



CENTENNIAL SQUARE Statement of Significance Report

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CENTENNIAL SQUARE

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Owner: City of Victoria

Design Credits:

Overall Planning & Coordination: Rod Clack

Centennial Square Design: Alan J. Hodgson with Rod Clack and Clive Justice of Muirhead & Justice Landscape Architects

Retail Arcade & Parking Structure: John Di Castri

Senior Activities Centre: Clive Campbell

Renovation of the Police Building: Don Wagg

Pantages Theatre Renovation: Alan Hodgson

Fountain & Mosaic Design: Jack C.S. Wilkinson

Completion: 1965



Description

Centennial Square is a public space located in downtown Victoria on the west side of Douglas Street, mid-block between Fisgard Street to the north and Pandora Avenue to the south. The square is framed by public buildings, which include three 19th century buildings of historic significance. Victoria's Old City Hall (1878-1891) and its 1963 modernist addition frame the south edge of the square. A four-storey city-owned parking garage with an attached 2-storey office space

along Douglas Street defines the north edge. The Capital Regional District Headquarters and the historic McPherson Theatre (formerly the Pantages Theatre) form the west edge. The ground plane of the square consists of a radial pattern of curving brick bands defining the edge of terracing steps that descend from Douglas Street toward a circular fountain. The fountain contains three monoliths that rise up to 28 feet in height. They have raked concrete ridges on one side, and Italian glass mosaics on the other. Fountains and underwater lighting animate the monoliths during the day and after dark. The fountain is encircled by a sculptural pre-cast concrete ring with repeating arches that give it a crown-like appearance. Brick and exposed aggregate are used extensively throughout the square. Walled planting areas are used as a secondary element to accent and soften the edges.

The square has historically been an evolving civic space and has been altered since its original construction to suit the changing needs of the City. Some of its original features and functions have been removed or no longer perform as intended. City Council voted to cover the sculptural crown feature in a bumpy stucco coating in the 1970's to make sitting less comfortable and discourage loitering. An Elizabethan-style "knot garden"¹ and the senior activity centre at the northwest corner of the square were both demolished. The construction of the six-storey CRD headquarters in 2006 introduced new sightlines to both Chinatown and the historic Chinese Public School. The ground floor of the parking garage was intended to contain retail units to help animate the edges of the square, but these units were re-purposed as municipal offices and have not contributed to the animation of the square as originally envisioned.² A more complete list of changes over time is included under appendix 1.



Seniors Centre (demolished) view from Northwest, Clive Campbell architect, Hubert Norbury photo, n.d. (ca. 1965), Private Collection



Knot Garden (demolished), from Centennial Square, Victoria, B.C. (ca. 1970) CD 13, City of Victoria Archives

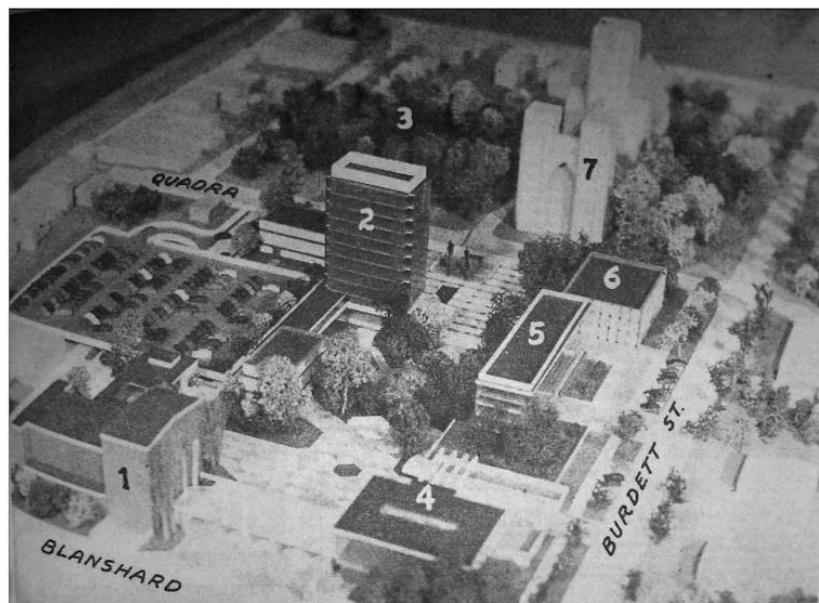
Project History

The Centennial Square project was first presented to the public on August 2, 1962 as part of Victoria's centenary celebrations commemorating its incorporation as a City 100 years earlier. The

¹ Centennial Square, Victoria, B.C., 1970, CD 13, City of Victoria Archives

² Muirhead & Justice Landscape Architects, General Plan, 2 of 11, November 1963

proposal for a civic square and park in the downtown area was initially developed by the Permanent Projects Committee of the Victoria Centennial Advisory Committee, and was part of a broader urban renewal initiative led by Alderman A.W. Toone³. In an interim report to Council, the Committee suggested that a civic square be located at the terminus of Blanshard Street. It was the concept for a commemorative civic square that would become instrumental in the preservation of Old City Hall, which was once again threatened with sale and demolition in the late 1950's. The City had planned to replace its original City Hall since World War 2, a plan that was nearly carried out. In 1957, the Capital Region Planning Board working with City Planner Rod Clack and the Dominion Construction Company from Vancouver had developed plans for a new modernist style City Hall on a large site in the Cathedral Hill neighbourhood at Blanshard Street, Quadra Street and Burdett Street. The 1957 plan envisioned a new civic centre for the Capital Region government, a courthouse and land registry office. While being well received by the public, a lack of funding from upper levels of government scuttled the plan⁴. In 1960, the Marwell Construction Company of Vancouver offered to purchase the existing City Hall, demolish it and construct a new eight storey reinforced concrete mixed-use city hall in which the City government would become a tenant. Upon learning of the proposal, the Dominion Construction Company attempted to revive its own proposal.⁵ In December, 1960, City Council turned down both proposals and the issue remained unresolved until the election of Richard Biggerstaff Wilson in late 1961.

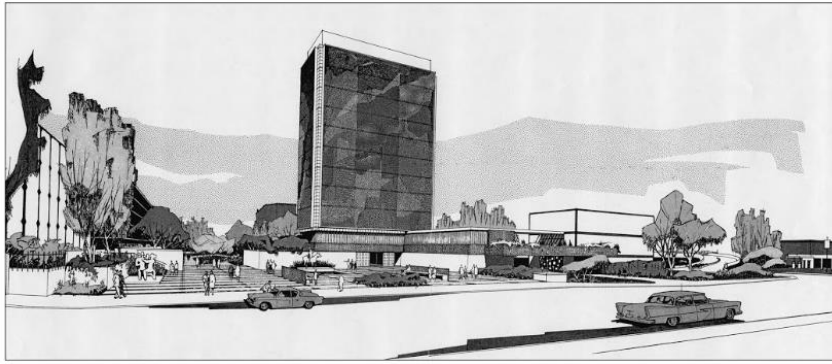


Model of the Cathedral Hill Site. 1) Royal Theatre 2) City Hall 3) Pioneer Square 4) Suggested site for museum 5) Courthouse 6) Land Registry Office 7) Cathedral

³ Segger, Martin. 2011. *The Emergence of Architectural Modernism II: UVic and the Victoria Regional Aesthetic in the late 1950s and 60s*. University of Victoria Art Collections.

⁴ Mindenhall, Dorothy. 2012. *Unbuilt Victoria*. Toronto. Dundurn Press.

⁵ Mindenhall, Dorothy. 2012. *Unbuilt Victoria*. Toronto. Dundurn Press



Perspective, Cathedral Hill Government Precinct Plan, 1957

During the 1950's, Victoria College (now the University of Victoria), was planning an expansion and the construction of a new campus on one of three possible sites- Beaver Lake, Blenkinsop Lake/Mount Douglas and Gordon Head, with the intention of applying for University status. A "University of Victoria Joint Planning Committee" was established to combine public, government and faculty efforts, and the committee's research established the Gordon Head Site as the preferred site by the end of 1960. Public interest and support for the expansion of Victoria College was strong. Oak Bay Reeve Richard Biggerstaff Wilson led a fundraising campaign that was so successful it resulted in the creation of a University Development Board of Victoria College, which would eventually raise \$11.4 million from public and private sources. Wilson became the chair of the board in 1961, a position of influence and authority that supported his eventual campaign for mayor.⁶ For the planning of the new Gordon Head Campus, Wilson requested a high profile international firm to provide input. The San Francisco firm Wurster Bernardi & Emmons were retained. At the time, the firm was working on Ghiradelli Square in San Francisco (1962-1964) and promoting a vision of urban renewal anchored by the conservation of historic buildings. Firm partner Don Emmons and R.B. Wilson developed a close relationship that continued after R.B. Wilson was elected mayor in late 1961. Emmons began advising Wilson on larger scale urban planning issues. He urged Wilson to conserve City Hall in private correspondence, and described it as an initial step towards a more comprehensive heritage conservation program for the downtown.⁷ The working relationship between Don Emmons and R.B. Wilson on the University of Victoria Gordon Head Campus was the genesis for the conservation of City Hall and the revitalization of the building through the construction of an adjacent, contemporary civic square. The design was led by many of the same architects and design team members as were working on the University of Victoria Gordon Head Campus.

In his June 20th, 1962 Feasibility Report to the Special City Hall Committee, city planner and architect Rod Clack noted that the Cathedral Hill site had not developed according to its original 1957 plan, and it was apparent that the site would continue to develop without municipal involvement. In his report, Clack promoted the idea that a proposal that conserved the existing

⁶ Segger, Martin. 2011. *The Emergence of Architectural Modernism II: UVic and the Victoria Regional Aesthetic in the late 1950s and 60s*. University of Victoria Art Collections.

⁷ Segger, Martin, *Survival By Design: Case Study Text Document*

City Hall would become a renewal incentive for surrounding areas.⁸ The report recommended that the renovations of City Hall and construction of a new addition should be connected to the construction of a new “Victoria Square” with a commemorative Fountain for the Centennial. Clack defined the elements of the proposal, which would be presented to the public as a physical model at the end of the summer, as follows:

- Retention of City Hall, interior renovations, construction of a new addition
- Construction of “Victoria Square”
- Construction of a carpark facility and shopping arcade to generate pedestrian traffic
- Rehabilitation of the Pantages Theatre as a new civic playhouse with an adjoining garden cafe
- Conservation of the Police Department headquarters
- Closure of Cormorant Street to create space for the square, as well as implement an overall traffic plan already underway. The traffic plan was intended to improve circulation, reinforce Pandora Avenue as the main town artery to Esquimalt and eliminate of surplus streets within the redevelopment area
- A senior citizens centre



Original model for Centennial Square, 1962

Design Value

Centennial Square is an exemplary modernist-style public space that was executed through a combination of visionary political leadership, the design and construction of new buildings, the careful coordination of multiple City departments and complicated logistical planning that included land assembly, selective demolition, and the permanent closure of the section of

⁸ Clack, Roderick. June 20, 1962. *Report of Special City Hall Committee on Feasibility Survey of City Hall Building and City Hall Area Redevelopment Proposal*, City of Victoria Archives CR-0177, File 2_1

Cormorant Street that ran on a diagonal through the centre of the site.⁹ In order to clear space for the square, the City demolished the 1891 public market building on the north side of Cormorant Street along with other old buildings it deemed obsolete. The Pantages theatre (now the McPherson Theatre) facing Government Street was conserved and expanded through a new addition by architect Alan Hodgson. The police station on the north side of the square facing Fisgard Street was conserved and renovated according to the designs of architect Don Wagg. A new four storey parking garage and retail arcade designed by architect John Di Castri was planned for the north side of the side of the square, which was part of a deliberate attempt by City Planning to minimize surface parking in the downtown area and generate more pedestrian traffic.¹⁰ Old City Hall was retained and internally modernized with a contemporary new addition by architecture firm Wade Stockdill & Armour Architects.

The City retained the Vancouver landscape architecture firm of Muirhead & Justice as the designers of the new square. The firm intended for the design to unify historic and new buildings immediately framing it, while complementing the surrounding neighbourhood of Old Town. The design used brick extensively, including salvaged brick from the demolished public market building and aggregate paving, arranged in circular patterns around a central fountain. The grassy lawn fronting onto Douglas Street was intended to invite pedestrians into the square and down a series of curved terraces to the fountain, which was the main focal point. The square was designed to fit naturally within its frame of existing and new buildings, while maintaining connectivity and a variety of views to and from Old Town.¹¹ The construction of the square was an exciting event for the City of Victoria, to the extent that a documentary entitled “Townscape Re-Discovered” was created to record its progress for posterity.

The Fountain

The fountain was a gift from the adjoining municipalities of Oak Bay, Saanich and Esquimalt and commemorated the Victoria Centenary. The design was a collaboration between artist Jack C.S. Wilkinson and Rod Clack. The fountain consists of three monoliths measuring 20 feet (6.1 metres), 23 feet (7 metres) and 28 feet (8.5 metres) in height¹². The monoliths are decorated with Italian glass mosaics in a palette of reflective gold tiles depicting scenes and imagery representing “three fundamental elements of life”. The smallest of the panels symbolically faces Oak Bay and depicts “youth” and the “experience of physical life capped by the shield of knowledge”, represented by the University of Victoria crest (The University of Victoria had just attained the status of a University in 1963). The second monolith faces Esquimalt and depicts themes of procreation and representations of womanhood. The tallest monolith faces Saanich and depicts the legend of St.

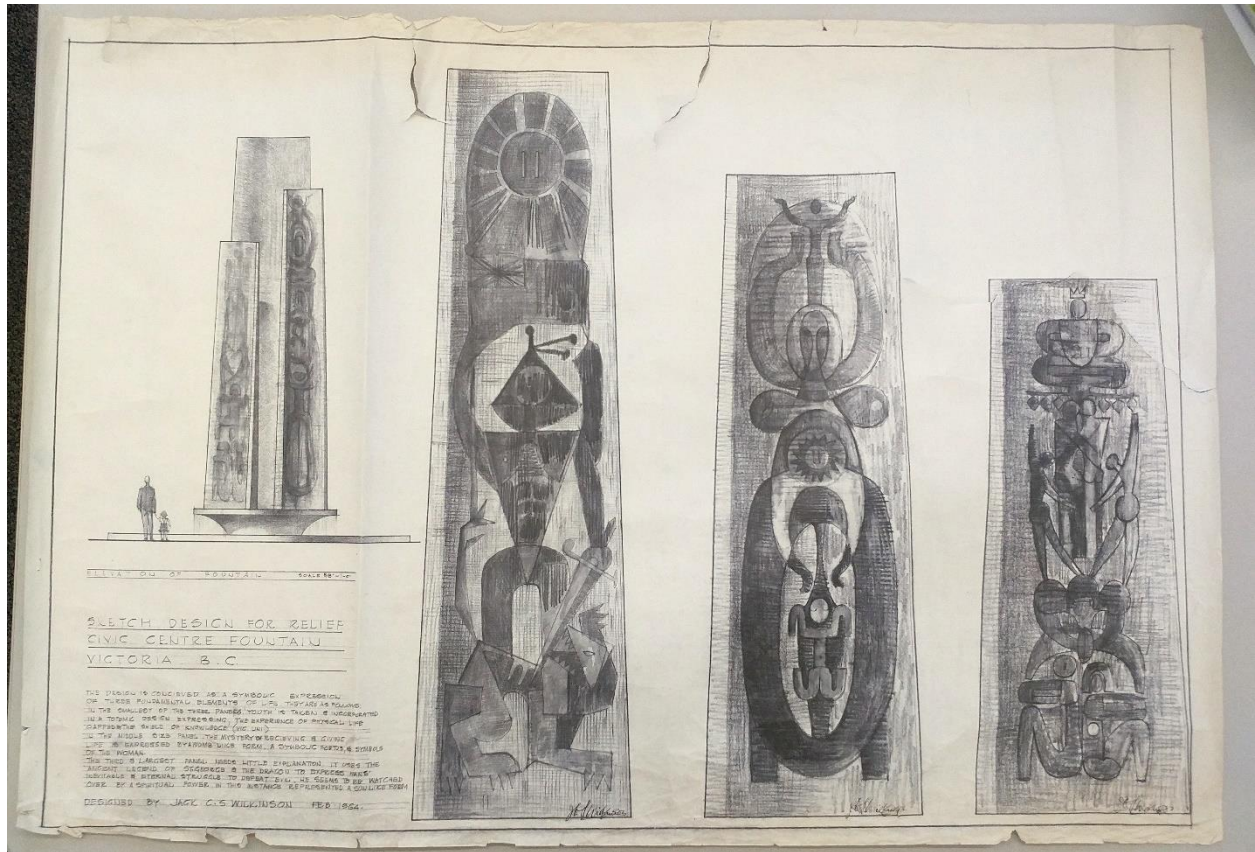
⁹ Planning Division, Engineering Department, City of Victoria- The Centennial Victoria Square Project- A precis of preliminary and introductory information prepared for the Consultant Architects comprising the Design Team, February 7, 1963

¹⁰ Clack, Roderick. June 20, 1962. *Report of Special City Hall Committee on Feasibility Survey of City Hall Building and City Hall Area Redevelopment Proposal*, City of Victoria Archives CR-0177, File 2_1

¹¹ Muirhead & Justice Landscape Architects, 1962

¹² Clack, Roderick, *Centennial Victoria Square- The Centennial Fountain*, Plan A3, 1964

George & the dragon, symbolizing humankind's struggle against evil. ¹³ The fountain was meant to be the unifying symbol of the square.¹⁴



Original Design for Centennial Square Fountain by Jack C.S. Wilkinson

Wilkinson's initial design for the fountain proposed that the monoliths be elevated on a plinth, with water emitted from the centre and cascading over the edges. The tallest monolith would have risen to a height of almost 40 feet. The design was revised through collaboration with Rod Clack to include the pond, fountains, lighting and the sculptural crown intended to function as a seating.

The style of the mosaics emulate the style of the influential artist Margaret Peterson, who lived and exhibited in Victoria studied mosaic techniques in Italy, travelled extensively in Guatemala, Mexico and California studying the anthropological, cultural and spiritual sources of myths, legends and religion. She also studied the artistic traditions of the Koksilah Cowichan Tribe prior to moving to Victoria, influences evident in her work and in the style of the mosaics designed for the monoliths. Peterson held exhibitions in 1953, 1959 and 1962. In his role as staff artist and senior architectural draftsman for the Provincial Department of Public Works. Peterson prepared mosaics for the University of Victoria and the BC Hydro building.

¹³ Wilkinson, Jack C.S. *Sketch Design for Relief- Civic Centre Fountain, Victoria BC*. February, 1964

¹⁴ Luxton, Donald, and The Victoria Civic Heritage Trust. 2012. *Test of Time: The Enduring Legacy of Victoria City Hall*. Victoria: The Victoria Civic Heritage Trust



Margaret Peterson, "Source of Sources", 1964,
University of Victoria

The monoliths are set on a rocky surface evoking a British Columbia Beach¹⁵ in a pond of water measuring approximately 40 feet (12.2 metres) in diameter with fountains and lighting. The pond is surrounded with a circular seating feature that resembles a tiara or crown, which was personally designed by Rod Clack. The crown was made of a series of precast concrete units with a reinforcing steel frame and a gunnite exposed aggregate surface.¹⁶ It was designed to provide seating around the fountain. City Council altered the tiara in the 1970's with a coat of roughcast stucco to discourage a perceived problem of loitering.¹⁷ In the images below, taken in the 1960's, the sculptural lines of the pre-cast units are much clearer than they are today.

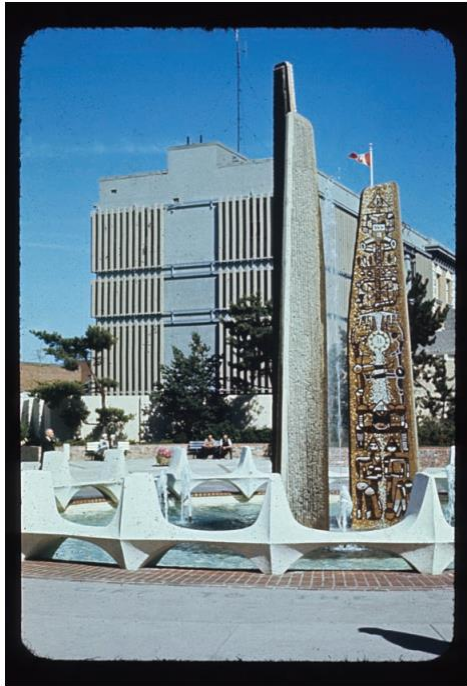
The circular ring exploits the sculptural possibilities of reinforced concrete, as other architects had been pioneering. In Brazil, years prior to the design of Centennial Square, an international competition had been held for the design of an entirely new City called Brasilia, which was to be the new Capital of Brazil. The modernist architect Lucio Costa won the competition and designed the layout, while architect Oscar Neimeyer designed a series of futuristic landmark buildings. The City was built in four years from 1956 to 1960 and had a population of 150,000 upon completion.¹⁸ The primary repeating form of the sculptural ring bears a strong resemblance to the elements used in the design of the Presidential Palace for Brasilia.

¹⁵ Centennial Square, Victoria, B.C., 1970, CD 13, City of Victoria Archives

¹⁶ Willis & Cunliffe Engineering Ltd. *Precast Ring Units and Foundation Plan*, April 9, 1964

¹⁷ Luxton, Donald, and The Victoria Civic Heritage Trust. 2012. *Test of Time: The Enduring Legacy of Victoria City Hall*. Victoria: The Victoria Civic Heritage Trust

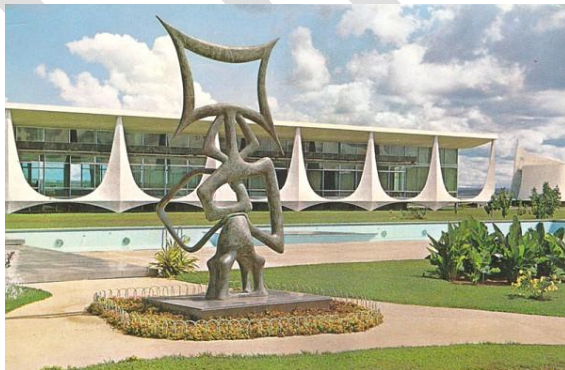
¹⁸ http://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications_resources/newsletters/28_1/brasil.html



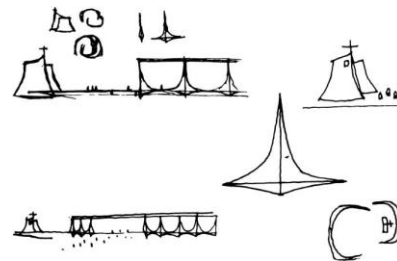
Centennial Square Fountain, Rod Clack architect-planner; Jack Wilkinson artist, *Private Collection*



Centennial Square Fountain under Construction



Palacio da Alvarado, Brasilia, Oscar Neimeyer, 1958



Significance of Centennial Square to Urban Planning in Victoria

Centennial Square is significant as an innovative model of urban planning in which historic buildings were proactively conserved as crucial components of a larger urban renewal scheme. Like other North American cities in the 1960's, Victoria's downtown was facing increased competition from suburban shopping centres and its historic building stock was in physical decline.¹⁹ Mayor Richard Biggerstaff Wilson, influenced by the San Francisco architecture firm Wurster, Bernardi and Emmons, championed Centennial Square as a means of revitalizing the downtown and enabling the continued use of City Hall, which was once again being considered for demolition. Centennial Square became the centrepiece of the 1965 "Overall Plan for Victoria", which promoted the same conciliatory approach to old and new architecture that has maintained Victoria's reputation for heritage and culture over time.²⁰

Associations to Notable Persons

The Square is notable for its associations with former Mayor Richard Biggerstaff Wilson (1904 – 1991), who served as the City's mayor between 1961 and 1965, was Chancellor of the University of Victoria from 1967 to 1969 and went on to receive the Order of Canada. The Square is also associated with Roderick Clack, the City's first architect-planner. Roderick Clack was hired in 1958 as the first staff member of the City Planning Division within the Engineering Department, which would become a separate department in 1966. Mr. Clack had a major influence on the design of Centennial Square, Bastion Square and the subsequent Overall Plan for Victoria. He personally designed the concrete crown encircling the main water feature. The square is also associated with the work of Jack C.S. Wilkinson (1927-2007), who designed the monoliths and mosaic features. Mr. Wilkinson was a trained architect, painter and sculptor who was a highly influential artist and art administrator during the 1960's and 70's for Victoria and the province at-large. In the 1960's, he was the staff artist and senior architectural draftsman for the Provincial Department of Public Works.²¹

The design for Centennial Square combined timeless principles of good urban design, contemporary modernist architecture and progressive ideals of heritage conservation. Unlike contemporaneous urban renewal schemes in other North American cities, which favoured large scale demolition as a solution to "urban blight", Centennial Square represented an alternative vision for the future that reconciled old and new buildings in the context of a thoughtfully designed public realm.

¹⁹ Capital Region Planning Board of B.C., *City of Victoria Urban Renewal Study. Preliminary Report No. 1*. June 1960. City of Victoria Archives CD-00118

²⁰ Segger, Martin. *The Emergence of Architectural Modernism II, UVic and the Victoria Regional Aesthetic in the late 1950's and 60's*.

²¹ Segger, Martin. 2011. *Victoria Modern: The Emergence of Architectural Modernism II*. Victoria: University of Victoria Art Collections

Character Defining Elements

- The location of Centennial Square next to Old City Hall between Fisgard Street and Pandora Avenue
- The radial design of the square, in which the design elements are organized around a central water feature
- The three monoliths at the centre of the water feature, each of which includes an Italian glass mosaic designed by artist Jack C.S. Wilkinson depicting the themes of youth, procreation and the struggle of good vs evil
- The symbolic orientation of the monoliths towards each of the three municipalities who contributed to the construction of the fountain
- The reinforced concrete ring surrounding the fountain (compromised in the 1970's with a cementitious stucco coating)
- The use of complementary materials in the square that visually connect the conserved heritage buildings of the square to one another, and to the larger context of the Old Town neighbourhood
- The visual connections between the square and Douglas Street, Broad Street, Government Street and the Gate of Harmonious Interest in Chinatown
- The framing of the square with significant historic architecture, including Old City Hall and the McPherson Theatre (formerly the Pantages playhouse)
- The use of bricks salvaged from the demolished 1891 public market building on Cormorant Street, re-used as cladding for the retaining walls of planted areas
- The use of a water feature as the central focal point for the square
- The use of native trees and vegetation
- The inlaid lettering that identifies the fountain and the square as a commemorative project

Appendix 1

Alterations to the Square

- The Knot Garden, an Elizabethan style flower garden was removed
- The senior's activity centre constructed in tandem with the square and located at the northwest corner of the site was demolished
- Connections to Chinatown were created through the introduction of the six-storey CRD headquarters at the northwest corner of the square in 2006
- The sculptural pre-cast tiara surrounding Centennial Fountain was covered in a stucco coating to discourage loitering at the request of Council in the 1970's
- A Spirit Square was built within Centennial Square near the southeast corner facing Pandora Avenue in 2006. It included a performance stage, drinking fountain, native plants and a pair of cedar spirit poles designed by Lekwungen Master Carved Butch Dick and Lekwungen/Mamalilikulla Carver Clarence Dick Jr.
- A sequoia tree was planted in the middle of the grassy area facing Douglas Street, and now screens the middle of the square from view. The date of planting is unknown. Plans and drawings of the square as well as historic photos do not show the sequoia tree.
- The globe light standards found throughout Old Town and which were originally installed in Centennial Square have been replaced with modern lighting (See below image)
- The ground floor of the parking garage facing Centennial Square originally contained retail units, however these were re-purposed as City office space
- Two out of four flag poles on the lower terrace of the square near the fountain have been removed



Panorama of Centennial Square, Clive Justice landscape architect, Clive Justice photo, *Private Collection*