One of the dilemmas facing planners and heritage activists in the redevelopment of old industrial sites is what to do with unique structures of a largely bygone era. One such structure is the Canron [Canadian Iron] Building in Vancouver's Southeast False Creek. A decision was recently taken to demolish the structure. While my information is limited and my biases numerous, I have reason to question this decision. Here is what I know of the history, and this is based largely on the research and interventions of Bruce MacDonald, local historian, and other members of an ad hoc False Creek Heritage Trail Group.

The Canron Building sits on the site formerly occupied by the Coughlan shipyard, at one time the largest steel shipbuilding complex in the British empire, which employed a workforce of 7,000 people during the First World War. During the Second World War, 25,000 workers were employed in the immediate area in an even larger complex, in which the Canron Building played a significant role. In the '50s and '60s, Canron workers helped build many of the components for the Granville and Second Narrows bridges, as well as for numerous office towers and industrial installations.

Today, the Canron Building stands vacant on City-owned land. It is one of the largest steel-riveted industrial building in the province and, with its massive old growth wooden beams, certainly one of the most significant in the city. It has a floor space of 135,000 square feet, most under a clear span that is 500 feet long.

In late September, in an in camera session, Vancouver City Council approved the demolition of the Canron building and the associated remediation of on-site toxic materials. It directed the Building Management department to solicit tenders and make recommendations regarding award of the contract. On November 6, City Council voted to give the contract to Quantum Environmental Group for nearly $600,000, after a standing committee meeting where the issue was aired.

Several prominent community and heritage individuals and organizations, who had previously been unaware that demolition was being voted on, addressed the meeting and brought to bear an impressive amount of information on the building's significance and precedents for adaptive re-use of similar buildings being explored elsewhere in the Lower Mainland. In this context, one is reminded of the successful uses to which industrial buildings on Granville Island were put — all the more so as consultant Stanley Kwok has called for the creation of 100,000 square feet of retail space as an integral part of the area's development.

By their own account, delegates felt they were treated dismissively by some members of Council, and heard unconvincing reasoning by staff members who reported on the reasons supposedly requiring the building's destruction. These included the fact that the province has been pressuring the City to move forward with remediating the site, which is thought to be leaching contaminants into False Creek. This pressure was characterized as the City "having a gun to its head".

It further begged the question of whether remediation necessarily required destruction of the building. The issue of designating the building has been raised with the City's Heritage Commission in the past, and recommendations possibly made, but to date no record of the proceedings have been located.

Council and staff have been contemplating this building's demolition for a number of years. Then a decision is pushed through in seeming haste and with little regard for public process. Why the rush? I can think of four possible reasons, some of which have been publicly stated. The first concerns the province's pressure on the City to get the site cleaned up. The second is a desire by the City to accommodate the Molson Indy in its new race course.
layout which, in its present configuration, requires access to the site. This course could be modified to permit retention of the building.

A third flows from the increasingly questionable cost-benefit calculus employed by some at City Hall that, in my opinion, tends to overestimate the costs associated with preserving historic buildings (and other features of urban sustainability), while underestimating the benefits associated with their re-use and the value of their unique component structures.

The fourth is the one that interests me the most. It seems to me that starting from a ‘clean slate’ gives profit-oriented developers complete freedom to design the site in accordance with what will make the most money, and provides planners with what will most closely accord with a modernist aesthetic of functionality and separation of land uses. The sterile landscapes of the north shore of False Creek, with nary an historic building in sight (the exception of the Roundhouse duly noted), are symptomatic of this approach. Whether this is a consciously held viewpoint, it smacks of the old paradigm of ‘progress’ and ‘development’ that has been responsible for the destruction of much of our natural and cultural heritage.

Of course, as with any story, there is a postscript. At a more recent Council meeting, City staff were instructed to explore whether parts of the original structure can be rescued from the wrecking ball and re-used in some way. Since then, the Planning Department has hired two heritage activists to document the building’s history and significance. This offers some hope that part of the legacy of the Canron Building will be retained and also attests to the resourceful and valiant last-minute efforts of members of the heritage trail group who continued lobbying, even after the original vote was lost.

What I have related here reflects my own perspective, based on limited information and my own biases. Preserving a building of this sort — parts of which are heavily contaminated — does pose challenges. However, the different approach being considered for Versatile Shipyards in North Vancouver suggests that there may be alternatives.

Don Alexander is an assistant professor in the School of Resource and Environmental Management at Simon Fraser University, and is active in urban ecology and heritage issues in Vancouver. Those wishing to get more information on the significance of the Canron Building and ongoing efforts to create a False Creek Heritage Trail, should contact Bruce MacDonald at (604) 251-1520.

Editor’s Note: In the interest of hearing all sides of the story, we have invited staff from the City of Vancouver to respond to the facts and views presented in this article.