

City Of Québec Awarded Prince Of Wales Prize 400 Years Of History And Heritage

by Odile Roy

The Heritage Canada Foundation has awarded the prestigious Prince of Wales prize to the City of Québec for 2003 for its array of forceful tools and incentives to protect and enhance its heritage.



In 2008, the City of Québec will celebrate the 400th anniversary of its founding, making it the oldest permanent settlement north of Mexico. Four hundred years of history have left their mark throughout the entire city's architectural and urban landscape. These influences constitute a rich heritage that is known and recognized around the world, and preserving it is essential.

The City of Québec's heritage is not confined to Old Québec; it also includes the districts of Sillery, Charlesbourg and Beauport, designated by the provincial government in the 1960s. Since that time, a greater understanding of the value of approaching conservation holistically has emerged. It is not just individual buildings that are identified for preservation, but public spaces, landmark features, visual perspectives and landscapes as well.

Stewardship of the urban and architectural heritage of Old Québec and the other three historic districts is an honour and a privilege that brings with it major responsibilities that citizens, the municipality and other levels of governments must share. The municipal government, as the guardian of this heritage, must define and disseminate a coherent vision of this historic city and its evolution. It must also ensure the quality of those developments that have an impact on the city and its buildings, while striking a balance between public and private interests.

To ensure the quality of these interventions, the City of Québec has several tools at its disposal.

- **The Commission On Town Planning And Conservation** This regulatory body, in existence since 1928, controls the architectural appearance and symmetry of buildings. The Commission is empowered to review and approve, or reject, any building construction, renovation or demolition in the four historic districts, in other older neighbourhoods in the city and with respect to any historic monuments and recognized natural sites.
- **Financial Assistance** The second tool is a financial assistance program made possible through an agreement with the provincial Ministry of Culture and Communications. Various grants are available to support the restoration, renovation, and recycling of buildings within the historic urban fabric, as well as new construction.
- **Intervention Guidelines** Lastly, the municipal government is making its expectations known through the publication of intervention guides. These guides lay down a set of principles that are at the foundation of the City's policy for interventions on both buildings and public spaces: conservation, continuity and consistency, knowledge, and collaboration.

In addition, the City is promoting heritage conservation through its own commitment to rehabilitate municipal property. Several public spaces have been redeveloped using existing historic elements for inspiration. That process involves redeveloping streets, burying power lines, and installing street furniture that integrates into the streetscape. The successful rehabilitation of the following three places are good examples: the Place de la Gare; the Chaussée des Écossais; and the Trait-Carré de Charlesbourg.

Beyond The Historic Districts: Urban Revitalization of Saint-Roch

Legally designating a historic district can unfortunately lead to the neglect of the heritage aspects of older outlying neighbourhoods, the “faubourgs” (suburbs). More recently, the heritage value that all districts contribute to the city’s urban culture has been recognized and their conservation seen as an important overall revitalization tool.

Just west of the historic centre, the community of Saint-Roch is Québec’s first faubourg, inhabited by artisans and labourers from 1745 on. Lumber industry labourers also settled here, and many naval shipyards were established along the Saint-Charles River at the beginning of the 19th century. Over time, this community became the manufacturing, financial and commercial hub of the entire city and remained so until the middle of the 20th century, when the outlying suburbs were developed.



In the early 1970s, thousands of citizens deserted the city core to live in the suburbs. Hundreds of commercial and administrative buildings were left empty and neglected. Poverty took hold in the community, along with crime and insecurity.

After 20 years of economic stagnation, deterioration of the urban fabric and much demolition, Saint-Roch has become a bustling community once again; its revitalization now seems irreversible. This recovery was made possible by the City holding firm to a specific development vision and maintaining a strong political will to revive the forgotten downtown.

“The modern approach we have taken, which involves respect for the community and its active elements, is a profound change in the downtown revitalization models that have prevailed in the West until recently,” explains Québec Mayor Jean-Paul L’Allier. “New buildings are welcome, but they must blend in with the urban fabric created by the configuration of the streets and the outline of surrounding buildings. Moreover, the revitalization effort will deal largely with consolidating commercial arteries and improving the quality of residential life.”

The focus of the strategy in 1992 was to establish the rules of the game and adopt a phased-in development approach. The creation of the Saint-Roch Garden was a symbolic first gesture: the restoration of a quality public space that has been neglected for years. Recycling a former factory (Dominion Corset) to house the Economic and Urban Development Centre and Université Laval’s School of Visual Arts put the revitalization players on centre stage.

Recognizing that it could not do it alone, the City convinced other government and private partners to invest in the community’s revitalization. The Complexe Méduse was formed, bringing together several professional cultural organizations through the joint financial involvement of the Canadian, Quebec and City governments. Other redevelopment includes the Laliberté Apartments, an adaptive reuse of the last great downtown department store, the upper floors of which were converted into dwellings. New construction includes the École nationale d’administration publique, the head office of the Université du Québec, the Télé-Université and, soon, the Institut national de recherche scientifique in Saint-Roch

Garden. In 1997, the City introduced the artists' workshops acquisition and renovation assistance program to reaffirm the community's cultural character. Since many artists had set up studio spaces in former factories and decommissioned warehouses, every effort was made to ensure that revitalization did not price them out of the area. The projects supported by this program (nearly 150 workshops) have given Saint-Roch the highest concentration of in-studio artists in North America. This is a unique experiment that several municipal stakeholders wish to draw on today. From an architectural perspective, the materials that architects used in recycling these buildings—such as galvanized steel or new concrete-based products—and the creative or traditional installation techniques used with them have set the pace for the new architectural expression in this community.

Grant and tax credit programs have encouraged private sector investment in the residential area. The City's goal with these programs has been the renovation and preservation of heritage buildings as well as the recycling of historic elements and introduction of compatible new construction. In 10 years, nearly 800 new dwelling units were created in the area. By transferring land and recyclable buildings to housing co-operatives, the City has also ensured that a portion of the new development would be for low-income housing. This strategy has resulted in a dynamic social mix in the downtown area.

The City's façade renovation program—aimed at improving commercial buildings and main streets—is encouraging investment from merchants. The most significant contribution to the commercial revitalization of the area, however, has been the redevelopment of Saint-Joseph Street. Lined with the first large stores built in the second half of the 19th century, the architectural richness of the façades reflected the prosperity of the retail sector. The exodus into the suburbs in the middle of the century and the construction of enormous shopping centres outside the downtown area in the 1960s drained the life from this unique commercial artery.

In the belief that they could turn this situation around, municipal authorities decided a little over 25 years ago to cover about half a kilometre of the street (five city blocks) with a roof structure. It quickly became apparent that the resulting huge indoor corridor was not a people-friendly place. After several studies and a public consultation, this ungainly structure was removed, revealing one of Québec's most beautiful churches while reconnecting the north and south parts of the community, the cliff and the river. The street re-emerged as a vibrant main street, enabling the residents to take back their community.

Barely 10 years later, it is evident that the Saint-Roch revitalization was a success. Five factors were essential to that success:

- A long-term vision and an action plan for the community that involved the resident population through a large public consultation process.
- The synergy that developed between the policy team and the public service responsible for designing and implementing the projects.
- A new social mix and image makeover. (Twenty years ago, most of the urban problems were concentrated in Saint-Roch, to the point where some people were afraid to venture there.)
- The support of the provincial government. The rehabilitation would not have been as dramatic without it.

- A planning vision that draws on local strengths and the authentic characteristics of the neighbourhood, rather than relying on what appear to be miracle solutions imported from elsewhere.

This approach to urban revitalization is reminiscent of “urban husbandry” described by Roberta B. Gratz in her book entitled *Cities Back from the Edge* (1998).

Beyond Urban Heritage: Natural Heritage

The interest in preserving historic landscapes and improving quality of life has evolved to include developing new approaches to reclaiming our natural heritage.

The renaturalization and clean-up project for the Saint-Charles River is a case in point. The river’s concrete banks in the downtown were removed and a more natural setting reintroduced. Animals have returned, as have people, owing to the recreational character of the site. At the summit of the Cartier-Brébeuf National Historic Site (where Jacques Cartier spent his first winter in Canada), nearly 500 metres of concrete wall gave way to lush vegetation, wetlands and a footpath with lookouts interspersed along the way.

Situated on the site of a former snow dump, the Arboretum has become a unique seven-hectare ecosystem in an urban setting. It plays a role in the popularization of botany and horticulture and is a major regional tourist attraction since it is adjacent to one of the oldest agricultural estates, the property of the Séminaire de Québec, the Domaine Maizerets and its Château Maizerets.

Finally, the City of Québec has drawn up an urban forest policy that regulates tree cutting and favours the maintenance of exceptional trees in an urban setting. It has also developed a master plan for the conservation of woodlands and natural environments.

No one could now deny that the preservation of architectural, urban and natural heritage is part of the City of Québec’s long-term development vision.

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