

Canada's Decommissioned Military Bases

by Albert Warson

Canada's military history is perpetuated behind thick, crenellated walls punctuated by cannons poking out of expertly restored, vaguely romantic but decidedly heritage-quality forts strung across the country. Other military heritage sites include Martello towers, citadels, armouries and, more recently, hangars and radar stations.

As long as there is a Parks Canada agency, the historic appeal of forts and fortresses will hopefully be preserved as the markers of battles between British and French armies for territory and colonial domination, or skirmishes with the Americans during the Revolutionary War of 1776 and the War of 1812. Their preservation, as part of the national heritage infrastructure that informs succeeding generations of students and captivates an endless stream of visitors is, we like to think, assured.

And as long as there is a Department of National Defence (DND), then operationally obsolete, costly military bases across Canada will continue to be closed and/or merged as federal government defence priorities and budget allocations tilt toward tactical mobility.

Unlike the centuries-old forts, most of Canada's functioning military bases are of early 20th-century, Second World War and "Cold War" 1950s vintage. The heritage significance of these places often has less to do with the architecture—for generally the buildings are plain-looking utilitarian structures—than with the associated values of the site. Only the best-of-the-best examples of the modest "cookie-cutter" houses, the dining halls, workshops, gymnasiums, small stores, hangars and chapels are recognized for their heritage merit. They are, nonetheless, part of the legacy of military communities secluded behind high fences and guard posts, and governed by strict codes of conduct by which men and women were taught to wage war or keep the peace around the world.

By virtue of their typology and use more than their age or design, many of the buildings on the bases are designated for their heritage significance. Physical evidence of Canada's modern military history would otherwise be frittered away over time, as DND continues to decommission and sell military bases.

DND's most avid buyer is the Toronto-based Canada Lands Company (CLC), a self-financing Crown corporation which disposes of federal surplus property. Since March 1997, CLC has paid \$81 million for 11 former bases: four in Halifax, two in the Montréal area, and the rest in Moncton, London, Calgary, Edmonton and Chilliwack, B.C., totalling 2,429 acres.

Heritage buildings in Canada are often recycled as museums, offices, retail environments and, more recently, loft-style condominiums, but are less frequently incorporated within large mixed-use communities of the kind CLC develops. Some are an impressive, award-winning combination of military heritage, new development and, especially, adaptive reuse—an officers' mess as sales centre, commanding officer's house as a new subdivision's administrative office, private schools in renovated old buildings, hospital and dental clinics as mixed retail and residential development.

The possibilities for development are unlimited, on open tracts of land large enough to have accommodated paratrooper air drops, military training exercises and mock battles—with the distinct marketing advantage of proximity to cities and towns that have gradually grown to flank, if not engulf, them.

Gordon McIvor, CLC's Vice-President of Public and Government Affairs, says the company will have invested about \$200 million by 2010 on rezoning, environmental remediation and new infrastructure for the bases, to prepare lots for sale to builders. He estimates there is probably as much surplus DND property that CLC might acquire as it has so far, including CFB Rockcliffe in Ottawa, Jericho Garrison in Vancouver, and Shannon Park at CFB Halifax, all with potential for some heritage designation. DND is

second only to Parks Canada for land ownership, with land, naval and air bases, armouries and other facilities from coast to coast.

There is nothing arbitrary about historical designation on the bases. Before disposing of any lands that include buildings 40 years old or older, DND must initiate a Federal Heritage Buildings Review Office (FHBRO) assessment that will evaluate the buildings as to their heritage significance.

In the case of buildings that are already officially designated, DND must ensure that new owners receive the relevant heritage character statements and copies of the FHBRO building reports. According to Fran MacBride, Senior Realty Advisor on Policy Matters at DND Ottawa, "We advise FHBRO when we're disposing of heritage buildings, and it is up to FHBRO to specify whether they must be protected or not."

"CLC makes a commitment to the federal government that it will make its best efforts to preserve the heritage aspects," Ms. MacBride says. But DND isn't Parks Canada and its forts. There is a limit to the heritage preservation potential on its properties, military and otherwise, which makes it easy for CLC to declare itself "committed to demonstrating sensitivity to heritage" through the "proactive recognition of the relevant aesthetic and economic benefits of heritage." Arguably, the aesthetic benefits of many heritage buildings on military bases are not as obvious as on other sites; it is often the associated values—and not the architecture per se—that determines heritage significance. The financial benefits of marketing their redevelopment, however, are in the millions of dollars. Nor is it giving much away for CLC to state that its policy covers "inherited objects, traditions and other meaningful linkages to the past and encompassing historic events, artefacts, emotive attachments to the site, geographic features, buildings and other human-made physical structures."

Nonetheless, the intent of CLC's commitment is clearly stated on its Web site (www.clc.ca <<http://www.clc.ca>>) as follows: "While heritage can sometimes be viewed as restrictive to development, Canada Lands will endeavour to realize the intrinsic and economic benefits of a property's heritage as a unique sense of place which can be used to promote public education opportunities."

Strictly speaking, CLC is not bound by Treasury Board's heritage buildings policy because, once sold by DND, heritage buildings go out of the federal inventory. That doesn't exempt CLC from provincial and municipal legislation regarding heritage issues, although so far the other two levels of government haven't exercised their authority.

The bottom line is really the bottom line. CLC weighs the price it pays for properties against its cabinet-directed mandate to succeed financially. This reality dictates that heritage issues are respected, providing they don't come with a financial loss.

Mr. McIvor says preservation of military properties was one of three mandates in the public interest that were established when CLC was reactivated in 1995; the other two were environmental responsibility and responsiveness to First Nations' land claims.

Kathy Milson, President and CEO of CLC, acknowledges that responsibility. "We realize a lot of the properties we purchase from DND have very significant sentimental value for the people who lived and worked on them, both for soldiers and people who lived around the base and who took great pride in having them there," she says. "We commemorate names of battles on streets and create commemorative walkways with plaques and monuments. We also have one of the best military museums in the country [Museum of the Regiments] on the former Canadian Forces Base (CFB) Calgary."

Garrison Woods, the first phase of a 10-year-long, 450-acre residential and commercial development recently completed on the decommissioned Calgary base, honours regiments that called the base home and fought in First World War battles. "People like to live near a sense of place, one that has a history and a soul," says Mr. McIvor.

Military Family Legacy

In adjacent British Columbia, the Department of Canadian Heritage classified two buildings at the former CFB Chilliwack. One was the Officers' Mess described by Al Dempsey, the Project Manager, as a "beautiful old building with a roof truss in the dining room made out of dismantled train trestle beams"; the other is a community centre.

The former Royal Canadian Engineers base was used in the 1940s to train all military engineers. In 1967 it became a Canadian Forces' Officers Candidate School. Before it was decommissioned in 1997, the base included two church chapels (since demolished), a general store and fire hall (still standing), a Francophone school building and a YM-YWCA-managed recreation centre. Mr. Dempsey, who served on the base and retired as a lieutenant-colonel with the military engineers, says that, rather than duplicate what is being done in Calgary, it is the military family that will be commemorated on this former base.

Michael Von Hausen, a registered planner and landscape architect, and Principal, MVH Urban Planning and Design, Inc., White Rock, B.C., whose firm is master planning the 153-acre Chilliwack base redevelopment with Ankenman Associates Architects Inc., explains, "We want to develop a legacy path with gateways, lighting, signage, and other landmarks along a commemorative walk that focuses on the family behind the troops."

Mr. Von Hausen notes that the master plan calls for "reusing or restoring existing residential, commercial, and institutional buildings where fiscally responsible and practical." They include the former fire hall, supply depot and other offices, although demand for housing or other mixed uses could change that plan.

Remembering William Antrobus Griesbach

CLC's latest base acquisition, in February 2003, was the 620-acre former CFB Griesbach in Edmonton. Tony Druett, CLC's Director, Development and Engineering, says 750 housing units, industrial buildings and warehouses, barracks, Officers' Mess, a military prison and more came with the purchase. He expects about 400 of the housing units will be refurbished, and construction of up to 4,150 new homes will begin this spring. A 25-acre village centre with a 15,000-square-metre supermarket and other commercial, retail and business premises will also be built.

According to Mr. Druett, of the many buildings on the site only two are worth preserving—a kindergarten to grade nine school housing nearly 300 students (leased to the local school board), and an office for the brigadier general commanding Canadian Forces in western Canada (leased to DND for at least another five years).

Looking to find the best examples of building types for designation, the FHBRO process can let many good-quality buildings fall through the cracks. In the case of Griesbach, 1950s Cold War-era land barrack buildings, designed by prominent architects hired by DND to create a standard type, have not qualified for official heritage designation. Their heritage value lies not so much in their architecture, but in what they reveal about how the military ran itself at the time.

A sculpture honouring William Antrobus Griesbach, namesake of the base, will be unveiled on the property next summer. Mr. Griesbach, a lawyer, was Mayor of Edmonton in 1906, then a Member of Parliament and a senator. His military career stretched from the Boer War in South Africa to the First World War in 1914, when he commanded Edmonton's 49th Battalion during an attack on Vimy Ridge, the defence of Arras and operations at Passchendaele and Mons. He was promoted to Brigadier-General in 1917 and died in 1945.

From Hangars To Movie Studios

On the other side of the country, CLC acquired the former Saint-Hubert Garrison on Montréal's South Shore, in Longueuil, in 1998. This former base appears to have slipped passed a federal heritage assessment. Basil Cavis, CLC's General Manager, Quebec Region, says that, for whatever reason, FHBRO never reviewed the site. Nor can FHBRO find any record of an assessment having taken place. Despite the oversight, heritage characteristics appear to have survived the decommissioning process. The CLC has sold most of the buildings on the site and 171 of its 186 acres to various companies. Mr. Cavis describes Saint-Hubert as "a small city within a city, with hangars, an Officers' Mess, residential units, gymnasium and other facilities."

Two movie production companies have spent more than \$30 million to turn truck repair hangars into sound stages and studios. The municipal police department, an airplane parts manufacturer, high-tech and other research laboratories and a private school are among the new owners of the old military buildings.

In early November, a Montréal developer bought what was left of the unsold property to build new housing and has yet to decide whether to demolish the remaining properties.

Meanwhile, the former air base CFB Downsview in north Toronto—the most prominent military station in Canada, large enough to accommodate the multitudes that came to attend a papal visit and a Rolling Stones concert—is on the verge of becoming Canada's largest urban park. The CLC launched a design competition a few years ago to redevelop the base as Parc Downsview Park, but the terms of reference provided to the landscape architects did not address the heritage buildings on the site.

The Toronto Aerospace Museum is currently housed in the 1929 brick-and-steel facility that was once home to Canada's most famous aircraft manufacturer, de Havilland Aircraft of Canada Ltd. Although the museum is now confirmed as part of Parc Downsview Park by the design team, the fate of the other 60- to 75-year-old historic aviation buildings at the site has yet to be decided.

Albert Warson is a Toronto-based freelance writer specializing in architecture and real estate development-related subjects. He contributes to The Globe and Mail, Toronto Star, National Post and magazines in the United States and Canada.