

Big Plans for Small Places: Downtown Revitalization on Main Street

by Martha Plaine

Main Street Then

In 1979 the Heritage Canada Foundation (HCF) embarked on a bold plan: a comprehensive effort to halt the decay and destruction of traditional main streets in Canadian towns and cities and set them on a path of recovery. It was called Main Street.

Four years into the project, Pierre Berton, chair of HCF's board, called Main Street "the most important and effective work" of the foundation. At the time, there was consensus that traditional downtowns and their commercial districts were ailing, if not dying.

Critics offered a variety of reasons: the growth of suburbs and shopping malls; the consolidation of retail commercial activity into the hands of a few chains; tax regimes that favoured green field development over conservation and reuse; urban renewal projects that deadened rather than enlivened downtowns; and just plain neglect. In response to this urban decay, business associations, chambers of commerce, developers and governments looked for ways to inject new life into main streets—beautification, economic development and revitalization plans.

What set the Heritage Canada Foundation's Main Street Program apart was its dual concern for architectural heritage preservation and coordinated economic and social revitalization.

In HCF's view, Main Street is the heart and soul of a community, the physical evidence of a shared social and economic history. Drawing on other downtown heritage revitalization schemes—the British Civic Trust, the Main Street Program of the National Trust for Historic Preservation in the U.S., and Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation's Neighbourhood Improvement Plan—HCF devised a pilot program for seven communities.

In each, a trained coordinator was hired to live in the community and work with local leaders, business people and residents. The coordinator wore many hats— animator, facilitator, teacher, historian and manager. A technical support team was available to advise on conservation and design.

Main Street focused on four key areas:

- Organization: to decide on common goals, plans and a revitalization strategy;
- Marketing and promotion;
- Economic development: including plans to increase density, attract new business and customers; and
- Design: including physical improvements such as façade repairs, signage and restoration.

The Pilot Project

Perth, Ontario, population 6,000, was the testing ground. The little town on the Tay River was settled by Scottish stonemasons who came to Canada to build the Rideau Canal.

It was a typical Ontario community with its fine downtown mid-19th century architectural heritage under threat.

Through the Main Street project Perth attracted new business, filled vacant storefronts, and increased its tax base. Residents felt a renewed sense of pride. As John Stewart, Main Street manager at the time, puts it: "Perth was a nice community with a great piece of architecture. And the people came to understand that they were living in a special place."

Success brought national acclaim. In 2004 Perth won HCF's Prince of Wales Prize in recognition of the local government's work to preserve and enhance the town's 19th-century stone architecture, mills and factories, Victorian store fronts, and grand homes through such means as regulation, policies, funding and exemplary stewardship.

Nelson, B.C., a town of 10,000 in the Kootenays, was another Main Street pilot. Baker Street, the traditional main street, was in decline as a new suburban shopping mall siphoned people and capital from downtown. Main Street helped Nelson rethink its image, capitalize on its heritage assets, and attract a mix of high-end retailers.

HCF consolidated the lessons learned in Perth, Nelson and other pilot projects (Bridgetown and Windsor, Nova Scotia; Cambridge, Ontario; Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan; and Fort Macleod, Alberta).

In 1984 the federal Department of Regional Industrial Expansion contributed \$8 million to Main Street Canada. A national program was formalized and delivered through four regional offices, with community coordinators, technical teams and training programs.

By 1991 Main Street Canada operated in every province and territory. Seventy communities had taken part and achieved remarkable success: thousands of jobs, new businesses, and more than \$90 million in private investment.

Main Street Now

The federal government's contribution to Main Street Canada ran out in the early 1990s. Jacques Dalibard, executive director of HCF at the time, lamented the government's failure to support a demonstrably successful program. He believed Main Street's comprehensive and inclusive approach—taking social, economic, environmental and cultural perspectives into account—was one reason the feds lost interest.

HCF closed its regional offices except in Québec City, where a subsidiary organization was created: La fondation Rues principales. An independent body, it operates at arm's length with an endowment from the Heritage Canada Foundation and federal and provincial funding. Rues principales sells its expertise to communities on a fee-for-service basis.

Big Box Stores Edge Closer

Buckingham, Quebec, population 12,000, is a Rues principales town. The traditional main street is Buckingham Avenue, a long thoroughfare of parks and Victorian mansions that leads to a downtown district of well-preserved commercial blocks: McCallum-Lahaie (1886), L'Élégance (1892), and the Houle Building (1917).

The Maclarens were the original lumber barons; their company is a major pulp and paper corporation which remains a big employer in the town today. There is a strong sense of history and place in Buckingham. And Rues principales' revitalization plans have acknowledged the role of the lumber industry and the sometimes violent labour struggles in the town's past.

Public art, new sidewalks, signage, and marketing plans are all part of the effort to lure shoppers and residents to the core. Although new shops and restaurants are coming to Buckingham Avenue, the big box stores are edging closer.

The big box store phenomenon is presenting new but familiar challenges to traditional downtown cores. As Wal-Mart breaks ground for a store ten minutes down the highway from Buckingham, provincial

stalwarts such as Jean Coutu pharmacy and the SAQ liquor store are ignoring downtown in favour of locations a few kilometres away, near a new housing development and the highway.

When François Varin, architect and executive director of Rues principales, meets with community groups, he stresses the importance of good working relationships with city planners and local officials. If big box retail is in a community's future, members of the local revitalization planning committee must shape their vision of the downtown's future economic development accordingly.

Ontario Nurtures Main Streets Through Rural Development

"We promote the Main Street approach, even in the absence of the national program," says Norman Ragetlie, program lead for the rural community development branch of the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (AFRA).

Ragetlie's team is developing a downtown revitalization program using pilot projects in more than a dozen Ontario communities. Francois Varin of Rues principales shared advice with the villages of Marmora, Tweed, Madoc and Stirling when they started a program in 2005. Now, with the help of a fulltime coordinator, the villages have organized volunteer steering committees and tackled streetscape design, marketing and commercial development.

To date, the branch's approach has focused largely on economic development, providing valuable market analysis to help identify gaps and strengths. As the team prepares their recommendations to the ministry, the pilots are being evaluated to assess program delivery options. "There is a real appetite for information about economic revitalization out there," observes Mr. Ragetlie.

In Omemee, in the Kawartha Lakes, the community has decided to develop a local heritage asset—the town's historic theatre, Coronation Hall—as a catalyst to encourage people and business in the downtown. Although heritage conservation is not what's driving AFRA's program, the team is exploring opportunities for collaboration with the heritage branch of the Ministry of Culture and non-governmental heritage organizations in the province to support the design and conservation side of their downtown revitalization initiative.

Mr. Ragetlie also sees a role for Main Street revitalization on a national scale. "The perspective that a heritage institution can provide, in conjunction with the provinces, could make an important contribution," he says.

Main Street Alberta

Alberta took over Main Street when HCF withdrew. With support from a provincial Crown agency, the Historical Resources Foundation, the province runs a traditional fourpoint program, with cost-shared funding with municipalities for coordinators, bricks-and-mortar repairs, and restoration.

"Good physical conservation design goes hand in hand with good marketing. That's the key," says Larry Pearson. He is manager of historical places stewardship section, Historic Resources Management Branch, Ministry of Tourism, Parks, Recreation and Culture.

Twenty-three towns and neighbourhoods, including downtown districts of Calgary and Edmonton, have taken part. There are active projects in Camrose, Lethbridge, Wainwright and Red Deer.

Main Street is not a magic wand or quick fix for decaying downtowns. It's a self-help method. In the course of revitalization work, basic questions come up. A question Mr. Pearson himself poses: If you have a downtown area where every building has "slip-covered" its original features, can that be a historic place, a historic main street? He pushes groups to consider ideas about heritage and authenticity. In Alberta,

historic does not necessarily mean old. In Red Deer, the majority of buildings on Main Street are post-1945, but they have a distinct sense of time and place.

Camrose, population 16,000, had already started on its Main Street revitalization before the first big box stores moved to town. After a slow start the program received a vote of confidence when the owner of a large furniture business used Main Street design services to restore his store front. Next, two buildings, previously vacant, were bought up and new businesses opened.

Now Camrose is running out of commercial space. Entrepreneurs are calling the Main Street office to ask about business opportunities. And after a successful fundraising drive, the restoration of a historic theatre is soon to begin.

Alberta Main Street eschews the beautification/Disneyfication route. Concerning new building, Mr. Pearson tells prospective participants, "Don't expect us to make you look quaint. Build something compatible with what you already have."

A related initiative, the Municipal Heritage Partnership Program, launched in June 2006, assists municipalities in taking stock of heritage assets. Mr. Pearson hopes the effort will help them appreciate their heritage buildings and act to protect them.

One of the biggest frustrations is the lack of understanding at the federal government level. A series of disincentives drives investment money away from heritage buildings. The building code, tax code and GST rebate programs all mitigate against reuse and favour new construction.

Preserving heritage buildings is by its very nature sustainable, Mr. Pearson contends. Plastics and metals are more energy consumptive than wood, brick and stone. By some estimates, up to one third of landfill is construction material.

British Columbia: Heritage Revitalization a Diminishing Priority

Although there is plenty of interest in downtown heritage revitalization, this province has limited its role. The B.C. Heritage Trust, mandated by the Heritage Conservation Act, no longer exists. Now, grants and loans for physical improvements are administered through the Ministry of Municipal Affairs.

"Most of our focus now is strategic," says Neil Wilton, registrar of the B.C. Registry of Historic Places, Heritage Branch, Ministry of Tourism, Sport, and the Arts.

Alastair Kerr, manager of Heritage Programs, says the Main Street Program offered a radically different way of looking at the concept of revitalization. "First you have to coordinate people... Then and only then can you launch the programs of economic development and marketing," he states.

Many planners are ill prepared and ill trained for a role in downtown revitalization that is sensitive to the needs of heritage conservation, says Mr. Kerr. He teaches heritage preservation for the Cultural Resource Management Program at the University of Victoria.

The case of Nelson illustrates the central importance of heritage. The city's 350 designated residential and commercial buildings reflect architectural traditions of the West coast from San Francisco to Seattle and give Nelson a competitive edge in tourism and retail marketing.

A successful Main Street requires partnerships, consensus and cooperation. Again, Nelson proved that support from many partners was indispensable. At the time, Nelson received major provincial funding in addition to Main Street Canada's contributions.

Both Kerr and Wilton believe that successful downtown heritage revitalization depends at times on competing ideas coming together through committed people working to create partnerships.

The Role of Planning

John Stewart, former director of Main Street, is now a principal with Commonwealth Historic Research Management. He sees a basic challenge to successful downtown revitalization: professionals are isolated in silos according to their specialties. Planners are faced with an array of issues demanding attention—from climate change and emergency planning to public transit and smart growth. A large chunk of the work-load is tied up with issuing permits. Heritage planning gets short shrift.

Many planners had a training that emphasized statistics, focused on quantifying data. The kind of planning needed for a Main Street revitalization requires facilitating and animating a complex process involving many players. It requires a comprehensive and integrated approach.

To the four pillars of the Main Street approach, Mr. Stewart would add a fifth component, the social. If Main Street has taught us anything, it's that the human—the social dimension—is essential to downtown heritage revitalization.

HCF brought the four-point Main Street approach to downtown revitalization to Canada nearly thirty years ago. Although HCF's program ended, its legacy exists in Alberta's Main Street Program and Rues principales. Its influence continues to shape revitalization programs across the country.

Heritage conservation has evolved over that thirty-year period, and downtown heritage revitalization programs have to fluctuate to meet changing environmental and cultural considerations. Neil Wilton says it clearly: "Everyone talks of sustainability, greening, liveable cities, LEED certification, embodied energy in building materials.... These ideas must work together to support sensitive downtown heritage revitalization in the future."