically absent, leaving the wood cladding, trim, windows, and window sills completely exposed.

Roof:

The duroid roof appears to have reached or extended past its life expectancy, although there is no notable evidence of roof failure or leaks on the interior because of roof failure.

Interior:

The interior is in good condition. floors and ceilings on the interior are solid, level and dry. There is no evidence of damage due to lack of maintenance or mechanical failures, except for what appears to be water damage in the ceiling in a corner of the main stairway leading to the second floor (see photo on next page). As the building is vacant, and disconnected from electricity, the lack of mechanical heat in the winter and and natural ventilation in the summer can bring on significant and quick damage and deterioration. Furthermore, it is evident that since the building was vacated, break-in/s have occurred for the purpose of stealing the copper wires which has left damage to certain wall and ceilings (see photo, right). The vacant state of the building puts it at risk of further vandalism, damage and deterioration.





This photo shows water damage in the ceiling in a corner of the main stairway leading to the second floor

Summary

This grand home, custom-designed by renowned architecture firm Townley & Matheson (who also designed the Columbia Theatre, Vancouver's city hall and many high-end residences in the area) was listed on the New Westminster's Community Heritage Register as a surviving reflection of the early, single-family, elite residential character of the Albert Crescent precinct of downtown New Westminster. The building has remained largely unaltered, both on the exterior and the interior, notwithstanding its sensitive and discreet conversion into rental suites in the 1950s, an evolution which contributes to the heritage values of this historic place.

The building's textured Arts & Crafts design and finishes stand out not only within what survives of the early Victorian-era neighbourhood but even more so in the current context of the dominating low-rise mid-century apartment buildings.

The generally good condition of the building means it is salvageable, even if relocation and adaptive reuse are desired as part of its conservation. In the context of site redevelopment, it has the potential to be a heritage feature and showcase, rooting the property in its layered legacy which is embodied in the evolution of the Catherine Armstrong House and giving any new development meaning and relevance within its historic setting.

Next steps:

Vacancy is the biggest risk for old buildings. An interim full-time use, whether residential or as storage, needs to be made possible in the building if it is to be conserved and protected as a community heritage asset as part of a Heritage Revitalization Agreement in the future.

Additional research needs to be conducted about the building to further understand the story and contributions of Catherine Armstrong, the conversion of the building upon her death, and any other historic resources available about the property. The Townley & Matheson fonds held at the Vancouver Archives should be searched for possible surviving plans for the building.

Photographs

Exterior photographs



Front (west) and
side (south)
elevations



Rear (east) and
side (north)
elevations

Interior photographs:



