



Are Canada's Historic Schools

by Christopher Wiebe and Carolyn Quinn

Canada's older schools provide not only a place of learning for our children, they are important anchors that help define and sustain our neighbourhoods. Schools are among the most important structures in our communities, often built to a level of detail and craftsmanship rarely found in other buildings. Located

in established neighbourhoods, they offer easy access for students to walk or ride to school. They often facilitate community involvement and provide a centre for local activity.

But schools today are under unprecedented pressure to perform as centres of educational excellence while meeting



Photo: Rick MacWilliam, Edmonton Journal

our Next Endangered Species?

ever-shrinking budgets. Historic schools in inner cities, mature suburbs and rural areas across the country are not making the cut. They are falling victim to declining enrolment, deferred maintenance, consolidation, development pressures, pedagogical pressures and the perceived high cost of rehabilitation. Some, like the

Alice Street Elementary School (1922) in Truro, N.S., have been hauled off to landfill. Many will be mothballed, exposing them to vandalism and creeping “eyesore” status; others will hopefully find immunity through reuse as private schools, community centres or condo developments.

Older neighbourhoods take the hit

The scale and pace of school closures across the country is staggering. In British Columbia, 10% of the province's 1,784 schools have closed since 2001, while Ontario will close 172 schools between 2009 and 2012. The impact has been uneven, with older downtown neighbourhoods feeling the brunt of it. The Toronto District School Board, for instance, saw its student population drop by 4,000 between 2007 and 2008—the equivalent of a 1,000-student high school and its 10 feeder elementary schools. Regardless of the rationale, a school closure has a ripple effect throughout the surrounding neighbourhood, influencing businesses and economic development, property values, and community viability overall.

Canada's school age population is declining, particularly in inner cities and rural areas. School districts have to sell surplus property to generate funds for the construction of new schools in suburban areas. In Vancouver, 11 downtown elementary schools are currently being reviewed for closure. "It's largely a financially driven decision for revenue ... what's the market for it; what kind of revenue would it generate," explained board chair Patti Bacchus. With declining funding, economies of scale must be found, and this means larger

"consolidated" schools. Older schools are losing out to new mega structures built in outlying areas that require extensive bus-ing programs. In Halifax, Queen Elizabeth High School (1942) and Saint Patrick's High School (1955) were levelled and replaced by the large new Citadel High, which opened in 2007.

The schools issue reaches beyond the preservation of our historic structures to include the sustained health of our children and our communities. The loss of older schools often means the disappearance of neighbourhood meeting places, and playfields and green spaces for areas without parks. Heritage activists are recognizing that engagement with community design and sustainability issues is critical if the public relevance of heritage conservation is to be broadened.

Who decides?

Provincial funding formulas are key instruments driving school closures. In Ontario, the province allocates operating and facility renewal funding to school boards based on the area requirement per student: 104.4 sq. ft. per elementary student and 130 sq. ft. for secondary students. The calculation includes hallways, washrooms, and all other spaces. Older



Photo: Charlene Deneron-Head

Closed amid controversy, Herchmer Public School in Regina was demolished in November, 2008.

Après avoir été fermée dans la polémique, l'école publique Herchmer de Regina a été démolie en novembre 2008.



Photo: Mike Wakefield, NS News

Materials being assessed for reuse during seismic upgrade of Ridgeway Elementary School (1910) in North Vancouver. Strong community input helped save three of the school's historic façades.

Matériaux soumis à une évaluation en vue d'une réutilisation lors de l'amélioration de la protection sismique de l'école primaire Ridgeway (1910) de Vancouver-Nord. La mobilisation de la communauté a aidé à sauver trois des façades historiques de l'école.

schools, with their generous hallways and function spaces, are at a disadvantage. The Toronto District School Board, with its vast stable of older schools, is in an unenviable predicament: it receives funding for 260,000 pupil places but has space for 342,000 students. Venerable Kent Senior Public School (1908), once the largest public school in Canada, now stands at 42% occupancy and will be closing. Recognizing the vital role that schools fill as community hubs in older areas, efforts should be made to coordinate school facility planning with other municipal planning to allow for the co-location of schools with community services.

Although funding is provided by provincial education ministries, it is at the district school board level where decisions about school closure, sale and demolition are made. Most boards establish the criteria for closing a school around quality of education and the costs, condition and current or potential uses of existing facilities. They see their role as providing safe and suitable school buildings within the financial resources available. Municipal planning and the socio-economic impacts of school closure are not on the radar, let alone heritage conservation.

Alberta's Education Minister, Dave Hancock, recently wrote on his blog, "In my view it is bizarre that many school boards

do not coordinate their school planning with development planning conducted by municipalities and counties. If urban revitalization and densification efforts advanced by cities are heavily influenced by the presence of local schools, and vice versa, then there must be coordination!" Ontario-based People for Education recommends that "each municipality have a local 'coordination office' with representatives from Public Health, Parks and Recreation, Housing, Mental Health, Child Care and Social Services." In 2008, Manitoba took steps to address this disconnect with the *Strengthening Local Schools Act*, which requires community consultation and consensus around school closures.

Repair or replace

Student numbers also determine funding amounts to cover costs of major items such as new furnaces, accessibility provisions and roofs. As with many other schools, refurbishment of the outstanding sandstone Moncton High School (1935) is foundering due to years of deferred maintenance. Added to that challenge is the fact that provinces will only fund major building rehabilitation if costs are below replacement values: 60% of replacement cost in Alberta, 65% in Ontario. The historic Prince of Wales Public School (1876) in Barrie, Ont., for example, has been deemed "prohibitive to repair" and will be abandoned in 2011.



Photo: Roderick Scott Greene

The McCauley Public School's (1912) role as a hub for its multicultural Edmonton neighbourhood was top of mind for parents concerned over the board's decision to close it. The closing, along with four others, was recommended on the basis that merging the students would give them better learning opportunities.

Le rôle de l'école publique McCauley (1912) en tant que centre nerveux de son quartier multiculturel d'Edmonton était un des aspects les plus importants pour les parents s'inquiétant de la décision prise par le conseil scolaire de la fermer. La recommandation de la fermer, ainsi que quatre autres écoles, s'appuyait sur le principe selon lequel le regroupement des élèves leur assurerait de meilleures possibilités d'apprentissage.

“If new schools had to be built to last as long as the old ones, we would soon see the cost benefits of conserving our existing buildings,” writes Catherine Nasmith, past-president of the Architectural Conservancy of Ontario.

British Columbia’s 15-year \$1.5-billion Seismic Mitigation Program has been a flashpoint for confrontations over the rehab or replacement of heritage schools. The program provides funds to ensure schools are made safer in case of earthquake damage. If the seismic remediation cost estimate exceeds 70% of the cost of new construction, demolition is the likely path. To date, 121 projects have had uneven heritage outcomes. Some, like South Park Family School in Victoria,

have been sensitively upgraded, while Vancouver’s Charles Dickens Elementary School (1912) was torn down, and more will follow.

Newer must be better

Changes in pedagogical fashion are taking a toll on older schools that are habitually characterized as inflexible and difficult to renovate. The Vancouver School Board’s publication *Essentials of Learning* extols “21st-century learning” and establishes a deterministic connection between the configuration of classroom walls and learning results to the disadvantage of older schools. This “newer is better” thinking is endemic. The Waterloo Region District School Board chair recently pushed for demolition of Grand View Public School (1910) in Cambridge, Ont., saying “the school is not an optimum learning environment” and that a new building would “put kids first.” But creative solutions have shown that interior spaces of historic schools can be reconfigured without compromising their distinctive characteristics. Meeting new needs can be achievable without losing the benefits of a community-centred school.

Adapting to a new use

Nationally, the prospects for the adaptive reuse of schools are mixed. There has been little appetite for the reuse of Qu’Appelle Public School in Fort Qu’Appelle, Sask., and Winnipeg’s distinguished three-storey Somerset School (1901) was razed for new construction in 2005 with little fanfare. In Ontario the school boards are expected to get full market value for their redundant properties, and there are no discounts to encourage the retention of public property in public ownership.



Photo: Bob Hare



A designated heritage building, South Park Family School (1894) was updated in the 1990s with a new heating system, library, washrooms, and more. Offices for local heritage groups are located in the annex (1914). In 2004 the school underwent a \$1.4 million seismic upgrade.


La South Park Family School (1894), un bâtiment du patrimoine désigné, a bénéficié en 1990 de diverses nouveautés, dont : installation de chauffage, bibliothèque, toilettes. Des bureaux pour des groupes locaux voués au patrimoine se trouvent dans l'annexe (1914). En 2004, des travaux de 1,4 million de dollars ont été effectués pour améliorer la protection sismique de l'école.

But it is not all bad news. There are property developers who see the economic and social benefits of investing in historic buildings and municipal policies that offer financial incentives to reduce the associated risks. The result has been a flurry of residential conversions: Stinson School (1894) and Dundas Secondary School (1923) in Hamilton are being converted to loft condos, and in Fernie, B.C., a progressive city council supported the redevelopment of Fernie Secondary School, abandoned for nearly ten years, into high-end condos to help keep residential living in the heart of the historic downtown. Port Hope, Ontario's L.B. Powers Public School and Peterborough's Central School have been reborn as affordable housing, and in Ottawa, the 1920s-era Maxwell Public School has been converted into the Carlington Community Health Services Centre and the old playground into community gardens. Queen's University successfully integrated Kingston's Victoria School (1892) into Goodes Hall, the new home of its School of Business.

Solutions

North Americans are rediscovering the merits of walkable communities, and decisions for the location and design of schools need to address that change. Local citizens, municipal planners, elected officials and school board personnel and trustees should coordinate decisions about the future of schools. And new standards are needed if existing schools are to be successfully rehabilitated and modernized.

When school board decisions result in school closures and the sale of facilities, efforts need to focus on converting these historic structures to new uses and keeping older neighbourhoods vibrant. Repurposing them makes optimum use of community resources, saves energy, protects the environment and improves neighbourhoods by reclaiming neglected structures.

For built heritage advocates, the "schools question" ultimately offers an opportunity to redefine the "edges" of their vision and to see the fostering of viable, sustainable communities as the broader aim. By supporting walkable, sustainable neighbourhoods and local schools, the heritage movement will be able to find common cause on the bigger questions of community design and amplify the public relevance of heritage. 

Windsor School Revival

John Campbell Public School in Windsor, Ontario recently underwent a massive \$10-million renovation. It could just as easily have been an expensive demolition instead.

Called “the finest public school building in Ontario” when it opened in 1927, by 2003 the Greater Essex County District School Board (GECDSB) had plans in place to demolish it—and two others that were also identified as “prohibitive to repair.”

Fortunately for John Campbell School, it remained almost unaltered from its original design, and the structure was still sound. There was also huge public support to preserve it. Various parent councils, The Walkerville Times, the Windsor Heritage Committee, former Heritage Planner Nancy Morand and various groups sought to save this community landmark. Rather than opting to build a new school, the GECDSB chose the costlier yet more historically focused route to modernize the existing school.

The complete brick and stone exterior is being preserved, counterbalancing the extensive alterations to the interior.

Designed by J.P. Thomson Associates, the new interior features a classroom that has been returned to its 1926 appearance, complete with hardwood floors, cabinets and original chalkboards. There is also a lobby with original doors, refinished woodwork and marble, and display cases documenting Windsor’s heritage; a second-floor music room whose long-forgotten skylight has been reopened; and a gymnasium where a beamed ceiling and stone features around the stage have been restored.

Provincial government consultant Rod Peterson, who formerly worked for the GECDSB, said at a Windsor Heritage Committee meeting that “the goal of the building is not only to preserve a part of Windsor’s heritage, but to provide a pretty cool school for kids to attend, and a facility which can be used by the community outside of school hours, in the summer and on weekends.”

Mr. Peterson added that the Ministry of Education funds the construction of new schools, but does not have a budget for the preservation of older or heritage school buildings.



Photo: David Staunton

1255 Tecumseh Road East, Windsor, Ontario



Photo: 901 Fernie

◀ Fernie Secondary School (Fernie, B.C.)

This 1908 downtown school was abandoned in 1999 for a new building. In 2007 it was redeveloped as a loft-style condominium that includes a community spa thanks to the support of a progressive city council.

◀ École secondaire Fernie (Fernie, Colombie-Britannique)

Cette école du centre-ville datant de 1908 a été abandonnée en 1999 en faveur d'un nouveau bâtiment. En 2007, avec l'appui d'un conseil municipal progressiste, elle a été transformée en ensemble de condominiums comprenant un spa communautaire.

➤ Maxwell Public School (Ottawa, Ont.)

Built in 1922, the school that once served the local community as an educational institution, today offers health and social services as the Carlington Community Centre.

➤ École publique Maxwell (Ottawa, Ontario)

Ce bâtiment construit en 1922 qui a servi d'école dans la collectivité locale est aujourd'hui le Centre communautaire Carlington offrant des services de santé et des services sociaux.



Photo: HCF/FHC



Photo: HCF/FHC

➤ Laura Secord School (Winnipeg, Man.)

A light-filled, massively proportioned 1912 school has undergone renovations over the years to meet changing needs. The school and its playing field continue to operate in the core area of the historic Wolseley neighbourhood.

➤ École Laura Secord (Winnipeg, Manitoba)

Cette école grandiose de 1912 a bénéficié au fil des ans de rénovations lui permettant de répondre à des besoins changeants. Le bâtiment inondé de lumière et son terrain de jeu continuent de desservir l'historique quartier urbain de Wolseley.



Photo: Alvin Comiter

◀ Lunenburg Academy (Lunenburg, N.S.)

Completed in 1895, the Lunenburg Academy is a town icon with an ongoing purpose as a public elementary school. The elaborately decorated wooden interior is intact and meeting contemporary needs.

◀ Académie de Lunenburg (Lunenburg, Nouvelle-Écosse)

L'Académie de Lunenburg, achevée en 1895, est un véritable monument de la localité, continuant de servir d'école primaire publique. L'intérieur doté de fines boiseries décoratives est intact et répond aux besoins d'aujourd'hui.

➤ Sydenham Public School (Kingston, Ont.)

Opened in 1853, the school is the oldest continuously operating school in Ontario. It remains a vital community space in its inner city neighbourhood.



Photo: William Stewart

▲ École publique Sydenham (Kingston, Ontario)

Inaugurée en 1853, cette école est le plus ancien établissement d'enseignement en exploitation continue en Ontario. Elle est encore aujourd'hui un bien communautaire vital au sein de son quartier urbain.



Photo: Bryan Scott