

Main Street Canada: Conservation in Small Town Downtown

Occasional Paper No. 15

**by Gordon W. Fulton
1986**

The Institute of Urban Studies





THE UNIVERSITY OF
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MAIN STREET CANADA: CONSERVATION IN SMALL TOWN DOWNTOWN

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PREFACE

The University of Winnipeg was the location of a major national urban studies conference, hosted by the Institute of Urban Studies in August 1985. The "Canadian Urban Studies Conference" addressed the general theme of "The Canadian Urban Experience - Past and Present." More than ninety specialists spoke during forty separate sessions on such topics as housing and the built environment, economic and community development, planning and urban form, women and the urban environment, and urban government and politics.

This publication is a result of the Canadian Studies Conference. The Institute of Urban Studies is publishing many of the papers presented at the conference in the Institute's publication series. Some of the papers will also appear in the scholarly journal, the Urban History Review/Revue d'histoire urbaine and in book form.

This conference represented a major effort on the part of the Institute of Urban Studies in terms of fulfilling its role as a national centre of excellence in the urban studies and housing fields.

Alan F.J. Artibise
Director



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1.0 A PRESERVATION PRIMER

Historic preservation as we know it has come a long way. In the not-too-distant past preservation in Canada conjured up images of North West Mounted Police forts, mansions and house museums. All were in some way related to events and people, not to any intrinsic architectural value the building or fort or even the locale or town might have had. As it happens, important Canadians tended to inhabit or build important buildings, so preservation became associated with high-style architecture.

To provide a rationale for preserving these monuments to the past leaders of Canadian politics, business and culture, a mandate was created to use these sites as tools to educate the Canadian public about their esteemed predecessors. Parks Canada, keepers of the past in this country, took this didactic approach and developed it to its maximum; in Dawson City, for example, the past was not only preserved as a teaching tool, it was recreated in large chunks to better explain the history of the gold rush. Entire buildings, long-since departed, were rebuilt to serve the needs of the site interpreters and to flesh out the streetscapes needed to explain the who, what, when, where and why of this chapter of Canadian history.

This idea of public education is a good one; education is an essential tool of preservation, whether in the old school of associative recognition or the emerging school of intrinsic or architectural merit. We'll return to this idea of education as a tool to preservation after looking at some selected preservation options in Canada.

2.0 INTO THE MAINSTREAM

If you were to sum up the preservation movement of the past few years in Canada, you might say it was growing, both in the public and private sector. It was also characterized by substantial expense and conflict (it seemed preservation always resulted in or was a result of conflict). If not for its inherent appeal and good sense the movement would have died ten years ago. But the fact that it is still alive, growing moreover, bodes well for its future - or reflects poorly on its competition, contemporary architecture. Yet when preservation comes head-to-head with new buildings, preservation tends to lose more battles than it wins. We are often left with artifacts, or with token gestures to the past, as in the Cornwall Centre in Regina, where a slice off an old temple bank facade was mounted in the shopping centre as a misplaced metaphor for preservation.

In the very recent past, preservation has moved away from this artifactual or archival approach to the past. It has, more or less, moved into the mainstream of everyday life. The move to a preservation ethic can be seen as partly a rejection of the sterility of the modern movement of the past four decades, where machine and sheen reigned supreme, partly a longing for our collective roots, and partly economics, now that new construction has become as expensive as renovation. It is a very strange set of bedfellows.

3.0 THE MALLING OF CANADA

Tying preservation to real-life economics and commerce has resulted in some awkward marriages. The attempts by well-meaning but misguided individuals to capitalize on the marketability of heritage preservation has littered our cities with monuments to false history, and rude juxtapositions purporting to give us "the best of new and old." Architects are to blame for some of this, but planners, civic

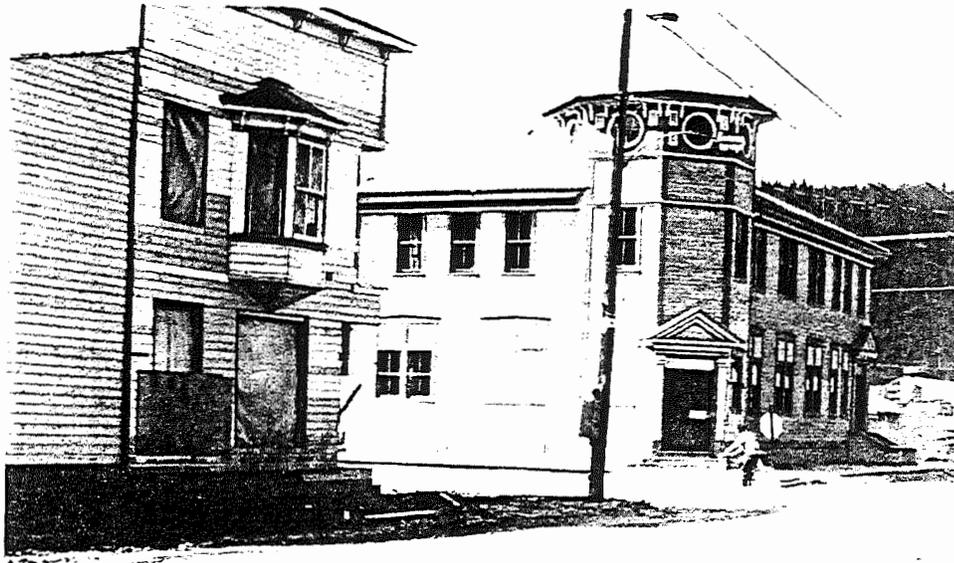


FIGURE 1. Dawson City, Yukon. Restoration, renovation and construction are all tools used in the public education process.

SOURCE: Heritage Canada.

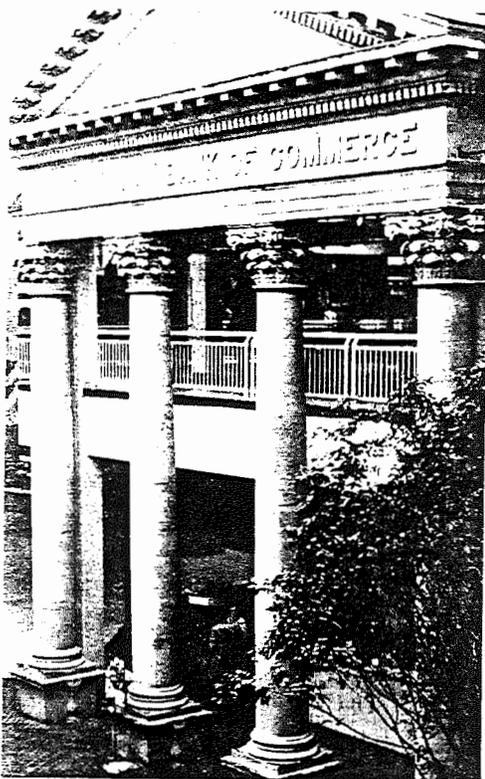


FIGURE 2. Cornwall Centre, Regina. A slice of history was erected in this shopping centre in downtown Regina: a misplaced metaphor for preservation.

SOURCE: Heritage Canada.



FIGURE 3. Sparks Street Mall, Ottawa. The original Canadian pedestrian mall, replete with people-place furniture, hardware, pavers and sculpture.
SOURCE: Heritage Canada.



FIGURE 4. Victoriaville Mall, Thunder Bay. The mall as an unfriendly alien, killing business in a donut-shaped ring around its blank exterior walls.
SOURCE: Heritage Canada.

officials and businesspeople are not blameless. For them a favourite past-time has been the malling of Canada: turning downtown business streets into pedestrian malls (a reaction to the shopping centre syndrome of car/people segregation). The buzz-word of the 1960s, 1970s, and even 1980s has been "people-places," as if people did not inhabit downtown before the banishment of the auto.

So from coast to coast you can find the ubiquitous pedestrian mall. The first was Sparks Street Mall in Ottawa. It was run on a seasonal basis from 1960 to 1965, modelled on a Toledo, Ohio precedent. The full-blown version, replete with people-place furniture, hardware, pavers and sculptures, was opened in just in time for the Canada Day Centennial in 1967. In the next decade most larger cities pedestrianized some shopping area. The malls tended to gravitate to the older areas of the cities, the areas with a high concentration of so-called heritage buildings. Malls like the Stephen Avenue Mall in Calgary or the Sparks Street Mall in Ottawa were not quite streets (no cars); not quite parks (no escapism). Other cities tried variations on the theme; Vancouver's Granville Street Mall allowed buses and taxis to mingle with the pedestrians.

The pedestrian malls were not the total successes anticipated by their proponents. A certain amount of friction existed in some malls between the merchants, who felt the loss of automobile traffic hurt business, and the people-place people, who appreciated the breath of fresh air a mall allowed downtown. The solution struck upon by some cities was to make the street a real mall, in the suburban shopping mall sense. Ottawa's Rideau Street Mall enclosed the sidewalks in metal and glass tunnels, thus providing that mall amenity, shelter. It was painfully obvious months after completion that this expensive solution only served to cut the sidewalk off from the street and buildings above the canopy level, and to function as a glorified bus shelter on a transit corridor.

Thunder Bay went one step further. In downtown Fort William the main intersection was covered and transformed into the Victoriaville Mall. The form of the suburban shopping centre was created holus-bolus, but without the critical store mix, promotional expertise and parking lost. The Victoriaville Mall also turned its back on the rest of downtown, killing businesses in a donut-shaped ring around its blank exterior walls. At this level of intervention, we have a costly solution to an undefined problem. Costly in dollars, and costly in social implications.

4.0 THE HISTO-MALLS

This sampling of downtown malling has dealt with the peripheral aspects of heritage buildings. A more blatantly historic route to revitalizing a shopping area has been successful, in some limited ways, in other cities. The grand-daddies of "histo-malls" in Canada were Toronto's Yorkville and Vancouver's Gastown. Yorkville's history was all but erased in the attempt to uncover it, and Gastown was overwrought (if bricks and lampposts are good, thousands of brick pavers and hundreds of lampposts must be great). Yet the areas were economically revitalized and some sense of history (albeit altered) has survived. The Gastown model, now 15 years old, has persisted with the recent bricking and lamping of Winnipeg's Old Market Square.

But something snaps in otherwise sane people when it comes to selling history. The tendency to create and impose a theme seems almost irresistible. It's as if real history isn't good enough, or exotic enough, or real enough. Small towns seem particularly susceptible to theme development; Kimberley, BC went Bavarian a few years ago. Battleford, Saskatchewan improved on their dowdy Victorian/Edwardian roots by going Wild West. Their false-fronted cedar sided buildings, fronted by hitching posts, harkened to the west of Hollywood, not Canada.



FIGURE 5. Battleford Saskatchewan. The theme village (Hollywood Wild West), where more than occasionally a discouraging word is heard.

SOURCE: Harld D. Kalman, Ottawa.



FIGURE 6. Windsor, Nova Scotia. Appropriate technologies are used in this community's Main Street revitalization.

SOURCE: Heritage Canada.



FIGURE 7. Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan. The strongest ally of revitalization through preservation has been the local business person and merchant, whose entrepreneurial spirit is ideally suited to the grass-roots process.

SOURCE: Heritage Canada.



FIGURE 8. Nelson, B.C. A long-dormant bicycle race through downtown Nelson was revived as part of the revitalization process. Revitalization must not be limited to physical improvements; it must also address cultural and financial identities.

SOURCE: Heritage Canada.

5.0 THE SMALL TOWN SHAKEDOWN

From coast to coast, big city and small town, people have been grappling with this oil-and-water mixture of business/progress and preservation/history. On Main Street Canada, we have seen numerous small towns trying to be something else, overlooking their own identity. Seeing small town Saskatchewan, with its wide main street, low frame buildings and table-top terrain, trying to emulate the narrow-streeted, stone-fronted towns of southern Ontario underlines the importance of building on a town's own identity, heritage and traditions. The trick is to do this in the real-world economics of small towns.

Luckily for us in the preservation world and the business world, a unique identity sells. In a growing number of places, suburban shopping centres - traditionally on the cutting edge of retailing - are emulating some of the more salient aspects of small villages. Burlington's Village Square, for example, has created the ambiance of a quaint brick village to gain that all-important unique identity to set it apart from the pack. That the result is more a caricature than an accurate copy is irrelevant in the business world; the caricature is more essentially "small town" than a real small town (this is the lesson taught by Disneyland).

The astute entrepreneur sees a window of opportunity on the horizon. Why build a theme village from scratch when Canada is brimming with real little towns and villages desperately seeking economic salvation. The towns want to preserve a certain ambiance and lifestyle, but realize economic health is vital to survival. The entrepreneur wants to move into a venture with a built-in identity which he can exploit, and needs enthusiastic non-confrontational citizens. The two parties, small town citizens and entrepreneurs, turn out to be striving for similar goals. It is often a very small and uncompromising step for each to come to the aid of the other.

6.0 REVITALIZATION THROUGH PRESERVATION

This is the crux of the main street movement in Canada. It is both possible and desirable to have economic health and a unique identity - a heritage - in small town Canada. Business/progress and preservation/history in fact mix very well. Self-identity, self-sufficiency and self-preservation are business and cultural objectives in small town Canada. Putting it all together, we have the potential to help small town Canada solidify its cultural identity through that powerful medium, the dollar, and of enhancing the community with two incentives: pride of place and economic strength. With virtually no conflicts.

This concept of revitalization through preservation has been tested in various towns and cities throughout the country. Main street "coordinators," akin to mall managers, have opened offices on the main streets of towns and set about to rekindle the entrepreneurial spirit of the merchants and focus the grass roots skills of the citizens on the problems of apathy and lack of confidence. The coordinators' tools are the towns' identity and history. Revitalization methodology is based on appropriate technologies scaled to local capabilities. And a guiding philosophy is that you shouldn't fix what isn't broken.

To maximize the tool of local identity, the coordinator plays the role of educator. This is familiar ground for the preservationist, and is not altogether unknown by the entrepreneur. The coordinator educates the businessperson to the past patterns of his or her customers; to the local tried-and-found-true architectural rules of thumb (sign placement, building materials and techniques); to the historical marketing strategies that may have potential in the modern marketplace. In this way the best of a hundred or more years of experience can be capitalized upon in the 1980s.

7.0 SEEN ONE, SEEN THEM ALL?

Stephen Leacock was not particularly concerned that his readers may never had seen Mariposa, his model Canadian small town, "for if you know Canada at all, you are probably well acquainted with a dozen towns like it." This we now know not to be true. Each town in Canada has a unique identity, and no doubt Mariposians would be the first to expound on the virtues and characteristics their town held to be uniquely their own. Preservation of these virtues is now being seen as good business, particularly in the heart of town, downtown, where "On Main Street itself are a number of buildings of extraordinary importance." Conservation and reuse of these buildings is proving in the 1980s to be a successful tool in the small town struggle for self-identity, self-sufficiency and self-preservation.

