

# Green Scene: Appreciating the Heritage of Riverview Hospital

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**The Riverview Hospital site has grand landscapes, heritage buildings of architectural significance and a collection of mature trees from all over world. *K. Takahashi photo.***

Some of Coquitlam's most significant and oldest buildings lie sheltered amongst the magnificent trees on the Riverview Hospital grounds. Thousands of people who drive by Riverview on the Lougheed Highway probably appreciate the lush green of its landscape. Others, who have joined a tree tour hosted by the Riverview Horticultural Centre Society or strolled through these spacious and gracious grounds on their own, will likely have been enthralled by the quiet majesty of this remarkable site with its heritage buildings and world-class collection of trees.

Riverview, formerly called Essondale, was established in 1904 when the provincial government acquired a thousand acres of land in Coquitlam along the lower Coquitlam River and adjoining hillside. The plans were to create a modern (for the times) facility for the care of the mentally ill. The lands on the floodplain were developed into prize-winning Colony Farm where patients, on a voluntary basis, provided labour and grew food which supplied several institutions in the lower mainland. The original plans for

Essondale were developed as the result of an important architectural competition. It was the intention of the province, under the visionary direction of the Provincial Secretary, Henry Esson Young, to create a stunning enclave of grand buildings graced by panoramic views and enhanced by an outstanding collection of trees. To landscape the site in the style of a pastoral English country estate, Young hired John Davidson from Scotland who then became the province's first botanist. Davidson went on to create the Botanical Gardens at UBC.

The first building at Essondale was West Lawn, opened in 1913 and designed by Henry Whittaker, BC's Chief Architect in the newly formed Department of Public Works. Whittaker's designs for the initial buildings at Riverview proved to be influential in subsequent plans for government buildings in other parts of the province. This gives the building complex at Riverview considerable historical significance. Whittaker's designs reflected a new medical approach at that time which held that the mentally ill would benefit from living in facilities that had an abundance of natural light, fresh air and porches to promote a close connection with nature.

Many of the buildings which followed were similarly spectacular. The Crease Clinic, now used by the movie industry, is an impressive rendition of the Art Deco design so characteristic of the 1930s. The original nurses' residence, opened in 1930 is built in the English Arts and Crafts style as were the charming cottages which provided residences on site for staff. Following Davidson's departure to UBC, the Head Gardener, who had trained at the Kew Royal Botanic Gardens in England, maintained a fine tradition of planting trees which would grow to impressive sizes to complement the buildings and create a sense of calm in a naturally therapeutic setting. Essondale was originally designed to care for 1800 patients but by the 1950s, over 4000 patients were receiving care from a staff of 2000.

More recent trends in mental health care, based on the wildly optimistic belief that modern drugs would simply eliminate mental health problems, have resulted in the downsizing of Riverview and the concomitant increase in the number of homeless mentally-ill people living on the mean streets of downtown Vancouver. Despite this dismal failure, the province intends to completely close Riverview Hospital by this summer. Last November, the closure of the Valleyview facility at Riverview, where patients suffering from dementia received assessment and care, resulted in such patients piling up in the hallways of the emergency ward at the Royal Columbian Hospital. Many people would argue mental health care facilities are still much needed at Riverview which, after all, is a centrally-located venue in Metro Vancouver well-designed to provide such care in healing and restorative surroundings.

Nonetheless, the future use of Riverview is now very much up for grabs. Prior to planning for future uses, the province is presently undertaking a heritage conservation process for Riverview. Public input regarding this process will be sought at local meetings anticipated in late May and early June (see [www.bmn.bc.ca](http://www.bmn.bc.ca) for more information). The goal of a heritage planning process is to evaluate the conservation worthiness of a site; this is intended, in turn, to form the basis for the sustainability and

longevity of a historic resource. All those who care about Riverview's heritage contributions to this community as well as its future uses should make every effort to ensure their participation in this important evaluation process. The next few months will be a critical planning period for the future of Riverview. Information about upcoming public tree and heritage building tours at Riverview to learn more about the site is available at [www.rhcs.org](http://www.rhcs.org).