

# WORK POINT

## demolish or preserve?

STORY BY LESLIE CAMPBELL

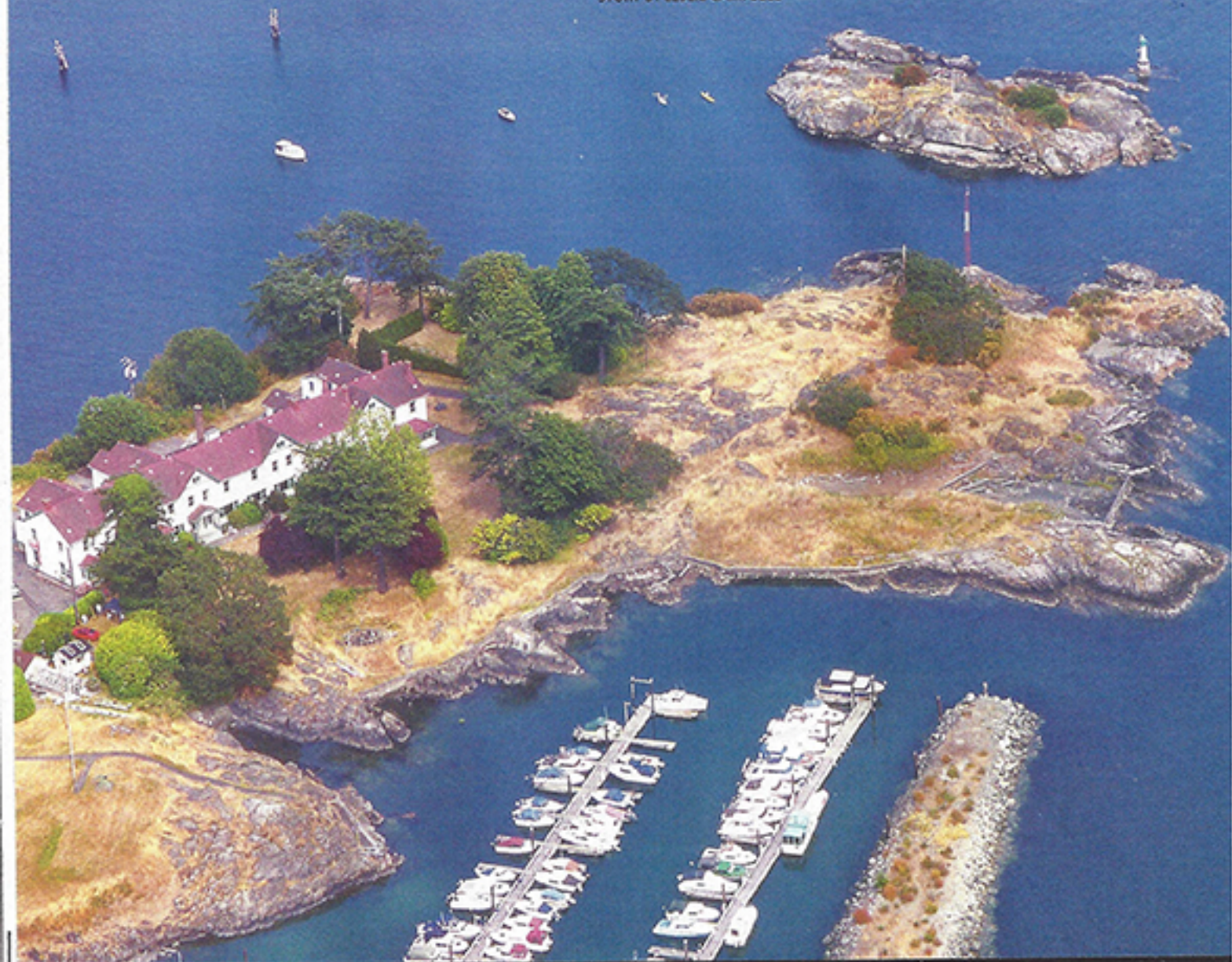


PHOTO BY GREGG ELIGH

ALTHOUGH DEFENCE MINISTER Bill Graham has declined to give Work Point historic site status, the question remains as to why it should be torn down before new ownership of the land is determined, a process that has been estimated will take five to 15 years. Why the rush to demolition?



# Victoria BY DESIGN AT ISSUE

Standing on the rugged rock tip of Work Point and looking east, one has a broad view of Victoria's harbour and commercial core. From here the city's modest skyline suggests change may be in the air: a number of construction cranes have shouldered their way above the norm and mark this moment as one of dramatic growth—at least by Victoria standards.

Just north of Work Point across West Bay, a mass of wooden formwork, steel and freshly poured concrete—the Swallows Landing condominium development—is rising above the fringe of Garry oaks bordering the shore. Further east along the harbour, more cranes hover behind Songhees waterfront condos, evidence that the massive Shutters project will soon add its substantial presence to the harbourscape. The pressure for residential development close to the core is intensifying and one can easily imagine Work Point becoming the site of another large condominium project.

The land is owned by the people of Canada, held in trust by the Department of National Defence. But DND has declared the land surplus to its needs and bureaucratic wheels have been set in motion to "dispose" of this property, including possible removal or demolition of the historical buildings on Work Point. The ultimate fate of this unique place is, at this moment, up in the air and waiting for...developments.

One vision that would preserve and celebrate the Point's history and natural attributes has been brought forward by a group of Victorians led by artist and antiques restorer Colin MacLock. MacLock and the Work Point Arts Project Society (WPAPS) envision a large visual arts centre complete with 30 individual studios, offices for arts organizations, galleries for exhibits and festivals, meeting rooms, a museum and tearoom, all housed in the 22,000 square-foot Work Point Officers' Mess and Quarters. MacLock's group has argued that the economic spinoffs from fostering the arts would be a significant boost to Greater Victoria. Central to this vision is preservation of the historical officers mess and quarters. >

**THE SITE IS RICH IN MILITARY HISTORY.** The establishment of a Canadian military presence in Victoria fulfilled one of the the final conditions for British Columbia's entry into Confederation in 1871. But until C Battery, Canadian Artillery arrived—fresh from the North West Rebellion in 1887—there was no central fortress for coastal defence. It took C Battery three years, starting with the felling of old growth Douglas fir on Work Point, to finish the Work Point Officers' Mess and Quarters, which represented the first Canadian-built military facility in Western Canada.

In its early years, the Officers' Mess and Quarters also functioned as the social hub of Victoria, the scene of many Saturday night dinner parties. And its grounds were a favoured place for family picnics and sporting matches.

Various regiments, including the Princess Patricia's Light Infantry, were headquartered at Work Point. Until the Navy took over the lands in 1995, the Officers Mess and Quarters was home to Barracks' leaders, many of whom played prominent roles in the life of Victoria.





Architect John Keay, who's been involved in numerous heritage developments, including the Belfry Theatre, says the heritage value of Work Point Officers' Mess and Quarters "is significant in terms of where it's located, who built it and its architectural design...it's an interesting example of military building of that era." And despite its age, it's still sound.

Completed in 1890, the building's simple Queen Anne style architecture has many interior embellishments such as grand staircases and ornate fireplaces. WPAPS would use the large rooms on the main floor for galleries and concerts, while the 30 small rooms upstairs (all with plumbing) would suit artists' studios.

A team of construction experts studied the building for WPAPS, and reported that only minimal seismic, electrical and other work would be needed to adapt the space. Total capital construction costs were estimated at \$803k.

MacLock and his board of directors prepared a business plan to show how the arts centre could be self-supporting, then proceeded to get endorsements from virtually every arts groups in Greater Victoria—including many who indicated interest in tenancy—as well as The Land Conservancy of BC, architects, heritage experts, and local and federal politicians.

But the DND and related bureaucracies proved a frustrating adversary. MacLock says that for two years "they didn't say 'no,' they just sent a lot of rhetoric back saying studies are being done." Or they told him and his allies to come up with proposals and get more stakeholders. MacLock's group did, but found that wasn't enough. "They'd change the goal posts and the playing field," MacLock says.

#### To be demolished?

The 22,000 square-foot Work Point Officers' Mess and Quarters



After their 2002 proposal failed to generate any commitment from DND, the group made the herculean effort of documenting the history and rationale necessary for Parks Canada's Historic Sites Designation—producing a 163-page report co-authored by heritage expert Martin Segger, architect Keay, MacLock, and (Ret) Lt-Col Cecil Berezowski. But they needed the signature of Minister of Defence Bill Graham as the "landlord" of the property. It took Graham a year-and-a-half to say "no," suggesting that the region's history was already captured by Fort Rodd Hill. In that July 2005 letter, he also announced that CFB Esquimalt would resume plans to remove or deconstruct the building.

In all it's been a five-year journey for MacLock, one that has eaten up a lot of his time and money. He figures—"to the chagrin of my family"—he spends about four hours a day on the project, either researching and documenting the site's history, selling the idea to others, or wading through government baffle-gab. He recently spent \$2000 of his own money on a photographic documentation of Work Point. As a self-employed artist and antique restorer, and the father of two preteens, that's got to hurt.

But what clearly worries him more is a looming DND "Request For Proposal" to either move or demolish the Work Point Officers' Mess and Quarters.

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CFB Esquimalt's public affairs spokesperson Captain Darin Guenette says that any salvation of the building would interfere with their long range plan to dispose of the land. There's something called a "Master Real Asset Development Plan" that guides CFB Esquimalt's actions involving their property. It has not been made public and Guenette says that it's "fluid," changing every six months or so as things evolve.

Guenette, Minister Graham and others have repeatedly suggested that if someone wants to preserve the Officers' Mess, they should apply to move it off Work Point. But as TLC's Bill Turner has responded (crediting Pierre Berton): "You can't move the Plains of Abraham—a historical site is a historical site where it is."

Base Chief of Staff Brian Losthouse says the building would have to be removed before the land was divested because "the building is surplus to our needs and is derelict and it's better down than having someone injured."

The Land Conservancy's Turner expresses sympathy with the



Colin MacLock

DND/CFB Esquimalt people: "They have all sorts of costs around maintenance, heating, security, and no money to spare." Still, TLC is not ready to give up on preserving the building *in situ* and has suggested TLC could pay for a commissionaire or otherwise help financially with security, in effect "mothballing" the building so that it's in useable condition when ownership of the land is finally determined.

When asked about such a proposal, Guenette says: "It doesn't make sense; we have to clear it off."

What would it cost to keep the building secure at least until the lands are divested? No clear answer has been provided. But the evasiveness of DND and their repeated assertions that the building must go has fuelled speculation that there's some sort of hidden agenda, some unstated need to get rid of the heritage building *now*.

EVERYONE IS IN AGREEMENT that the whole Work Point/Macaulay Point area (about 60 hectares) is surplus to DND's needs and will eventually work its way through a long, rigorous process and end up in someone else's hands. The process demands that it first be offered to other government departments, and also that it takes into consideration First Nations land claims. At some point the municipality can make an offer.

MP Keith Martin—who is also Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Defence—says that the Work Point/Macaulay lands will be divested in one piece. He feels the municipality, working with the public and interest groups like MacLock's, should bid on it. He doubts that other levels of government would want to buy it. Because of his dual roles, the Ethics Commissioner has ruled that Martin can only act as MP in this matter—that is, he cannot use his portfolio within the Defence Ministry to push for preservation of the site.

But Martin seems fully on the side of saving the building: "Somehow we have to come up with the money to preserve the site." He sees the availability of the property as "an exciting and fascinating opportunity to provide for the beautification of the community."

The TLC's Deputy Executive Director, Ian Fawcett, and MacLock recently met with Keith Martin who is working from his end to extend the life of the Officers' Mess and Quarters. What will happen if MP Martin says he can't prevent the demolition? Fawcett simply says, "We can't accept that. It's an incredibly valuable community asset."

At the local level, the new Esquimalt council includes people on record for preserving the Officers' Mess: Jane Sterk, Hy Freedman, Basil Boulton. The Arts Centre initiative is also part of Esquimalt's Parks and Recreation Strategic Plan (Nov 2003)—as is a performing arts centre, and public recreational access to the waterfront from West Bay to Macaulay Point. The CRD has expressed interest in the property too, with its sights set on Macaulay Plains for a sewage treatment facility.

The long divestiture procedure for the lands does give the public some time to gain awareness and to get involved in determining the future of the area. As Ian Fawcett of TLC notes, "There are a lot of points at which decisions can be made or reversed; it's not fixed in stone." So the vision of Colin MacLock and the Work Point Arts Project Society is not dead—and neither are other possible options for the site. But moves are afoot now that could potentially narrow the options.