

Schedule A

CITY OF VICTORIA STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE LEE WOY & COMPANY BUILDING 557-561 FISGARD STREET

Updated March 2024

Civic Address: 557-561 Fisgard Street

Original Owners: Lee Woy, Lee Yan and Lee Chong

Architects: Hooper & Watkins

Date: 1908

Description of Historic Place:

The Lee Woy & Company Building is a modest two-storey masonry building. It is located mid-block on the south side of Fisgard Street in Victoria's Chinatown. It is identifiable by its metal balcony at the second storey and wood screen above the storefronts.

Heritage Value of Historic Place

The Lee Woy & Company 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 also representative 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. The Lee Woy & Company building was a product of the second wave of merchants who immigrated to Victoria's Chinatown in the 1890s to 1910s. Built in 1908, the building was constructed as stores with tenements above. The use of a 'cheater-storey', a low-ceiling mezzanine that was not taxed, is one of its significant character-defining elements and typical of commercial buildings in Chinatown. The original owner, Lee Woy, Lee Yan and Lee Chong, of Lee Woy & Company, purchased the eastern portion of Lot 443 and a portion of Lot 442 from the Todd family and built on Lot 443. Lee Woy was born in China circa 1855, and his business success allowed the construction of this building. It is one of the few in Chinatown that has remained in Chinese possession.

The building is further valued for its later, and ongoing, relationship with volunteer associations such as the Dart Coon Club and the Chih Kung T'ang. Volunteer associations, or Tongs, were established at the time of the first Chinese settlement as protection against the intolerance and prejudices of Western society and opposing Chinese clans. Some of these early associations, such as the Chih Kung T'ang, were secret society-based political groups, who opposed the

corrupt rule of the later Qing Dynasty. The Chih Kung T'ang was the first Chinese volunteer association in Canada, established in Barkerville in 1863, and in Victoria in 1876, and was set up to maintain businesses and social relationships, as well as organizing gambling activities. The Dart Coon Club arose as a political organization, supported by the Chih Kung T'ang. In accordance with most volunteer associations, funding was obtained entirely by membership dues, gambling, opium dens and exit fees. Volunteer associations usually had their own buildings, typically housing the meeting halls and offices on the upper floor and leased storefronts on the ground floor.

The Lee Woy & Company Building is also significant as an example of the work of architects Hooper & Watkins. Western architects were hired to design the buildings throughout Chinatown, as the Chinese were shunned as professionals in the building trades. Thomas Hooper (1857-1935) and C. Elwood Watkins (1875-1942) were two of the most important early architects in British Columbia. They designed many of the commercial and institutional buildings in downtown Victoria.

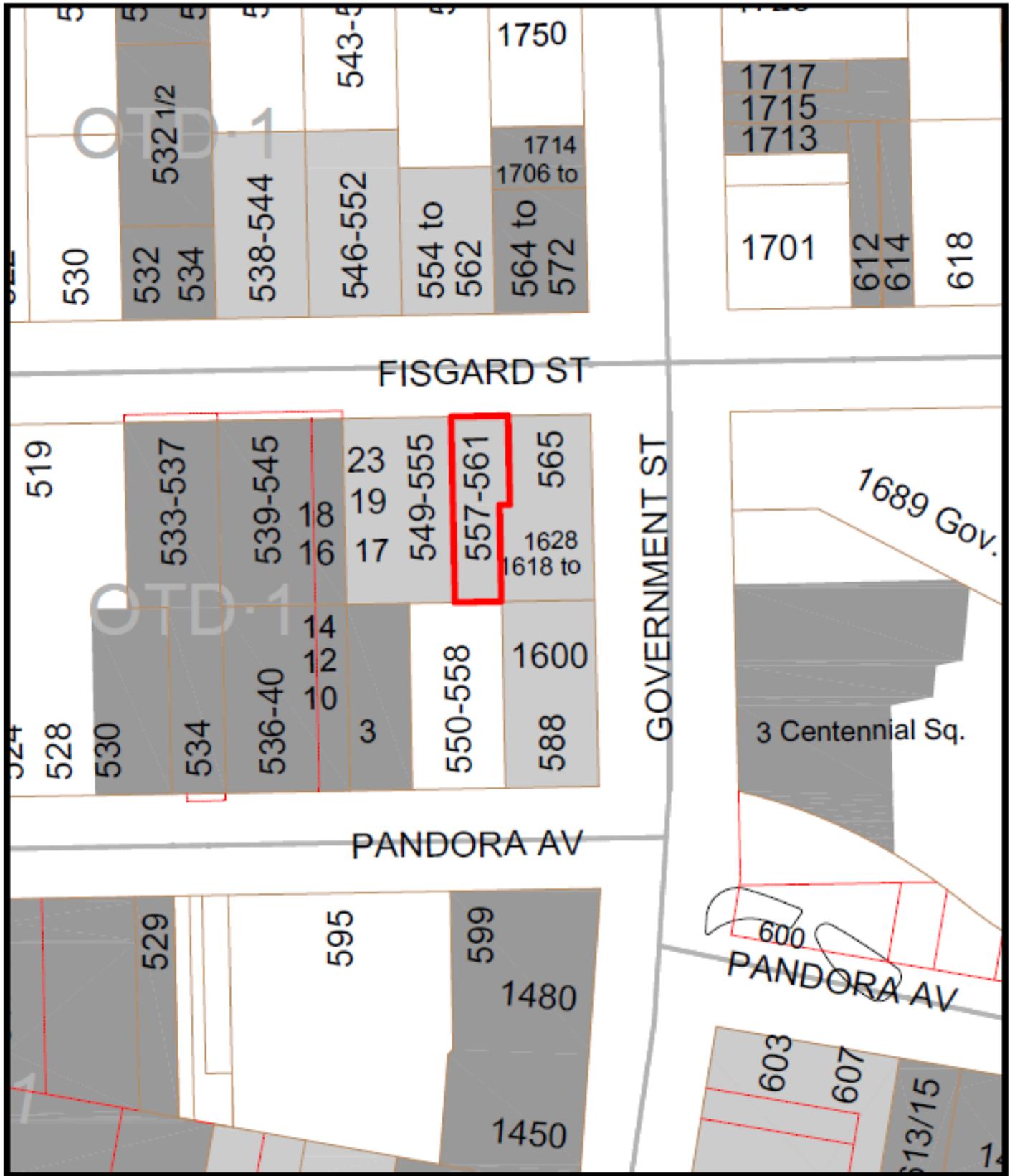
Character-Defining Elements

Key elements that define the heritage character of the Lee Woy & Company include its:

- location on the south side of Fisgard Street, part of a grouping of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century historic masonry buildings in Victoria's Chinatown National Historic Site
- continuous commercial and institutional 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' mezzanine, symmetrical plan, flat roof
- retail storefronts facing Fisgard Street and association meeting rooms above
- brick walls, with corbelled detailing and tooled joints
- two second floor doors, leading to later metal balconies.

Victoria Heritage Thematic Framework

The property at 557-561 Fisgard fits within a few different themes of Victoria's Heritage Thematic Framework. Firstly, this building represents Theme 1.2 Multi-Cultural Origins and 2.1 Frontier Boom Town as in the 1850s, due to 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. The building is also representative of the dominant role Chinese merchants played in Victoria's Chinatown and the Lee Block was a product of the second wave of merchants who immigrated to Victoria's Chinatown in the 1890s to 1910s. With the building being used for the Dart Coon Club, Chih Kung T'ang and the Chinese Freemasons, we can also apply Theme 4.2 Associations and Organizations. Although a modest building, the two-storey plus 'cheater' mezzanine is a character-defining element that is unique to Chinatown, so Theme 5.1 Architectural Expression is relevant here.

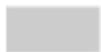


557 Fisgard Street

Heritage Designation #000205



Designated



Registered

