

SHEAM & LEE BUILDING, 539-545½ FISGARD STREET/ 16-20 FAN TAN ALLEY

Owners: Sheam Tim and Low Yan San

Architect: Fisher & Wilson, 1888; 191, 1901; 1912

Date: 1888 (eastern portion) / 1901(western portion) / 1912(rear portion)

Description of Historic Place

The Sheam & Lee Building is a two-storey, brick-clad commercial and residential building located on the south side of Fisgard Street in the heart of Victoria's Chinatown National Historic Site. The building also extends south and marks the northern entry to Fan Tan Alley. The building is distinguished by its symmetrical segmental-arched windows on the upper floor and distinctive storefronts.

Heritage Value of Historic Place

The Sheam & Lee Building is valued as part of a grouping of early buildings that contribute to the historic character and urban pattern of Victoria's Chinatown National Historic Site, the oldest and most intact Chinatown in Canada. In the 1850s, exacerbated by political and social turmoil in China, thousands of Chinese migrated from a small region in the southern province of Guangdong to frontier gold rush sites in California, setting up a permanent base in San Francisco. In 1858, the Fraser Gold Rush spurred the growth of Victoria as a significant port town, and prompted the movement of many Chinese into the province. Victoria was the primary point of entry for Chinese into Canada until the early twentieth century.

The building is further valued as a representation of the dominant role Chinese merchants played in Victoria's Chinatown. Chinese merchants, already established in San Francisco, moved to Victoria and purchased lots as early as 1858, opening stores backed by funding from San Francisco headquarters. A second wave of merchants immigrated into Victoria's Chinatown in the 1890s to 1910s. These smaller proprietors consisted of groups of individuals or clans who pooled their resources to purchase land to build their businesses. Loo Chew Fan and his brother Loo Chuck Fan, who owned Kwong Lee & Co., purchased Lot 445 from Roderick Finlayson and the western six meters of Lot 444 from William J. Macdonald in 1881. Sheam Tim and Low Yan San purchased the remainder of Lot 444 in 1887 and built the first portion of the building in 1888; a structure at the rear of the building housed the Shon Yuen Opium Factory. The property was sold to Laurent Guichon, in 1890, who sold it to Jules Boucherat the same year. Boucherat died in 1900, leaving the property to his wife, Marie. Lee Mong Kow, a figurehead in Victoria's Chinatown who leased the building, added the western section in 1901. In 1912, Marie Boucherat rebuilt the rear of building, facing Fan Tan Alley, for tenement housing.

Victoria's Chinatown is expressive of a duality in architecture and cultural landscape. On each block, street façades link together, forming a wall that shields interior spaces and narrow alleyways between and through buildings are linked to central courtyards which were the hidden location of tenements, opium dens, theatres and gambling houses. This

configuration allowed the Chinese community to adhere to follow traditional religion, kinship and economic practices while projecting the image of assimilation to Western society. The Sheam & Lee building is consistent with such a duality. The commercial façade displays a design typical to Victoria at the time with its Italianate influences such as segmental-arched windows and pressed metal cornices. Typical features include narrow doorways in the front façade lead to the upper floor and a 'cheater' mezzanine. The building also links to the interior of the block via Fan Tan Alley, which in the early 1900s housed gambling and opium dens shielded from the non-Chinese community by a series of heavy wooden doors.

The building is also valued as an example of the short-lived yet successful partnership between Elmer H. Fisher (ca. 1844-ca.1905) and William Ridgway-Wilson (1862-1857). Fisher & Wilson designed the eastern portion of the building in 1888. In 1901, Thomas Hooper (1857-1935), one of the province's most prolific architects, designed the western portion in matching style.

Character-Defining Elements

Key elements that define the heritage character of the Sheam & Lee Building include its:

- location on the south side of Fisgard Street, at the northern entry point to Fan Tan Alley, part of a grouping of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century historic masonry buildings in Victoria's Chinatown National Historic Site
- continuous commercial and residential use
- siting on the front and side property lines, with no setbacks
- commercial form, scale and massing as expressed by its two-storey height, with 'cheater' mezzanines, rectangular plan, flat roof, four storefronts facing Fisgard Street, lower rear addition facing Fan Tan Alley, and passageway at rear leading west from the Alley
- red-brick walls on main building and on the rear tenement
- Italianate features such as pressed-metal brackets and cornice, and brick pilasters dividing the building into four bays
- Chinese features such as second storey wood panelled doors with segmental-arched transoms above opening to later balconies, and narrow doorways leading to upper floor tenements
- additional features on the Fan Tan Alley elevation including two wooden storefronts, segmental-arched window openings and 6-over-6 double-hung wooden sash windows
- original 4-over-4 double-hung wooden sash windows with horns, arched at the top and set into segmental-arched symmetrical openings and parged sills; decorative transoms in 1901 storefronts
- original interior elements such as 'cheater' mezzanines