

In Visioning the City: Urban History Techniques Through Historical Photographs

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Article abstract

The past is always present in photographs. Unique visual statements and readily reproducible photographs assist in reconstructing the past through the transmission of information by sight. One of the more important, yet often neglected, areas of scholarship is the documentary photograph taken for or representing a certain place or event in history. Provided its context and accuracy are determined and verified through external evidence, the photograph is primary source material whose judicious use by historians can relay information not available through other kinds of records.



Bird's-Eye View of Montreal, ca. 1889.

SOURCE: National Map Collection, Public
Archives of Canada. NMC 11075.

Vue à vol d'oiseau de Montréal, vers 1889.

SOURCE: Collection nationale de cartes et
plans, Archives publiques du
Canada. NMC 11075.

Research Notes/Notes des recherches

In Visioning the City: Urban History Techniques Through Historical Photographs

David Mattison

Résumé/Abstract

Le passé est toujours présent grâce aux photographies. Elles aident à reconstruire le passé par la transmission d'informations visuelles uniques, faciles à reproduire. Un des plus importants champs d'étude, quoique souvent négligé, est celui de la photographie documentaire représentant certains lieux ou événements historiques. A condition d'en déterminer le contexte et d'en vérifier l'exactitude, la photographie constitue une source primaire qui, utilisée judicieusement par les historiens, peut transmettre l'information non disponible dans d'autres types de sources.

The past is always present in photographs. Unique visual statements and readily reproducible photographs assist in reconstructing the past through the transmission of information by sight. One of the more important, yet often neglected, areas of scholarship is the documentary photograph taken for or representing a certain place or event in history. Provided its context and accuracy are determined and verified through external evidence, the photograph is primary source material whose judicious use by historians can relay information not available through other kinds of records.

The past is always present in photographs. Unique visual statements and readily reproducible, photographs assist in reconstructing the past through the transmission of information by sight. One of the more important, yet often neglected, areas of scholarship is the documentary photograph taken for or representing a certain place or event in history. Provided its context and accuracy are determined and verified through external evidence, the photograph is primary source material, whose judicious use by urban historians can relay information not available through other kinds of records.

Photographs as records or documents are preserved by archives (and libraries) for the same reasons (right and wrong) other kinds of records are acquired: to reflect the activities of the sponsoring institution or the geographic (social, cultural, political, et cetera) environment in which the institution is sited. The City of Vancouver Archives, for instance, collects photographs by Vancouver photographers

regardless of subject as well as photographs of the city regardless of who photographed it. The City of Vancouver does not now and has never had an official city photographer, so a municipal viewpoint is not readily apparent in the photographic collection. Some of the images, however, are clearly statements of municipal activity — scenes of street-car track laying or street repairs are common — though their origins are obscure or undetermined. All the photographs in the City of Vancouver Archives are in the documentary tradition and have not been preserved because of aesthetic appeal.

The documentary tradition is as old as photography.¹ Images of the urban landscape were among the first subjects with which photographers experimented. One of the most well-known photographs by L.J.M. Daguerre (1789-1851), co-inventor of the first commercial photographic process marketed in 1839, is an aerial scene of the Boulevard du Temple, Paris, in which a man having his shoes shined has remained immobile long enough to register on the daguerreotype plate. The city has remained a convenient subject for hundreds of professional and amateur photographers

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worldwide. They have traced the growth and changes in their urban regions.

Yet while the clarion has been sounded often enough in the past decade for the treatment of photographs as primary source material, few urban historians have taken up the challenge of creating history from photographs first and textual records second.² Before historians can even begin to tap the rich visual resources preserved by archives and libraries across Canada, the history of the medium in general and in Canada, as well as successful examples of how to use photographs, should be studied.³

There are four essential elements, all interdependent, to consider when studying historical photographs: 1) what is the photograph in terms of its original format; 2) when was it created; 3) where was it created; 4) who created it. The first element relates to the photograph as a record; it is

incumbent upon the researcher to determine the nature of the original photograph in case additional evidence might be obtained from the original that is otherwise not available upon the reference print or electrostatic photocopy not normally consulted in an archives or library. The second element is one of two reasons why photographs are studied. Photographs freeze time and motion, making reality a convenient specimen for research. The third element pertains to the geographic location of the image and is the second reason for the study of photographs — their ability to isolate segments of a landscape, or conversely, to convey the panoramas of the world. The fourth element has frequently been neglected as attention has been directed towards the subject of the image rather than the creator.

Historical photographs come in a wide variety of shapes, sizes, colours and styles. It would be impossible to detail here the kinds of photographs produced throughout the history of



FIGURE 1. Looking east from the West End, Vancouver, circa 1932. Photographer unknown.

SOURCE: City Archives. City Hall, Vancouver. AIR P. 53

the medium. Compositional style offers an important reference point for determining time and place of creation: the height of an aerial photograph is fixed by the kind of aerial transport available and the height of buildings or other structures within a city. One of the most common vantage points in Vancouver from 1887 to World War I was the Hotel Vancouver. Another was the steeple of the Holy Rosary Cathedral.

Figure 1 demonstrates the power of the aerial image to provide information about patterns of development in housing, transportation, and commercial/industrial land uses. This area of Vancouver, even fifty years later, is still the most important part of the city and this image will continue to serve as a landmark of its own in tracking the visual changes to the urban environment. Notable structures still standing in 1981 are the Hotel Vancouver at Georgia and Burrard streets, the diminutive Christ Church Cathedral on the north side of Georgia at Burrard, the Marine Building at the foot of Burrard near the waterfront, the Sun Tower on Beatty

street to the left of the giant gasometer tank in the centre of the image, and Holy Rosary Cathedral on the southeast corner of Dunsmuir and Richards streets. The roofline of the Vancouver Art Gallery (see Figures 4 and 5) is visible as is the rear of the dome of the Vancouver Court House (see Figure 3).

Panoramas are another awesome tool in the study of the city. There are three kinds of panoramas: those created with special cameras; those made with special lenses; and those produced by joining separate images into a unified whole. Figure 2 is an example of a panorama taken with a wide-angle lens that distorts geometry while presenting the big picture. A drawback to the use of wide-angle lenses is the subduing of the background while often irrelevant stretches of foreground leap out at the viewer. Philip Timms, the photographer, has attempted to achieve scale and limit the foreground by introducing a couple of figures, one of whom appears to be carrying a camera of his own. The third figure may have just been strolling by. Judging from the photog-



FIGURE 2. Granville street at Georgia street showing, *left*, Strathcona Block (southeast corner), and *right*, Hotel Vancouver (southwest corner), circa 1905. Photographer: Philip Timms.

SOURCE: CVA HOT. P. 78



FIGURE 3. Vancouver Court House, Georgia street, south side between Howe and Hornby streets, circa 1912-14. Photographer: Richard Broadbridge (no. 2844).

SOURCE: CVA BU P. 724

rapher's shadow, the picture was taken in the morning in order to get the proper lighting on the hotel.

The street scene is by far the most common representation of the city. Commercial photographers specializing in nothing but urban scenery emerged. Richard Broadbridge, a Vancouver photographer of the 1910s, worked largely at street level, photographing the impressive architecture of the city. His photograph of the newly completed Vancouver Court House (Figure 3) may become the subject of renewed interest with the conversion of this building into "Vancouver's New Art Gallery." Linked with the blueprints and drawings by architect F.M. Rattenbury, the photograph assists in establishing the context of the design in terms of the finished product. The photograph can also be juxtaposed with that by Stuart Thomson showing the old Art Gallery under construction (Figure 4) and the finished gallery (Figure 4, *inset*).

Although the city may be accurately represented, it can sometimes be misrepresented through altering the image

chemically or physically. One recent use of such an altered image is found in Patricia Roy's *Vancouver: An Illustrated History* in which a composite photograph of the *Beaver* and an *Empress*-class vessel sailing out of Burrard Inlet are presented as though the photograph is true to reality.⁴ These kinds of alterations are not frequent and external evidence can usually verify whether the photograph has indeed been altered.

The photograph as a moment locked in time is a concept as old as the process. Motion is another factor in the time equation implied and imprinted in historical photographs. If the orientation of the photograph is known or can be discovered, the time of day can be deduced. The Drill Corps of the Knights of Pythias (Figure 5) brings together the photograph's ability to freeze time and motion. The newspaper tells us that the tubing over the Rand Bros. office door is "an arch of gas jets at the end of which are two stars and underneath are the words Rand Bros., Real Estate in letters of flame, which will be sure to impress themselves upon the

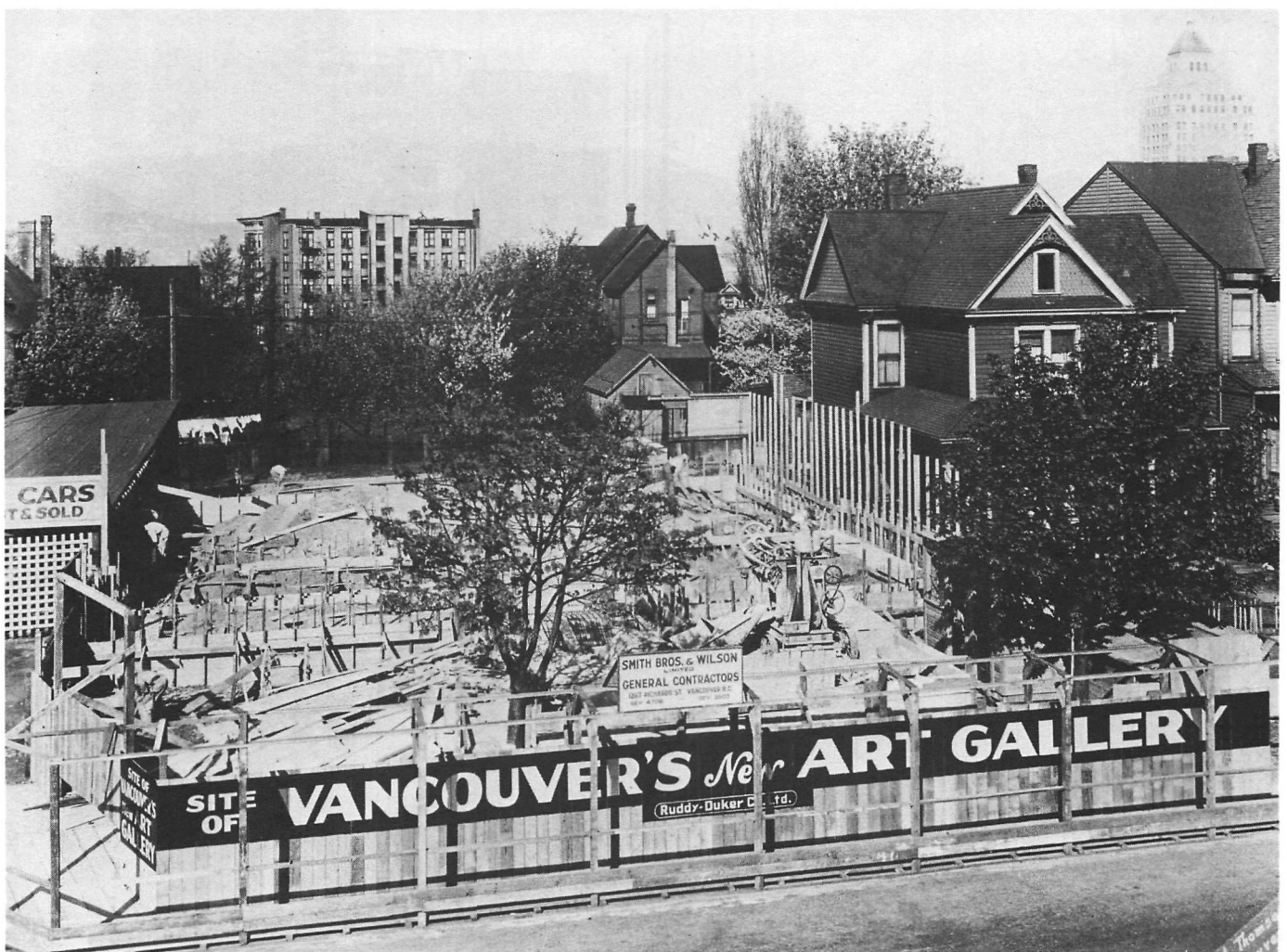


FIGURE 4. Vancouver Art Gallery under construction, 1145 West Georgia street, north side, 1931. Photographer: Stuart Thomson.

SOURCE: CVA BU. P. 401



FIGURE 4. *Inset.* Completed Art Gallery. Photographer unknown.

SOURCE: CVA BU. P. 401

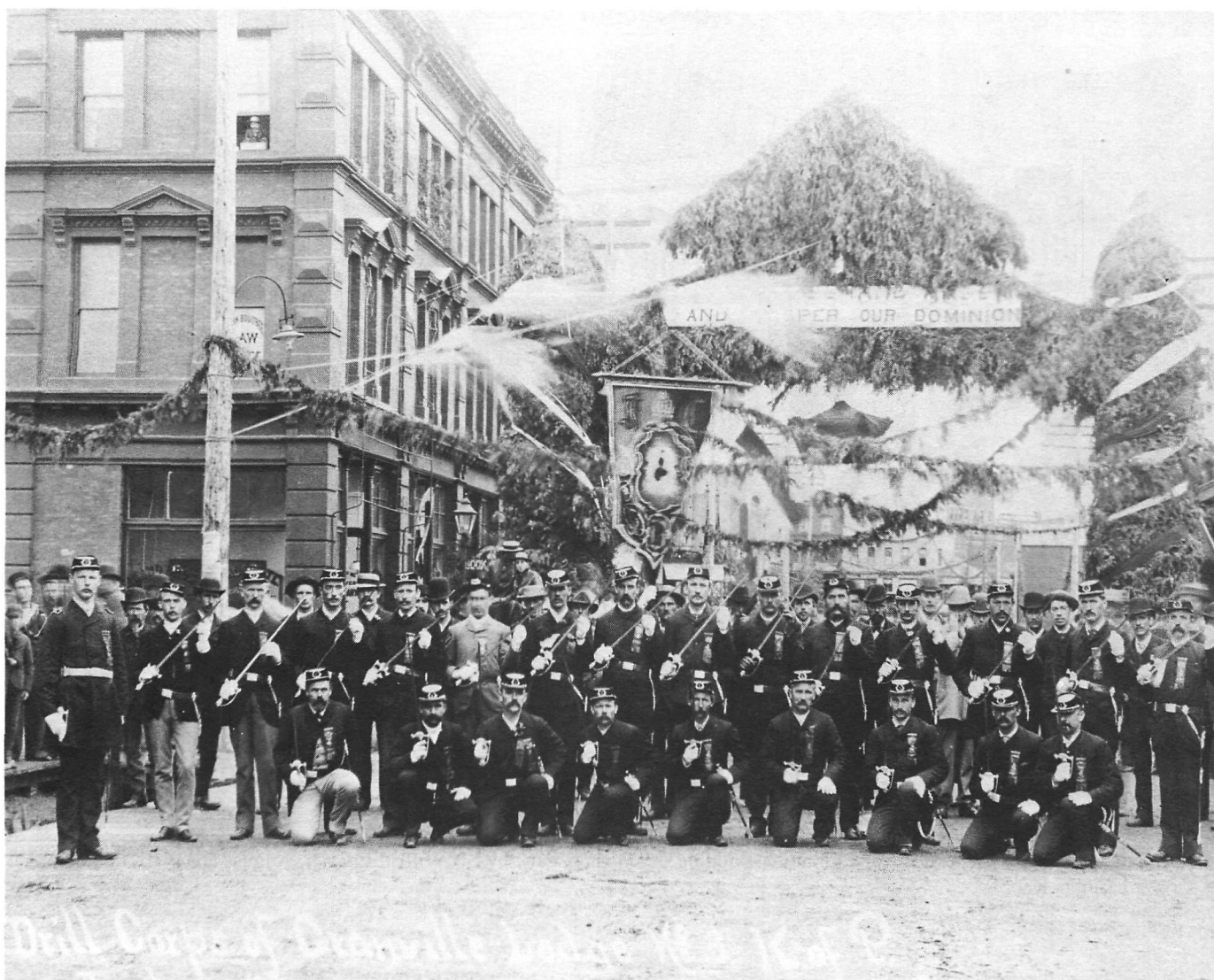


FIGURE 5. Drill Corps of Granville Lodge No. 3, K[nights] of P[ythias], July 2nd, 1888, Vancouver, B.C. Photographed at the intersection of Cordova and Abbott streets, W.B. Wilson Block (erected 1887) on southwest corner. Photographer unknown.

SOURCE: CVA 146/1.

retina of every visitor.”⁵ The same daily also described the same photograph and a companion image more than two weeks after the event.⁶ The photographs only came to light in 1977 when a set was presented to the City of Vancouver Archives.

Documentary photographs are always rooted in or tied to a landscape. The camera does not always reveal its position within the geography being depicted. Shrewd guesswork, memory, and external evidence are the means by which the boundaries of a photograph are delineated. Without prior knowledge of the event or place, it would be difficult to establish the location of the crowd scene in Figure 6. But by linking this photograph with that of Figure 7, it is possible to demonstrate that the two structures are the same. The

photographs were, it seems, taken from different positions. But, if one were to conclude, from studying the plans, that the photographs were taken from nearly the same position, then at the very least a later date would have to be assigned to Figure 7, for the changes to the building appear to be those brought on by the need for internal expansion. The two children racing around the fountain in the foreground of Figure 7 provide an interesting touch of humanity and scale to this playful yet imposing edifice whose lines were later echoed in many drawings by Martin Escher (1902-1972).

Photographers have often been neglected in the presentation of photographs. This situation can sometimes be traced back to the archival collections, whose financial resources



FIGURE 6. Opening of the Vancouver Exhibition Building in Hastings Park by Sir Wilfrid Laurier, August 16, 1910. Photographer unknown.

SOURCE: CVA 7/109.

and staff time are limited and to a public whose interest lies in the subject of the image. The bulk of the images organized by Major J.S. Matthews, first City of Vancouver Archivist (1933-1970), were preserved by him because they depicted aspects of the city that appealed to his love of history, and not because they represented the oeuvre of a photographer. His finding aids to the photographs he amassed made no provision for access by a photographer's name. Major Matthews' attitude does not correspond with today's archivists, to whom the record, and not the subject, is sacrosanct. Strengthening the relationship of the photographer to his or her own work causes new relationships to emerge. It is unfortunate, however, that few textual records created by photographers in the course of their careers have survived to add context to the images themselves.

Photographs, like any other form of visual documentation, are not a panacea for the urban historian who seeks to touch up a piece of writing with a few good illustrations. Photographs need to be approached and researched on their

own merits: how, for instance, did the panorama image boost a city's image of itself? In what ways does photographic perspective and the use of colour affect a viewer's perception of the urban environment? What about lack of colour in the black-and-white photograph? What means can be used to relate the visual limits of the photograph with the non-visual elements present in every scene? What parts of the urban past exist only in photographs?

Photographers constantly and often consciously interweave their own image of the city with the image presented to their cameras. The historian needs to perceive not only the bias of the photographer but that of the camera. The superimposition of the archives itself in determining which photographs become the visual documents by which future histories are written, is a factor urban historians cannot ignore. No matter how many photographs are preserved, the essence of a city's past will still depend upon the judgement of photographer, archivist and historian who create, preserve and assess the evidence.

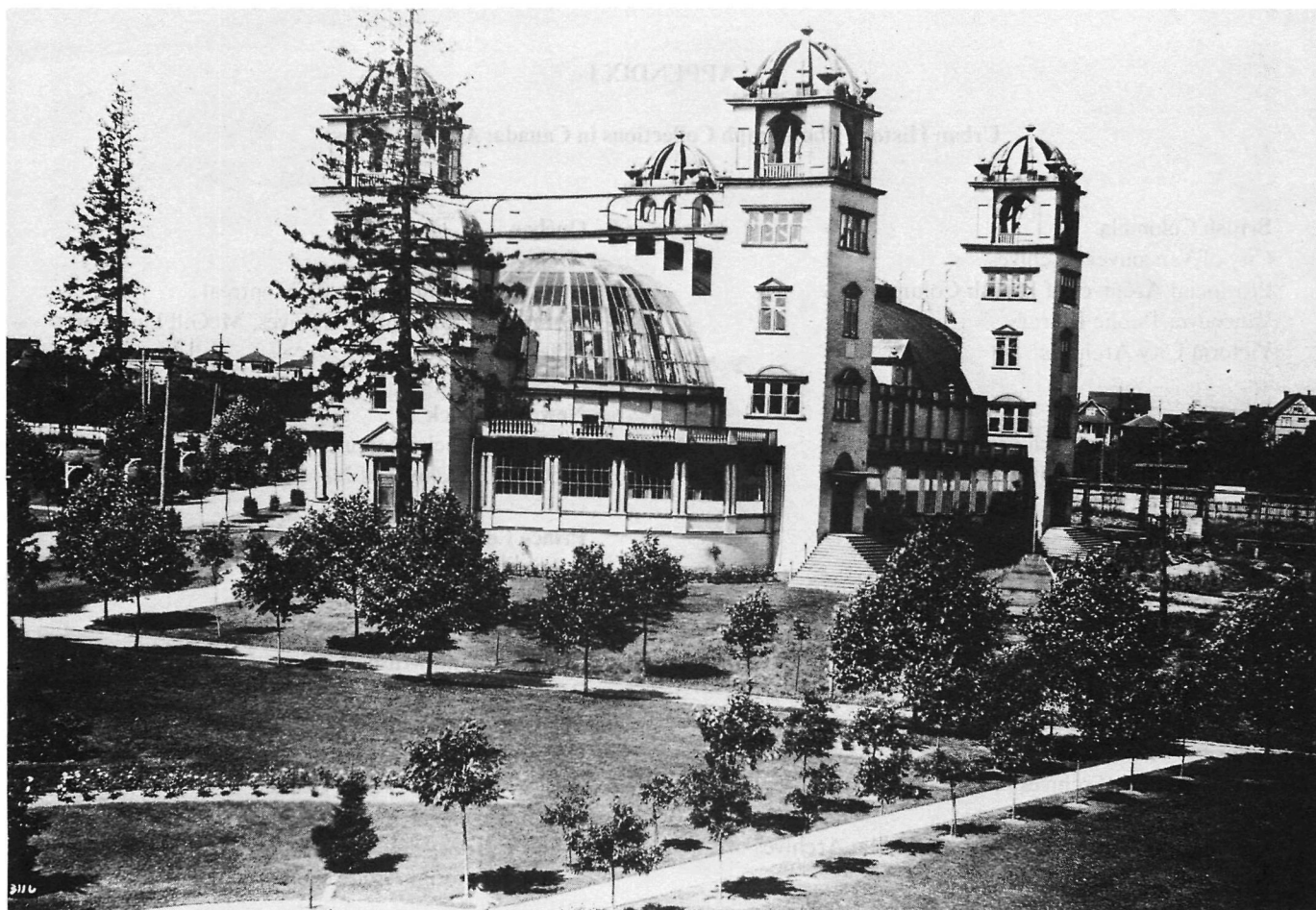


FIGURE 7. Vancouver Exhibition building (Horticultural Building), Hastings Park, designed by W.T. Dalton and S.M. Eveleigh, 1909; photographed 1920s? Photographer unknown.

SOURCE: CVA BU. P. 364

NOTES

1. Virtually any photograph can qualify as a documentary photograph as long as it imparts information about the thing photographed rather than the photographer's attitude towards that which has been photographed. A line is often drawn between the photograph as document or testimony and the photograph as art or expression of the photographic process (camera, photographer, darkroom) to reach beyond what is loosely called reality. Photographs can become documents when presented as such, regardless of their aesthetic merits. The converse is also true. It is photographs consciously created as evidence to which this paper addresses itself. Documentary photographers include the commercial as well as the amateur or semi-professional photographer.
2. The most eloquent pleas for writing history based upon photographs rather than using photographs to illustrate textual histories can be found in two publications: *Archivaria* 5 (Winter 1977-78) was a special issue devoted to photographs and archives, while Alan Trachtenberg's introduction to the National Archives (Washington, D.C.) exhibition *The American Image* (New York: Pantheon, 1979) is one of the best statements qualifying the deceptions and veracities of the photographic image. The catalogue to the Public Archives (Ottawa) exhibition by Lily Koltun, *City Blocks, City Spaces* (1980), likewise offers a sampling of the methods by which urban historians can study and utilize photographs.
3. Works worth consulting in chronological order of publication are: Helmut and Alison Gernsheim, *The History of Photography* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969); Michael Millward and Brian Coe, *Victorian Townscape: The Work of Samuel Smith* (Woodstock, N.Y.: Overlook Press, 1974); Joan M. Schwartz, "Images of Early British Columbia: Landscape Photography, 1858-1888" (M.A. thesis, Dept. of Geography, University of British Columbia, 1977); Robert A. Weinstein and Larry Booth, *Collection, Use, and Care of Historical Photographs* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1977); Ralph Greenhill and Andrew Birrell, *Canadian Photography, 1839-1920* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1979); Norm Bolotin, *Klondike Lost: A Decade of Photographs by Kinsey & Kinsey* (Anchorage: Alaska Northwest Publishing, 1980); and *B.C. Studies* (Winter 1981-82), special issue devoted to the historical photograph record.
4. The photograph is captioned "In this late 1880s scene of Burrard Inlet, an outbound trans-Pacific steamer passes a renowned coastal vessel, the Hudson's Bay Company's sidewheeler, the S.S. *Beaver*. In the background are the majestic Lions peaks." The *Beaver* ran aground on 26 July, 1888 and the first *Empress* ship did not reach Vancouver until 28 April 1891. The background mountain is Grouse Mountain; Patricia E. Roy, *Vancouver: an Illustrated History* (Toronto: J. Lorimer and National Museums, 1980), 10.
5. *News-Advertiser*, 1 July 1888, 6.
6. *Ibid.*, 19 July 1888, 6.

APPENDIX I

Urban History Photograph Collections in Canada: A Selected List

British Columbia

City of Vancouver Archives
Provincial Archives of British Columbia
Vancouver Public Library
Victoria City Archives

Alberta

City of Edmonton Archives
Glenbow-Alberta Institute
Provincial Archives of Alberta

Saskatchewan

Saskatchewan Archives Board (Regina and Saskatoon)

Manitoba

Provincial Archives of Manitoba

Ontario

City of Toronto Archives
Metropolitan Toronto Library
National Photography Collection, Public Archives of Canada
Provincial Archives of Ontario

Québec

Archives nationales
Bibliothèque municipale de Montréal
Notman Photographic Archives, McGill University
Ville de Montréal

New Brunswick

New Brunswick Museum
Provincial Archives of New Brunswick

Prince Edward Island

Public Archives of P.E.I.

Newfoundland

Newfoundland Museum
Provincial Archives of Newfoundland

Nova Scotia

Public Archives of Nova Scotia

Yukon Territory

Yukon Territorial Archives