

Donald Luxton
Heritage architectural consultant
Donald Luxton & Associates, Vancouver, British Columbia

There is no such thing as a typical work day for Donald Luxton.



Dearborn House colour selection, Seattle, 2001

One day he could be atop a 30-foot ladder, reaching under a dormer, scalpel in hand as he chips samples of paint from an Edwardian house in a Vancouver neighbourhood. Later, back in the office, he'll examine the paint under a microscope.

Another day Luxton might be walking through a cemetery near Victoria. He's examining everything he sees—the moss-covered memorials and gravestones, pathways and trees— and jotting down notes.



Walking tour of Mole hill, Vancouver, 2002

Luxton is an architect with a busy practice as heritage consultant, historian, writer and specialist in heritage conservation. His range of interests and activities is varied: from historic paint colours for West Coast homes to preserving cemeteries throughout British Columbia; from documenting the significance of historic buildings to teaching a new generation of architectural technicians to value built heritage.

From his teens, Luxton was keen on architecture. Growing up in Vancouver, he enjoyed looking at buildings and appreciated the rich stock of building types in his city. But his notion of architecture did not include the idea of heritage architecture.

All that changed in 1974. A controversy was raging in Vancouver over the fate of the Birks Building, at the corner of Georgia and Granville streets. The 11-storey high-rise, built in 1913, was a landmark.

When the Birks Building was demolished to make room for a new bank tower, Luxton watched and thought, "This is so unnecessary."

At the University of British Columbia, he received an education in architecture that made little reference to heritage architecture.

To his surprise, after graduation and ever since, he has been working in the field of heritage conservation.

One of his most fascinating jobs was the Mole Hill Community Housing Project, for which he was a heritage consultant.

Mole Hill is a West End neighborhood of Victorian and Edwardian houses that date from as early as 1888. In 1996, the city was planning to demolish the block—which had been neglected for years—to make way for a park and high-rise condominiums.

A seven-year campaign by heritage advocates and the public convinced Vancouver city council not to demolish the Mole Hill homes—many of which were actually on Vancouver's heritage list—but to redevelop them for public housing instead.



Dearborn House colour investigation,
Seattle, 2001

As the project's heritage consultant, Luxton was responsible for researching and documenting the architectural and historical significance of each building, as well as their condition.

As a result of the project, 27 heritage homes were preserved, restored, and painted in authentic colours. Even Luxton is startled at the beauty of the result. The project also culminated in the area's revitalization with the emergence of daycares, community gardens, a community recycling project, and a facility for people with HIV/AIDs.

Now that Mole Hill has been completed, it is a model for intelligent redevelopment and quality public housing. And the work was done at a cost comparable to new construction of public housing.

A related project was Luxton's work with the Vancouver Heritage Foundation on the True Colours Palette of 35 Vancouver paint colours.

In 1999, the foundation wanted to start a program of grants for homeowners. Working with Benjamin Moore, the project's sponsor, they created a palette of historic paint colours. The colours date to the period 1888-1928, when many of Vancouver's Edwardian, Victorian, Arts and Crafts, and Tudor Revival wooden houses were built.

Every year five municipally designated homes are chosen to participate. Homeowners receive a heritage consultation, historic paint analysis, paint, and a cash grant. Benjamin Moore Paints is the corporate sponsor. Now, colours such as Hastings Red, Mount Pleasant Tan, and Point Grey are in demand by homeowners who aren't even part of the program.

A large part of Luxton's practice is preparing Statements of Significance (SOS). Every site on the Canadian Register of Historic Places has an SOS. It's a concise document that includes three parts: a description of the historic place, an explanation of its heritage value, and a list of the key features that must be conserved.

Luxton's firm has produced about 700 Statements of Significance, more than any other firm in Canada. It takes team work to do this research. Typically, Luxton works with an archaeologist, a building technician, an art historian, a computer expert, and many other specialists to complete an SOS.

When he was in architecture school, heritage was not part of the curriculum. That is changing, and Luxton himself is part of the change. Today, he is a sessional lecturer at the British Columbia Institute of Technology, where he teaches Heritage Principles and Theory.



Luxton says that heritage conservation needs another generation of people with an interest and passion for history. There are shortages of all kinds of technical people—as designers, architects, and tradespeople with expertise in windows and masonry. Historians, planners and writers are also in short supply, he adds.

And the single most important change—something which would really boost the cause of heritage preservation—would be a federal tax incentive program. It's a cause for which Luxton and others are fighting.

Donald Luxton & Associates

<http://www.donaldluxton.com/>

Canadian Association of Heritage Professionals

<http://www.caphc.ca/>

Mole Hill Housing Project, Mole Hill Community Housing Society

http://www.gvrd.bc.ca/sustainability/casestudies/mole_hill.htm

Vancouver Heritage Foundation – True Colours Program

<http://www.vancouverheritagefoundation.org/truecolours.html>

British Columbia Institute of Technology – School of Construction and the Environment

<http://www.bcit.ca/construction/>