

# Heritage Conservation Dis

The numbers are in and the news is good: Heritage Conservation Districts (HCDs) work. For nearly 30 years, dozens of Ontario neighbourhoods have been designated as HCDs. Supporters hoped this would solve concerns raised by both heritage advocates and critics. The trouble was, no one knew whether or not the designations were effective. Now, a new University of Waterloo study documents that HCDs have exceeded expectations.

“The most important thing in the Heritage Conservation District Study Summary Report 2009 is that HCDs work the way they are supposed to. They’re popular with the people who live in them, and we need more of them,”

said Prof. Robert Shipley, who heads the Heritage Resource Centre at the University of Waterloo.



# tricts Work: Proof at Last

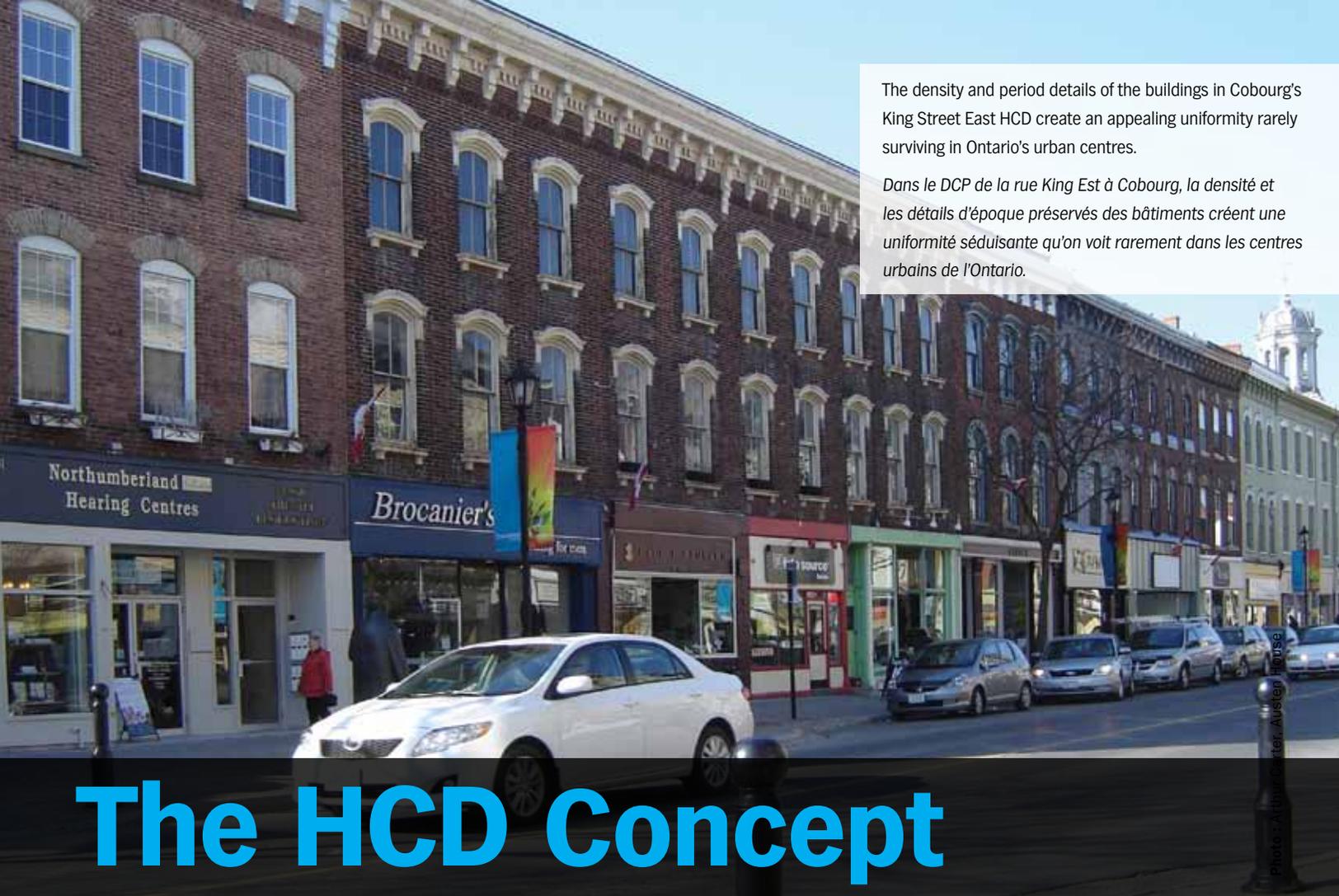
by Sheila Ascroft

Photos courtesy of Heritage Resource Centre, University of Waterloo



A residential section of Niagara-on-the-Lake's Queen and Picton Streets HCD, designated in 1986.

*Une section résidentielle du DCP des rues Queen et Picton de Niagara-on-the-Lake désigné en 1986.*



The density and period details of the buildings in Cobourg's King Street East HCD create an appealing uniformity rarely surviving in Ontario's urban centres.

Dans le DCP de la rue King Est à Cobourg, la densité et les détails d'époque préservés des bâtiments créent une uniformité séduisante qu'on voit rarement dans les centres urbains de l'Ontario.

# The HCD Concept

Enacted in 1975, the *Ontario Heritage Act* enables local governments to create HCDs, which expand the idea of heritage preservation to include not just individual buildings but entire neighbourhoods. This includes the spaces between the buildings, the surrounding natural and man-made landscape, roads, footpaths, fences, lighting, street furniture and other features.

HCD designation allows municipal governments to protect and enhance the special character of groups of properties in an area. The types of districts cover the gamut of properties, including commercial, residential and rural.

Any alterations, additions or demolitions within an HCD require a permit from the municipality and are assessed according to an established district plan.

In his *Globe and Mail* "Architourist" column, Dave LeBlanc wrote that HCDs are not intended to prevent development

but rather "take the features people love about their particular neighbourhood—whether the gingerbread and gables of Cabbagetown or the atomic-age rooflines of Don Mills—and create a set of bylaws to ensure they stay that way. That stability in turn usually raises property values. Sounds like a sound investment to me."

## Volunteer-Driven Research

Although many advocates have long felt that HCDs have a positive economic effect, heritage activists had little hard evidence to back this up. Professor Shipley sought a solution with a comprehensive study of 32 of Ontario's oldest HCDs in 21 different municipalities.

Together with the Architectural Conservancy of Ontario (ACO), Community Heritage Ontario, Heritage Ottawa and funding from the Ontario Trillium Foundation, Shipley and the

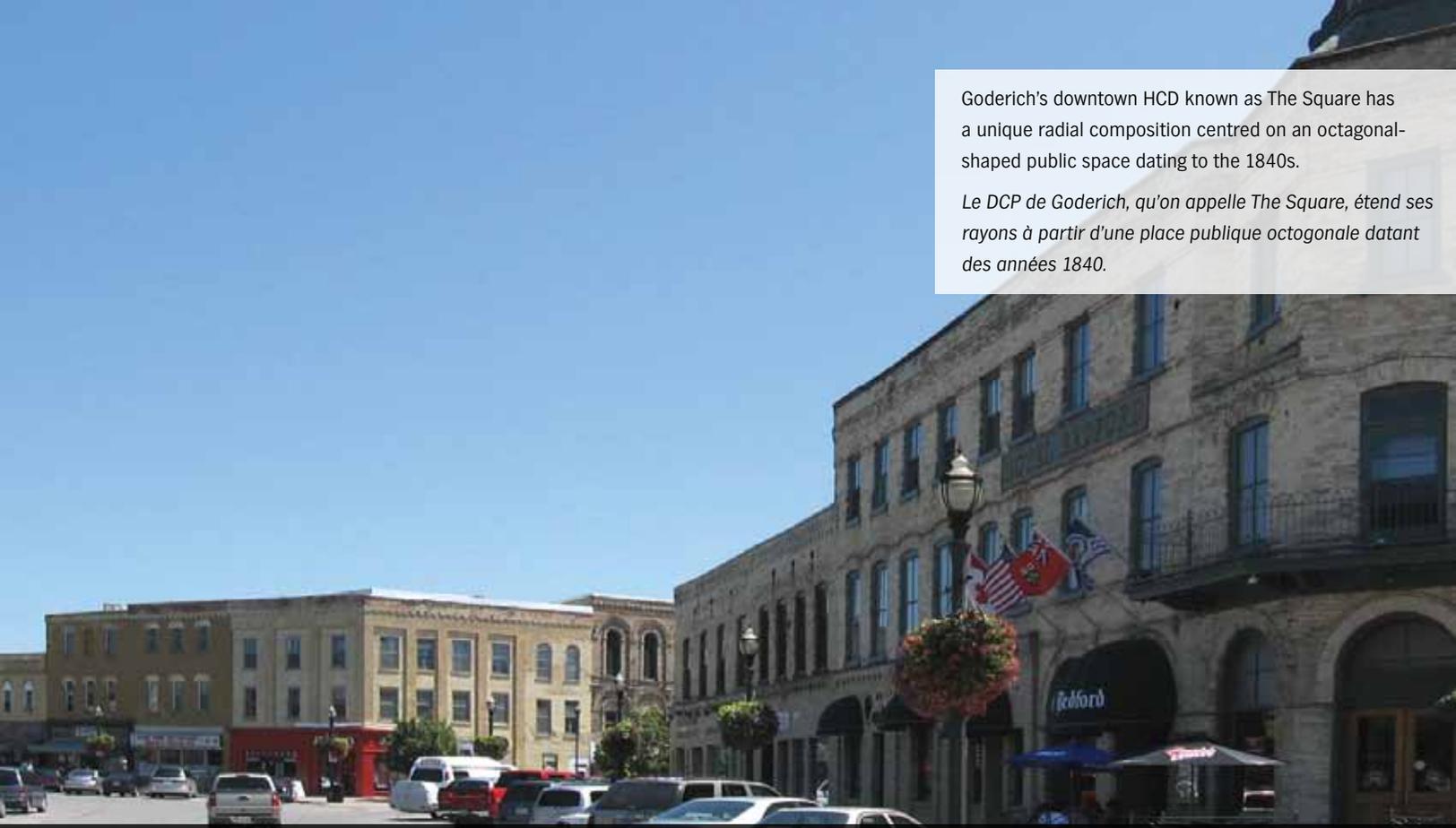
Heritage Resource Centre launched a major volunteer effort involving 11 heritage organizations and committees. The project employed 84 volunteers, including students and young professionals from the University of Waterloo, the Willowbank School of Restoration Arts and Carleton University.

"I hope that the data we collected and analyzed will be valuable for the heritage community. It's an example of how the heritage community functions from the grassroots," said project coordinator Kayla Jonas.

The study was based on 681 door-to-door surveys of HCD residents and property owners. In addition, key stakeholders were interviewed. Researchers also mapped land use, evaluated streetscapes and analyzed sales trends and property values. Data was collected on requests for alterations over the history of the HCDs.

Goderich's downtown HCD known as The Square has a unique radial composition centred on an octagonal-shaped public space dating to the 1840s.

*Le DCP de Goderich, qu'on appelle The Square, étend ses rayons à partir d'une place publique octogonale datant des années 1840.*



# Myths Busted

The study's results didn't surprise those involved in the districts.

"The study confirms that people enjoy the benefits of living in HCDs. 'Happiness' ratings and property values were higher where controls were more stringent. The converse was also true: where enforcement was lax and inappropriate alterations permitted, property values were lower," said Catherine Nasmith, past president of the Architectural Conservancy of Ontario and publisher of *Built Heritage News*.

Shipley predicts this will help soothe the resistance that some property owners continue to feel about newly proposed HCDs.

"Some people worry that if their house is designated or if they live in an HCD, they won't be able to alter their house or the process will take too long," he said. In fact, the report shows HCD residents don't find approval processes to be onerous and the average approval time for property alterations was under a month.

As well, the report's hard numbers on sales trends and property values put to rest misinformation from the real estate industry. Realtors sometimes claim heritage designation lowers property values because the rules may impede what owners can do. The report documents that where the heritage rules are strictly enforced, residential real estate values often go up.

In fact, HCD property values tend to rise faster than in surrounding neighbourhoods and be less vulnerable to downturns in the market.

The report also shows that most people prefer living in an HCD over a regular neighbourhood. Over 75 per cent of HCD residents surveyed reported being "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with living or owning property in such a district.

However, Shipley notes that HCDs are not as popular among commercial property owners because commercial districts have not seen the same increase in property values.



Kayla Jones and Robert Shipley of the Heritage Resource Centre.



# Recommendations

The report has three general recommendations for the future:

- Create more districts because they are successful.
- Continue monitoring and evaluating districts, using the study as a baseline.
- Publicize the Ontario Municipal Board ruling that pre-2005 Heritage District Plans are valid and district plans take precedence over other municipal bylaws.

The report also recommends that:

- All districts establish district plans;
- The provincial government create a special fund to help municipalities update district plans;

- The roles of the municipal heritage committees and heritage staff be clarified (they should set policies, not just administer them);
- Real estate agents be required to inform buyers about existing HCDs and their procedures; and
- Municipalities protect parks and open spaces as part of districts.

Education is another key recommendation. The public, real estate industry and municipal councils need to be better informed of the existence and benefits of HCD designation.

Robert Shipley adds that HCDs should be vigilant to ensure they stay relevant. "HCD plans need to be periodically

reviewed and updated, perhaps every five to seven years to determine if they are working as intended," he said.

## Praise for the Report

The report's backers are not trying to suggest that HCDs are a magic bullet to solve all heritage challenges.

"The Heritage Conservation District is one weapon in the preservationists' arsenal and there can never be too many of them," Nasmith said.

However, by backing up claims about the benefits of heritage designation, the report could play a major role in defining the face of Ontario's architectural culture.



Protecting the scenic rural landscape of the Credit River Valley is a primary objective of the Churchville HCD, a historic village now part of Brampton.

*La protection du panorama rural de la vallée de la rivière Credit est un des principaux objectifs du DCP de Churchville, village historique qui fait aujourd'hui partie de la ville de Brampton.*

# Ontario HCD Network

The Architectural Conservancy of Ontario is seeking funding to support the creation of the Ontario Heritage Conservation District Network. This would offer mutual support for those with a direct interest in heritage conservation districts and provide them with a coordinated advocacy voice.

The Ontario HCD Network would:

- share individual HCD concerns, initiatives and achievements within the conservation community;
- engage with the OMB and with politicians—from local councillors to the provincial minister of culture—whose decisions impinge on heritage;
- ensure that HCD guidelines are backed by municipal and provincial policy and that they are “in sync” with official plans;
- generate publicity for HCD causes and achievements;
- provide HCD property owners with advice and information on heritage conservation and retrofitting; and
- educate the real estate industry, as well as existing and potential homeowners, about the economic value of conserving the significant heritage and cultural elements of an HCD.

“I hope heritage activists will feel inspired because they now have facts to support heritage districts and can be more assertive in their own communities. We’re so used to losing heritage battles. It’s discouraging. Here we have proof that heritage districts really do work. I hope it brings more momentum into our communities,” Shipley said.

“Word is out that this is a good way of preserving neighbourhoods,” he added. “You may not be able to save the whole town, but you can save where you live.”

For more information on the Summary Report, and 26 individual HCD reports, visit [www.fes.uwaterloo.ca/research/hrc/projects/index.html](http://www.fes.uwaterloo.ca/research/hrc/projects/index.html).

*Ottawa-based freelancer Sheila Ascroft has been writing for various HCF publications since the last century! The former journalist regularly appears in the Hēritage magazine, Ottawa Outdoor Magazine and womenscycling.ca. You can contact her at: [sheilaascroft@rogers.com](mailto:sheilaascroft@rogers.com).*

For more information about the proposed Ontario HCD Network, contact ACO board member and Harbord Village HCD representative Richard Longley at [longley\\_fovea@sympatico.ca](mailto:longley_fovea@sympatico.ca).