

# Design Guidelines:

## Old Town, Victoria, B.C.

*new buildings and additions to non-heritage buildings*

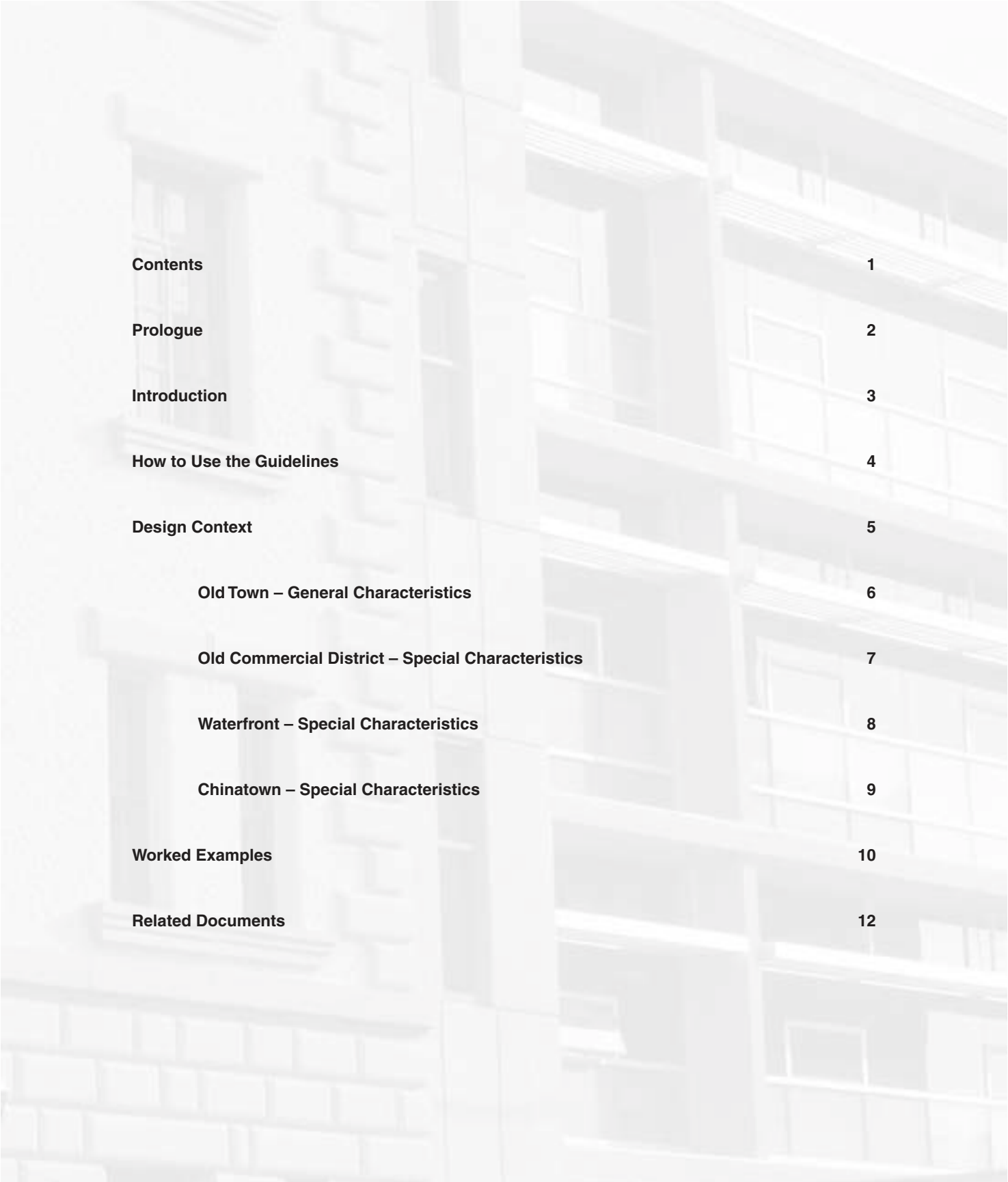
City of Victoria  
Heritage  
Program



*Building  
on our past*



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# Prologue

For many years, design guides for new buildings in historic cities emphasized subservience to the past. Their key message was that design in a historic context must be imitative or meek - the commonly used words were “compatible with” and “subordinate to.” Buildings that followed such guidance often said little about the time in which they were designed – they ignored contemporary values. We are custodians, not curators, of the historic environment. Our city is evolving, it is not a museum object, and we have a duty in the design of new buildings, additions to non-heritage buildings, and new urban spaces to respond to changing ways of working, living and playing. Equally, in our search for contemporary urbanism in Old Town, the latent structures that will answer this call shall respond to the existing urban context *and* find form that reflects the values of the time in which they are conceived.



Character Areas and Effective Area of These Guidelines

# Introduction

There are many ways to design a new building, or an addition to an existing one, that are in harmony with their surroundings. They range from copying nearby architectural forms, through reinterpreting old forms in new materials, to using new forms and materials that complement or enhance what is already there. All of these approaches are valid as long as their design is skillfully executed.

Old Town is an historic place of profound importance in Canadian history, and is the largest single historic area in the province - the role of the commercial district, as western Canada's principal port up to 1900, is recognized by its designation as a National Historic Event. Within Old Town are three areas of distinct character; the commercial district, Chinatown, and the waterfront. Old Town includes four other National Historic Sites including Victoria's Chinatown, the oldest surviving Chinatown in Canada, and a further 200 municipally recognized historic places. Decisions and actions that affect historic places must protect their commemorative integrity – that is to say, the ability of their physical presence to remind us of their profound cultural importance. New construction has the potential to strengthen, as well as to erode this integrity.

The City of Victoria seeks to protect, conserve, and enhance the heritage character of Old Town, established through the presence of sites, buildings and structures which are of architectural and historical significance through its designation as an Heritage Conservation Area. In May of 2005, the City began using the *Standards and Guidelines for the Conservation of Historic Places in Canada* to review proposals to make alterations to **designated and registry heritage buildings**, and for new buildings and landscapes in heritage conservation areas, of which Old Town (Development Permit Area No. 1 [Heritage Conservation]), is the largest under Victoria's Official Community Plan. In creating this Heritage Conservation Area, the City aims **to regulate development to ensure consistency with the established form and character of the area**. The guidance that follows tailors the generalized approach of the National Standards and Guidelines for the Conservation of Historic Places in Canada to Old Town, by making it easier to understand what we value about this historic place, and by illustrating the forms and characteristics to which the design of new buildings, landscapes and additions to existing non-heritage buildings should respond.

This guidance has been developed under the powers given to municipal governments in British Columbia, according to Section 919.1(1)(d) and (f) and 970.1(1)&(2) of the *Local Government Act* item ii., that allows Council to approve the particulars of the exterior design and finish of all buildings and structures, and to establish landscaping standards.



Old Town seen from the clock tower of City Hall.



# How to Use These Guidelines

## 1. Understand Heritage Value and Character

Read the statements of heritage value for Old Town and the particular character area in which you are proposing to build. Become familiar with what it is about the historic place that is valued and develop an awareness of the general and special characteristics of the area, to **understand what physical things, such as spaces, connections, materials, textures, colour, views and shapes, contribute to the special character there.**

## 2. Consider How Your Plans will Affect Neighbouring Properties

Develop an understanding of how your design could affect the privacy of neighbours. Consider how your design could affect their natural light? Could the changes you propose affect the noise level of the neighbourhood? How will your design mitigate against any potential negative effects?

## 3. Decide on a Design Approach

Decide how your design is going to respond to the general and special characteristics of its surroundings. Consider how your plans will affect the neighbours and take appropriate design steps to mitigate negative effects. Take photographs that illustrate the character of the area around your site, write down your design approach, and prepare a sketch design. Use these analyses, and any others that you consider necessary, to present an outline design to city staff early on in your design process. **Consider whether your building and landscape might be worthy of preservation by future generations for their positive contribution to the character of Old Town?**

## 4. Develop Your Design

**Develop your design considering the comments of the city staff.** Make your application for a Development Permit.

## 5. Review Process

Your Development Permit Application will be reviewed by staff, who will put forward a recommendation to Council. Council will make the decision to approve, approve with amendments, or decline your application. Staff support will be contingent upon applications demonstrating a clear understanding of, and a sensitive response to the general and special characteristics of their surroundings. In some cases applications may be referred to an advisory committee for review to assist Council with their decision.

Applicants are required to demonstrate an awareness of the development context and to explain how the design responds to that context.



# Respond to Old Town character

This guide is intended to stimulate designs for buildings and landscapes that do more than simply meet mandatory technical requirements such as zoning and building codes. It encourages designs that are strongly contextual, visually interesting and uplifting to use. By providing a better understanding of what is special about Old Town, the City is seeking to inspire creative developments that contribute to the cherished character of this place. It is not looking for monumental buildings and spaces, however, as these could be just as damaging to the character of Old Town as bland buildings could be. Designs are sought that can assert themselves – that have their own presence while being sensitive to their context – and that stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the fine historic buildings and streetscape of the largest heritage conservation area in the province.

This guide recognizes that there are an infinite number of ways to successfully respond to the special urban character of Old Town, and because of the fine-grain (the densely built up, small scale, small lot character) of the historic place, that the character can change from block to block, and even from building to building. Instead this guidance identifies the heritage value of Old Town generally and the local variations in character that are seen in the **old commercial district**, on the **waterfront**, and in **Chinatown**, and urges proponents to consider how their design will respond to these characteristics to richen and amplify the sense of place of the historic heart of the city.

This modern hard landscaped area recalls the mid-block walkways once common to Chinatown



# Old Town – General Characteristics

Preserve *heritage value* by responding to the *general characteristics* of Old Town

## *Heritage Value*

The distinctive character of Old Town, without parallel in other Canadian cities, derives from Victoria's decline as a major seaport and centre of commerce by 1900, that protected it from the pressures of urban development that have altered the scale and character of most other urban seaports. The special character of Old Town resides primarily in a surviving, diverse assortment of buildings that document Victoria's key periods of growth: its emergence as a seaport and distribution centre during the gold rush era between 1858 and 1865 (the **waterfront**); its cosmopolitan population (including **Chinatown**); its commercial links to coastal cities to the south; and in the large cohesive group of modest (for the time), low-rise commercial structures (the **commercial core**) constructed up to the early 1900s when commercial power shifted to Vancouver, the city chosen as the western terminus of the Canadian Pacific Railway. The significance of the city's early period of growth is formally recognized by its designation as a National Historic Event.

## *General Characteristics*

The general characteristics of Old Town include:

- historic buildings ranging in height from one to five storeys
- classically-inspired proportion and building elements
- load-bearing brick and stone buildings and details and forms that accompany load-bearing masonry
- architecturally distinctive buildings at street heads
- rounded or splayed building corners, often with corner entrances, at street intersections
- buildings at street intersections with asymmetrical facades terminating in a taller corner element
- pedestrian paths, mews, and courtyards within / through blocks
- shop windows at street level displaying merchandise
- rich detailing, craftsmanship and colour of street / alley elevations
- views of harbour, mountains and hills on street ends
- cohesiveness of buildings and spaces that are neighbourly yet dense

Old Town retains much of its nineteenth-century commercial character



# Old Commercial District – Special Characteristics

Preserve *heritage value* by responding to the *special characteristics* of the old commercial district

## *Heritage Value*

The old commercial district is significant as the historic nucleus of Canada's first Pacific port city. As a major commercial centre, area of settlement, and active port prior to the First World War, the streetscapes possess valuable association with the early commercial and social growth of Victoria, British Columbia, and western Canada. The location of the old commercial district - around the original site of Fort Victoria - is an important indication of the intentions of the city's first planners to take advantage of the natural geography and to make the best use of the Inner Harbour waterway. The juxtaposition of law and order (as seen in such buildings as the court house, city hall, and bank structures) with commercial structures such as warehouses and mercantile buildings, laid out within a pedestrian-scaled grid of streets, alleyways and courtyards, is significant as a reminder of the British influence on the planning of western Canadian cities.

The significant architectural styles in the old commercial district embody Victoria's transformation from a gold rush boom town to a permanent port and centre of trade. The confident styles of the commercial architecture in the late-nineteenth century (1870-1900) are valuable as they represent the replacement of the business-minded Hudson's Bay Company by the American entrepreneurs of Victoria's merchant community in this period of rapid growth. This shift to centralized business endeavors in Victoria, which began in the mid-1880s when Vancouver became the terminus of the Canadian Pacific Railway and climaxed in the early twentieth century, is particularly evident in such structures as the warehouses that line Wharf Street, and the retail and wholesale buildings on Government Street. Architectural themes in the old commercial district are valuable indications of the trends occurring in Canada before the First World War.

## *Special Characteristics*

The special characteristics of the old commercial district include:

- the views of the Inner Harbour from Wharf Street, Bastion Square, and Fort Street
- the street plan, including alleyways and courtyards, and city blocks of various shapes and sizes including small blocks
- the architectural differences seen in the buildings and streets; the identification of the oldest streets closest to the water, and newer streets and buildings farther inland
- Government Street, the central orienting spine of the old commercial district, defined by a streetscape of businesses including historic banks, offices, and shops
- the density and intact street front character of historic streetscapes created by the distinct collection of nineteenth and twentieth century (1880-1910) commercial and administrative buildings built up to the property line
- the varying heights averaging four storeys that contribute to the rich skyline texture of the street frontages
- prevailing American neo-classical commercial architectural styles overlain with Victorian applied ornament on functional brick structures
- the prominent use of brick masonry construction, such as the use of arched entryways into brick buildings
- articulated, three dimensional nature of facades and skylines



Lower Yates Street exhibits many of the defining characteristics common to the old commercial district



# Waterfront – Special Characteristics

Preserve *heritage value* by responding to the *special characteristics* of Old Town’s waterfront

## *Heritage Value*

The groups of waterside warehouses and hotels dating to the 1860s, and the accompanying landscape of loading docks, retaining walls and wharves, along Store Street reminds us of Victoria’s role as a commercial seaport and the trans-shipping point for material and supplies that built British Columbia, served the Gold Rush era and built trade with Asia via the Pacific Ocean in the second half of the nineteenth century. The commercial activities of the harbour are valued for the way they have shaped the development of the land beside the water, as are the architectural treatments of buildings and landscape that remind us of these maritime industrial origins.

## *Special Characteristics*

The special characteristics of the waterfront area of Old Town include:

- the intersection of bridge, harbour, and street
- building types and spaces associated with the functions of a commercial harbour
- buildings over the water, vessels, floatplanes, buoys and marks, wharves, pontoons, piles, boat ramps, davits and ladders, hawsers, bollards, and mooring rings
- random rubble stonework, brick masonry, and iron shutters and doors
- stone and brick retaining walls
- buildings with an industrial aesthetic
- dual-aspect structures that present a commercial frontage to Wharf Street and a harbour frontage to the water
- the rich texture of the land / water edge resulting from conditions including inter-tidal beaches, projecting structures, inundations, and reclamations
- Load-bearing masonry buildings, and details and forms that accompany load-bearing masonry surrounded by subordinate lighter wood and metal structures
- the constantly changing water’s edge resulting from the movement of vessels, the trans-shipping of cargo, and the state of the tide
- the glimpses of water seen between buildings, down alleyways and slips, and on street axes



Buildings and landscaping beside the water have different characteristics to such elements seen in the old commercial district. The industrial aesthetic and dual-aspect elements of this character area are echoed in this modern waterfront apartment building

# Chinatown – Special Characteristics

Preserve *heritage value* by responding to the *special characteristics* of Chinatown

## Heritage Value

Victoria's Chinatown, a formally recognized National Historic Site, is valued as the oldest surviving and continuously used Chinatown in Canada. This historic place is a document of the emergence of the Chinese-Canadian in Victoria and Canada-wide. The early history of Chinese immigration to Canada when thousands of men came to British Columbia in the nineteenth century seeking gold, or work in coal mines and logging camps, and on the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway - is evident in the physical attributes of this historic district. The variety of buildings in this area, including mercantile houses, cultural associations and temples, creates unique streetscapes which illustrate the perseverance of the Chinese community in the face of cultural exclusion. The labyrinth of off-grid alleyways within Chinatown remind us of the intensity of the former land-use and are valued for the way their exotic quality distinguishes the area from other parts of the city. The architecture of Chinatown is valued as a largely complete illustration of the growth of a distinct Chinese-Canadian culture in Canada. Buildings dating to the nineteenth century, and possessing typically Victorian elements of design, represent the influence of British order over the foreign population. Buildings constructed in the twentieth century illustrate a distinctly Chinese architectural vocabulary, indicative of the growth and increased strength of the Chinese community within itself prior to the First World War.

## Special Characteristics

- the sense of place attributable to Chinese-Canadian commercial activities such as groceries and restaurants; the prolific use of primary colours alongside various types of signs including neon
- the fine grain of the area derived from the scale and mass of the buildings ranging from 3 to 5 storeys, and including the off-grid path network and intimate scale of alleyways and courtyards within clusters of buildings
- densely packed buildings on blocks comprising a street frontage of a mixture of very wide and very narrow commercial buildings
- the construction materials, such as brick, attributable to the era before the First World War
- the juxtaposition of traditional architectural styles with later Chinese-style buildings
- Chinese cultural characteristics manifested in such architectural details as storefront mezzanines, recessed balconies, decorative wrought ironwork, upturned eaves and tile roofs, and Asian-style ornamentation.

Chinatown buildings have a very different character to the waterfront and commercial core. They are a fusion of nineteenth-century Chinese and western commercial architectural languages.



# Worked Examples

## *1215 Broad Street*

1215 Broad Street constructed in 2001 is valued for its contemporary interpretation of Old Town's commercial architecture, and for its positive contribution to the street:

The characteristics that underlie the building's value include:

- the classically inspired facade as seen in the relationship of window to wall, and the use of pilasters and transom panels to divide the street façade into pleasingly proportioned areas
- the building height
- construction up to the building line
- wide retail display windows at street level and smaller office windows above
- robust, competent brick detailing and construction
- articulation of the street façade achieved by features such as the corbelled window heads, the pilasters, the recessed entrance and display window, and the canopy
- signage integrated with design



## *Steamcrane Quay*

Steamcrane Quay, constructed in the late 1990s, beside Jutland Road on the Selkirk waterfront is valued as a good example of a contemporary waterfront landscape:

The characteristics that underlie the landscape's value include:

- hard landscape detailing that refers to the maritime industrial past of the quay including fair-faced concrete walls, pieces of heavy machinery arranged as objets d'art, and beds of river rocks
- the way the landscape reminds us of the passage of time by the juxtaposition of the neat urban vegetation with the bare concrete and industrial artifacts
- the evocation of the memory of past quayside activities including the incorporation of the steamcrane rail ties, and the use of lighting bollards and handrails with a nautical flavour
- the shape of the soft and hard elements that encourage people to sit, but not to loiter
- the robust detailing that requires little maintenance



# Worked Examples

## *720 Douglas Street*

The Victoria Conference Centre at 720 Douglas Street is valued as an exemplar of 1980s urbanism in a significant historic precinct.

The characteristics that underlie the building's value include:

- the building massing and spatial composition that acknowledges the powerful plan geometries of the Empress Hotel and the Provincial Legislature
- the open public spaces and their landscaping
- the mid-block walkway
- the materials of construction and their colours that refer to the materials of the Empress Hotel and the Crystal Garden across Douglas Street
- the roof form that echoes the profile of the nearby Crystal Garden
- the scale of the shop display windows and entrances along Douglas Street



## *1645 - 75 Douglas Street*

Just outside the boundaries of Old Town, 1645/75 Douglas Street is valued as a contemporary interpretation of the large commercial buildings that are scattered along Douglas Street.

The characteristics that underlie the building's value include:

- an architecturally distinctive building forming the backdrop to a public square
- the rounded corner and corner entrance at the street intersection
- display windows at street level
- references in the design of the façade to neighbouring buildings
- the use of different materials and details to reduce the perceived mass of the building
- the use of elements of classical architecture in a contemporary way such as the streamlined cornice, the attic storey of smaller windows, the expressed frame, and the massive masonry plinth
- the colour of the pre-cast masonry that echoes the colour of the façade of the former Hudson's Bay Company building to the north





# Worked Examples

## *532 1/2 Fisgard Street*

532 1/2 Fisgard Street is valued as a good example of an addition to, and the adaptive reuse of, a building in Old Town

The characteristics that underlie the building's value include:

- the recollection in the mid-block external circulation of the network of alleyways and courtyards that characterize Chinatown blocks
- the retention of the mid-block tenement buildings' facades
- the bold additions to the tenements that illustrate their original form by the use of different materials and colour
- the restoration and adaptive reuse of the commercial buildings that front Fisgard and Herald Street
- the landscaping of the courtyards within the block
- the dense yet neighbourly rooftop additions



## *407 Swift Street*

One of the few new waterfront developments within the Old Town Conservation Area, 407 Swift Street is valued for its response to the defining characteristics of the Old Town waterfront

The characteristics that underlie the building's value include:

- the dual aspect structure that presents a façade inspired by warehouse design toward the water and a façade inspired by commercial architecture toward Swift Street
- the use of vast expanses of brick and small metal balconies reminiscent of warehouse fire escapes
- absence of ornament/use of an industrial aesthetic
- waterfront landscaping including wharves, docks, piles, and indigenous plant material



# Contents

This guidance should be read in conjunction with the City's existing published guidelines listed below and available at the planning counter in City Hall:

- *Chinatown Guidelines for Buildings, Canopies, Landscaping, Colours & Signs (1983)*, City of Victoria 1983
- *Advisory Design Guidelines for Buildings, Signs and Awnings (1981)*; City of Victoria 1981
- *Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design - Guidelines*
- *Downtown Plan 1990*
- *Zoning Schedule E (draft)*
- *Noise Bylaw / Zoning Adaptable Standards*
- *Standards and Guidelines for the Conservation of Historic Places In Canada 2003*
- *Victoria Harbour Plan 2001*



