WOODLANDS CENTRE BLOCK

Architecture

In 1873, this site was chosen as the setting for British Columbia’s “Provincial Lunatic Asylum”, later known as the “Provincial Insane Asylum”, the “Provincial Hospital for the Insane”, “Woodlands School” and finally “Woodlands”.

The Centre Block, once an expansive three-storey masonry building constructed in stages between 1875 and 1909, was BC’s first large-scale purpose-built mental health institution. It was the first and main building amongst a complex of buildings on the 26-hectare “Provincial Lunatic Asylum” grounds, as it was originally known.

Over time, the design of the Centre Block was influenced by many factors: evolving architectural styles, available building materials and technologies, the changing use of the building, efforts to economize, and the needs of the patients. It can be argued that from the start, every aspect of the patient’s life was defined and controlled by those responsible for operating the institution. The architecture reflected this control.

Victoria architect Andrew Johnston Smith (1840-1899) provided the plans in 1875 for a small two-storey brick building. A year later, local architect James Kennedy (1817-1902) was assigned to supervise the project. The building was a classical design with symmetrical, well-proportioned sections resting on a granite block foundation, constructed with heavy timber framing and clad in locally-produced brick. The austere exterior had minimal decorative details limited to semi-elliptical moulded arches over the windows, projecting overhanging hip roof eaves. The multi-paned windows on the second floor were placed so high that patients could not look out.

Between 1884 and 1895, due to a demand for improvements and more space, architect George William Grant (1852-1925) designed plans for substantial additions to the original building, including a front addition that became the Superintendent’s Residence with a tower and grand-entrance. All of Grant’s additions to the Centre Block were bricks clad with hip roof and included embellishments to make the entire building look like a cohesive whole, featuring many design elements of the picturesque Italianate style. It was at this time that the window sills were lowered and balconies were added. William Turnbull and Co. served as contractors.

More changes were made to the Centre Block between 1917 and 1918 during which time well-known Victoria architect William Kennedy-Wilson (1842-1917) designed a two-storey brick addition for a kitchen with dining room above and attached to the near wall of the existing kitchen. A pair of two-storey brick-clad buildings were constructed and attached to the Centre Block by enclosed wood-frame corridors.

The Centre Block continued to expand in response to overcrowding, and an increased demand for space. Further additions to the Centre Block were made which repeated the architectural design elements found on the existing building. From 1905-1907, a third story was added to the two-story wings by contractor Henry Hoy (1845-1931). By 1908, there were 509 patients housed on the site, over 13 times the number of people accommodated in 1875.

In the 1930s and 1940s, the Provincial Lands and Works Department modernised the building by stripping away the decorative Italianate style elements and by applying stucco over the brick walls. This emphasized the building’s institutional function and created streamlined exteriors in the then fashionable Streamline Moderne style. Major renovations to the Centre Block occurred in 1967-68; then in 1975, the BC Building Corporation recommended that the building be decommissioned and residents relocated.

As residents moved out of Woodlands and into the community, an entire wing was closed in 1996. By 1998, the majority of Woodlands’ programs and services were discontinued. In 2003, the former Woodlands site was sold by the Province to the Onni Group of Companies and rezoned for high-density residential. Still standing at that time, the Centre Block was one of six structures identified as having heritage value, receiving legal heritage protection by those responsible for operating the institution. The architecture reflected this control.

A special thank you to the Woodlands Centre Block Task Force who contributed their time and energy in the true spirit of cooperation.

In 1873, this site was chosen as the setting for British Columbia’s “Provincial Lunatic Asylum”, later known as the “Provincial Asylum for the Insane”, the “Provincial Hospital for the Insane”, “Woodlands School” and finally “Woodlands.” Its history is a reflection of the often contradictory views and constantly evolving beliefs about institutionalization and people with disabilities and mental disorders in our society.

In the mid-1800s, institutions were built across North America. This was regarded as an enlightened approach to meeting the needs of people labeled as “feebleminded” or “lunatics”, people now identified as having developmental disabilities or mental disorders. Public sympathy for the plight of these people, some of whom were incarcerated in the province’s jails, led to calls for the creation of a “modern asylum.”

On May 17, 1878, the New Westminster institution opened, with the first 16 of 38 patients transferred from the original asylum in Victoria. The new building was immediately criticized as overcrowded, gloomy, unsafe and unfit for the purpose. “The architectural defects are trifling compared with the total unfitness of the buildings intended for patients suffering from aberration of intellect; they are like dungeons, with windows very high up in the wall and guarded by heavy iron bars—sufficient, in fact, to disorder the brains of sane persons.” (Mainland Guardian, August 7, 1878).

Woodlands Centre Block Map, c. 1912.

Records of debates in the BC legislature and correspondence with government officials during construction reveal that the original plans were altered to cut costs and the resulting design, coupled with poorly supervised construction, led to major deficiencies and miserable living conditions.

Exemplary staff and progressive administrators made efforts throughout the institution’s history to ensure appropriate treatment of the patients and residents. From the early days, there were “Rules and Regulations” for staff forbidding the unnecessary use of force and all forms of physical and verbal abuse, but despite these efforts, mistreatment and unsafe conditions occurred throughout the institution’s existence.

In the 1920s, authorities decided to separate people with developmental disabilities and mental disorders, with the latter being served by the nearby Essondale institution.

The philosophies of care changed over the decades, from custodial training, education, and development. The 1950s saw the establishment of parent-led associations which demanded community-based supports. By the 1970s, disability rights advocates and professionals across Canada began to call for the closure of institutions.

In 1981, partly in response to the demands of the Woodlands Parents Group, the Provincial government announced plans to close Woodlands. Community-based supports and services were planned for all residents. Woodlands finally closed in 1996, marking the culmination of a long struggle and a commitment to community living for people with developmental disabilities in BC.

In 2011, the portion of the Centre Block was demolished on October 18, 2011 with former residents leading the ceremony and signalling for the demolition to commence.

April 2003) supported McCallum’s recommendations and called for the demolition of the institution and a role for former residents (or survivors as many preferred to be known) in the demolition.

With the support of New Westminster City Council, the remaining portion of the Centre Block was demolished on October 18, 2011 with former residents leading the ceremony and signalling for the demolition to commence.

Please visit www.newwestcity.ca or scan the barcode with your smartphone for more information about the Woodlands site.

“Exemplary staff and progressive administrators made efforts throughout the institution’s history to ensure appropriate living conditions.”

“Woodlands Centre Block, c. 2009.”

Project: City of New Westminster

City of New Westminster

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Our community history

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In July 2011, City Council received a letter from a highly respected heritage conservationist. "Places like Woodlands are always multi-valued, contested sites, and deal with painful memories. . . . I believe that after two years of extensive public consultation and strong feelings expressed by the two advocacy groups for the former residents, the right decision is to demolish the remainder of the tower."


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In early July 2008, four fires at the legally-protected heritage Centre Block occurred in one week, with the fourth fire destroying nearly all of the building. On July 11, the scorched ruins were knocked down, leaving only a portion of the Centre Block tower.

Soon after the fires, individuals and organizations sent correspondence to the City of New Westminster regarding the future of the tower. In response, City Council directed City staff to continue consultation about the tower's future with the Community Heritage Commission and with the advocates representing the former Woodlands residents.

The year 2009 witnessed further discussions about the future of the tower. Advocates for the former Woodlands residents continued to insist on total demolition—a position supported by the document The Need to Make Amends which states that demolition would assist former residents to find some closure.

Heritage advocates wished to see the tower preserved because of its link to the City's colonial past, its period architecture and its association with historic architects and builders. Victoria Hill residents expressed concern about the height of a new building on the Centre Block site.

City Council directed City staff to take options 2 and 3 to the community for consultation. Of the 163 feedback forms returned to the City, there was very little support for retaining the tower. A June 2009 City staff report identifed that the negative aspects of Woodlands' past created a complicated role for heritage conservation and raised difficult ethical issues. The report went on to recommend conservation of the tower, citing an earlier City Council decision to include the site's heritage elements within the new condominium structure.

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In 2011, new information was brought before City Council about the cost of tower retention options and the growing public sentiment to respect the wishes of the former residents, resulting in a new direction.

On July 11, 2011, City Council endorsed the option to demolish the Centre Block tower. City staff worked with former Woodlands residents, BC People First and the BC Association for Community Living (now Inclusion BC) to plan a demolition ceremony. On October 18, 2011, following a ceremony culminating with a signal given by former Woodlands resident Richard McDonald, the tower was demolished before a crowd of community members, former Woodlands residents and their supporters.

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