

Comments offered to the City of Vancouver Planning Department with regard to the proposed development and enhancement of the property occupied by Ryerson United Church, Kerrisdale

by Paul B. Ohannesian, 27 March 2017

Let me first introduce myself; I believe I have the background to speak meaningfully about this proposal.

I am a retired architect; I practiced in Vancouver from 1973 to 1993, retiring to take up arts occupations. I have been involved with church projects, single-family and multiple-family residential projects, and I have considerable experience with historically significant buildings. I was one of several paid architect consultants to the City of Vancouver in the late 1980's, helping the City to redraft its RS-1 Zoning Bylaw. Between 1989-1991, I was one of two architect members of the First Shaughnessy Design Panel for the City.

I also have a musical background, playing both piano and pipe organ as an avocation, and singing in both my church choir at St. Mary's Kerrisdale and in the Richmond Chorus. My wife Susan was a member for 27 years of the Elektra Women's Choir, one of several notable music ensembles that have used Ryerson United Church as their "performance home" for decades. I have attended innumerable organ concerts at Ryerson as well. Indeed, I met my wife in 1975 at one such concert in which she was turning pages for the recitalist, her teacher Patrick Wedd.

Therefore, I respectfully place before you my considered opinion on the subject proposal. I am fully supportive of the proposal as it has been described in the excellent documents attached to this public notification. Let me take several aspects of it in turn:

1) With regard to its suitability to its neighbourhood: I am, of course, well aware of the local community resistance to the proposal. I live at 17th Avenue and Dunbar Street and have been observant of the changes in my neighbourhood over the past number of years. At the beginning, my neighbours were similarly resistant to change, but as well-considered projects were built, opposition diminished, and by now, those of us who still live in single-family houses are pleased with the character of recent commercial/residential projects constructed along Dunbar Street nearby us. They serve as a welcomed buffer/transition between the arterial commercial activity of busy Dunbar Street and the quiet residential streets nearby. It is easily apparent to me, viewing this Ryerson proposal, that if built, it too will provide a good transition from the village-like character of the Kerrisdale commercial neighbourhood nearby to the remaining single-family residential neighbourhood next to the Ryerson site.

I must observe, by way of a final word on this aspect, that the tactics being used by some of the project's opponents, of exaggerating the perceived "menace" of the eight-storey residential building in the proposal is an all-too-familiar attempt to employ scare

tactics to sway the opinion of often-elderly residents nearby, and I have little to no respect for such methods. Enough said on that subject.

2) Speaking of Ryerson Church itself as a musical venue, it provides superb accommodation to organ concerts, choir concerts, and, of course, the church services for which it was designed. Its acoustics are such that it has been used many times for the recording of performances which are then translated into purchasable CD's and, thus, the value of Ryerson as a musical venue is extended directly into the homes of purchasers of such recordings. The proposal includes some vital seismic upgrading of the church, and that is very reassuring, because it is generally agreed that at some future time, which could be in a few minutes or a matter of decades away, a large earthquake will affect this region in a possibly disastrous manner. If Ryerson Church were to have been upgraded to survive such an event, its value to the community would be carried on into the far future.

It should be noted that the fine Casavant four-manual organ is considered to be amongst the perhaps ten most important pipe organs in the Metropolitan Vancouver area. The pleasure I have derived from hearing great musical works performed on it cannot be easily stated in mere words.

3) The residential components of the proposal appear to me to be eminently "livable". It is obvious that much care has gone into their design. With Vancouver under increasing pressure to densify its neighbourhoods, this proposal is a sensitive response to that need. Were I searching for such a unit to purchase for myself, I would have no hesitation in buying into this development.

4) With respect to the Community Meeting Space(s), such places are extremely important to the social health of a community. Over a period of decades, many places of worship in this region have made their secular meeting spaces available to the wider community outside their immediate worshipping membership for the purpose of social and political meetings and lectures, educational events, arts festivals, and so forth. The people of Kerrisdale and beyond will benefit greatly by having these rooms made available for their use.

5) Finally, one more word about the church building itself. Its great acoustics aside, it is a part of the architectural/historical continuity of this region. It has long been recognized by planning experts and sociologists that the presence of such memory-laden structures such as Ryerson United Church in the community forms part of the "happiness safety-net" (my improvised term!) of a region. We are living in a very precarious time in this world, and I assert that people need as much safe contact with the treasured past embodied in such buildings as they can possibly get. In this sense, I consider this proposal a very positive contribution to the ongoing happiness and mental well-being of my fellow Vancouver-area citizens, not to speak of visitors to our region who may attend musical events there.

I conclude by putting down for the record my 100-per cent approval of this planning proposal as it stands, and I congratulate the architects, landscape architects, city planning staff, and Ryerson Church membership on their achievement of placing this rich proposal before the community for what I hope will be focused and good-willed consideration. Thank you for the opportunity to state my case. I look forward to continuing to enjoy musical events at Ryerson United Church for the rest of my life and, as I am now 70 years old, to knowing that future audiences beyond my lifetime will have such a great resource in their community.

Thank you for your attention to my remarks.