

Celebrating Our Architectural Heritage

by Carolyn Quinn

"I think it is so very important for the people of any city to come to know the historical and cultural significance of the buildings around them. Congratulations on a great idea."

So wrote one participant of the city of Ottawa's inaugural Doors Open event this past spring. Many more comments praising Doors Open have come back to organizers, not just in Ottawa, but in the other cities and towns across Ontario where the event has been hosted.

But the idea for Doors Open did not originate in Ottawa. Nor did it originate in Toronto, the first city in North America to successfully launch a Doors Open event in 2000. It began in Glasgow, Scotland, in 1990 as Doors Open Days and quickly expanded nation-wide under the overall co-ordination of The Scottish Civic Trust, evolving into Scotland's contribution to European Heritage Days, launched in 1991 as a Council of Europe initiative. (The international co-ordination of European Heritage Days is currently undertaken on behalf of the Council of Europe by Centro Nacional de Cultura in Portugal.) By 1998, 19 million people had visited some 28,000 sites, open during weekends in September, in 44 countries throughout Europe, making it the world's biggest festival of the built environment.

The event appears under various guises. Whether it is European Heritage Days, Heritage Open Days in England, London Open House Weekends, Doors Open Days in Scotland or just Doors Open, the concept remains the same. And it is a simple one: buildings of architectural and historic significance, most of which are not normally open to the public, open their doors for a day or a weekend. Many provide guided tours, special exhibits, displays and performances, while others just let the visitor enjoy wandering about—and without exception, it is all absolutely free.

The aim of Doors Open events is to facilitate people's understanding and enjoyment of their local architectural environment while encouraging awareness of their built heritage. Persuaded of the potential for increasing that awareness right across the country, the Heritage Canada Foundation is launching Doors Open Canada. The goal is to promote the concept of the event nation-wide and to inspire communities to organize their own Doors Open Canada programs. Heritage Canada's executive director

Brian Anthony sees it as a wonderful opportunity for generating community pride by heightening awareness of local heritage resources and ultimately increasing the desire for their preservation. "Doors Open events are primarily about communities celebrating their history through their built heritage—celebrating themselves, their own history and collective accomplishments."

Comments from participants reveal this sense of increased community pride.

"It was fun to play tourist in a city where you live and work every day, ... this tour filled me with a unique feeling of pride that I never felt before." (Toronto, 2000)

"Overall, this was one of the best experiences I have had during 30 years in the city. Once word gets around, it has the potential ... to provide Ottawans with a greater sense of appreciation of their city." (Ottawa, 2002)

"More than any other event that I've attended in the city, this one has gone the farthest toward building ... a sense of community." (Ottawa, 2002)

The immense popularity of these events reveals people's curiosity about buildings and about history. Heritage buildings are the cultural artefacts that surround us. And like all artefacts, they reveal something about our society, our values and our history—they remain the tangible evidence of our past. But unlike other artefacts found in museums and galleries, buildings are part of our everyday lives. They define our

living spaces. A Doors Open event captures our imagination by allowing us the opportunity of entering inside those spaces—to eagerly venture through doors and discover the inner workings of a place—why it is there, who designed and built it, its purpose today, its story within a neighbourhood, what secrets it may hold.

A heightened historical sensitivity to the built environment must be part of any successful development plans for our cities. As the future role of Canadian cities in our national economy continues to be debated, the objectives behind such catch phrases as "smart growth," "sustainable development," and "liveable communities," must pay more than lip service to the recognition and preservation of heritage buildings and the commitment to inspiring architecture. Doors Open events give voice to these ideals.

Doors Open first arrived in Canada three years ago through the efforts of a dedicated group in Toronto who attended a presentation on the success of the event in Scotland. In 1999, a visit to that country's Doors Open Days soon followed, setting the stage for the launch of Toronto's event the next year. The program was co-ordinated by the City of Toronto's Culture Division with the support of a Steering Committee organized by Heritage Toronto (see C. Nasmith, "Doors Open Spreads from Europe to Toronto," *Heritage*, Winter 2002). By 2002, the event had exploded with over 100 buildings and 130,000 visitors participating. Sites included such landmark buildings as the famous Victorian-era Don Jail, the 1892 Flatiron (Gooderham) Building, and that magnificent example of civil engineering, the R.C. Harris Filtration Plant National Historic Site. (For a detailed description of the Toronto event see John Sewell's *Doors Open Toronto: Illuminating the City's Great Spaces*, Knopf Canada, 2002.)

In 2001, other Ontario cities began organizing Doors Open programs—including Port Hope and Ottawa—and the Ontario Heritage Foundation soon followed with a Doors Open Ontario program aimed at widening the celebration of architecture and community throughout the province. From April to October, 2002, 17 cities and towns are organizing a Doors Open event, from the Coniagas Mine Shaft in Cobalt to the Hiram Walker Warehouse/Walkerville Brewing Company in Windsor.

The City of Ottawa's launch of its first Doors Open this past May saw 88 building owners and 60,000 visitors join in. The newly amalgamated city faced unique challenges as organizers worked to co-ordinate a selection of buildings balanced between the more urban/suburban parts of the city and the newer rural areas lying outside the greenbelt.

A group of volunteers got to work promoting the event in Ottawa, eventually meeting with Mayor Bob Chiarelli, who quickly saw the event's potential as a unifying force for the new city. It became a perfect vehicle for residents to discover and celebrate the divergent communities that Ottawa now comprises. "Doors Open connects our heritage and history to the people," stated Mayor Chiarelli. "A city with no heritage has no soul, and Doors Open allows us to connect with our heritage through the memories and stories of buildings that really belong to all of us."

As in Toronto and Kingston, the City of Ottawa committed staff and resources to the co-ordination of the event. Buildings ranged from outstanding examples of particular architectural styles, like the distinguished Art Deco Embassy of France or the unique early 20th-century modern design of St. Clare's Mission Church in the West Carleton area of the city. Others were selected for their unique functions, like the Fleet Street Water Pumping Station built in 1874, or the National Research Council Wind Tunnel. The Heritage Canada Foundation welcomed 1,200 visitors to its handsome new heritage home.

In the city of Guelph, Doors Open was a joint initiative between the Guelph Arts Council and the Local Architectural Conservation Advisory Committee (LACAC). As elsewhere, Doors Open proved a huge success. According to Arts Council executive director Sally Wismer, the prime motivation for the council's involvement was the opportunity to increase heritage awareness in the city as part of the celebration of Guelph's 175th Anniversary. Ms. Wismer noted that the success of the event exceeded their expectations and was a much easier sell than Discover Guelph:

Be A Tourist In Your Town, a less than successful event, also undertaken with the support of Guelph's Visitor and Convention Services. Discover Guelph offered residents a chance to visit ten to twelve tourist attractions in the city for a small fee—the cost of a five-dollar passport. Ms. Wismer concluded that, although it was free of charge, Doors Open's success lay in its unique appeal. "It's hard to explain what it is about Doors Open. I think that on a subconscious level, we all want to get inside those places that are part of our everyday lives but we're only able to see from the outside. People are still talking about their experience two months later."

Notwithstanding the success of Doors Open events across Ontario to date, several organizers identified the need for more private-sector sponsorship or more support from their municipalities. Despite the invaluable role of the Ottawa Citizen, CBC Radio One and CBC première chaîne in promoting the event in Ottawa as patron sponsors, private-sector dollars are still needed to defray the costs of producing, and especially marketing, the event. In Toronto, year two brought the Toronto Star on board as a lead sponsor, a position the newspaper has continued to maintain. Arguably, the success of the inaugural year makes that kind of support easier to secure.

Jan Grey, director of community, marketing and business development and head of Doors Open Ontario at the Ontario Heritage Foundation (OHF), expressed similar frustration with the lack of available funding. Ms. Grey explained that the foundation wanted to build on the success of Doors Open Toronto. "The key factors in the foundation's mandate where we saw Doors Open events fitting were the promotion of education and the objective of creating access and awareness around heritage in Ontario." The OHF saw the event as a new heritage tourism opportunity. The bulk of the funding came from the Ontario Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Recreation, which also helped find sponsors for the printing of the Doors Open Ontario event guide. The guide invites tourists to visit as many sites as possible: "Select the Doors Open Ontario events that pique your interest ... and discover community heritage." As well as the event guide (to which participating towns and cities paid \$1,500 each for coverage), the OHF provided a comprehensive resource kit comprising valuable information pertaining to the development of project literature, advertising, volunteer tips, signage and other matters. Ms. Grey reports that 30 additional communities have already approached the foundation about participating next year.

Although Doors Open encourages the exploration of architectural heritage available at residents' doorsteps, the event inevitably attracts visitors excited by the prospect of exploring a town or city by travelling through its buildings. However, concerns regarding how best to promote the event have arisen alongside its success. Should the event emphasize community pride and awareness or its cultural tourism potential?

Brian Anthony argues it can be a bit of both. "Philosophically and practically speaking, the event comes from a community's desire to celebrate its own heritage and its success is dependent upon the willingness of local building owners and volunteers to participate. On the other hand, if a community wants to marry it up with a cultural tourism message, it can."

Karen Black of the City of Toronto's Culture Division agrees. "Every community needs to organize its event its own way. The key elements that must be maintained for Doors Open to succeed are free admission and local organization. Directives should not come from an external body."

As is the case in Europe and participating Ontario towns and cities to date, Heritage Canada anticipates that Doors Open events across the country will be organized by local municipalities, heritage groups, historical societies, arts centres, museums and galleries, the private sector, Chambers of Commerce and individual owners. They should not be managed from a centralized overseeing office—be that office provincial or national. "Each community must decide how to focus its own event," stresses Mr. Anthony.

Heritage Canada's primary role in overseeing a Doors Open Canada program will be an inspirational and promotional one focusing on the principles of access, awareness and advocacy. Municipal councils and civic societies then take the lead and invite other local voluntary organizations and owners to join them.

The foundation will work to ensure a high profile for the events by providing accurate and timely details on the Web site. Heritage Canada has registered the Doors Open Canada domain name for Internet use that will link to other Web sites in Canada and abroad.

Although the details of Heritage Canada's role continue to be developed, areas of support will likely include assistance with fostering local media relations and advice on such aspects of the event as insurance, health and safety, accessibility, and educational opportunities.

Architecture—old and new—is an excellent resource providing occasions for teachers to develop an awareness of buildings. The Doors Open experience in the United Kingdom and elsewhere has shown that educational prospects abound. Built heritage provides an ideal opportunity for students to engage in their culture, to explore themselves and their communities by exploring their past. Heritage Canada believes Doors Open has great potential in a Canadian education context; it can become a useful resource for the classroom.

Examples of successful programs developed by the Scottish Civic Trust include twinning with schools in other participating towns and cities—sharing photographic exhibitions and essays describing one's place to another. Similarly, London Open House has placed special emphasis on promoting an understanding and appreciation of the built environment with children and young people. Junior Open House was developed—a scheme involving over 15 inner-city schools—bringing students into contact with the most inspiring architecture that surrounds them. Research collected from visits is then explored in greater detail back in the classroom. The initiative was produced in consultation with the participating teachers and architects and complies with all the school curriculum guidelines.

Doors Open events also harness a tremendous voluntary effort and enthusiasm, offering a unique opportunity for cultural organizations to explain their role in protecting built heritage. Hundreds of volunteers in participating communities gave their time as members of organizing committees and as on-site volunteers during the events. In 2002, Toronto organizers developed a high school peer-mentoring program, taking advantage of the provincially mandated forty-hour community service for all secondary students in Ontario. Students responded positively to the experience and were enthusiastic about learning the history of their assigned buildings. Six high school principals helped to co-ordinate the program that partnered students with veteran Doors Open Toronto volunteers for the weekend.

The success of the events in Ontario, Europe and the U.K. is linked to their ability to capture and hold on to the purity of the principles of access, awareness and advocacy. Although national organizations provide inspiration and develop supportive material and some education-related programming opportunities, they do not attempt to consolidate the management of the events at the national level. The events remain locally based in terms of organization, funding, and marketing.

Doors Open has come to North America to stay—cities in the United States have contacted Toronto organizers for information, including New York City—and the Heritage Canada Foundation is enthusiastic about spearheading its promotion across the country.

Heritage Canada will be officially launching Doors Open Canada at the upcoming Annual Conference in Halifax. The logo design, currently under development, will be unveiled at that time with associated material about the event for early distribution.

Any Canadian town or city is encouraged to contact the foundation for information on how best to proceed with bringing Doors Open to their community.

Carolyn Quinn is a member of the Doors Open Ottawa organizing committee and chair of its buildings sub-committee.