

Preserving Roots A Newfoundland Fishing Town's Innovative Solution

by Don Procter

Ancestral roots run deep in fishing villages dotting the rugged coastline of eastern Newfoundland. Family names go back centuries, and many residents live in houses that their forefathers called home. But over the years, economic downturns have cut deep into the heart of many a community, unravelling families and the historic fabric of quaint towns and villages.

While in recent decades the region's built heritage has come down—been abandoned or insensitively covered up with inappropriate modern building materials—that trend is being bucked in Bonavista. This most easterly fishing outpost in Canada is striving to preserve and restore its bountiful heritage through an ambitious restoration movement whose success hinges on the principles of sustainable economic development.

A four-hour drive east of St. John's, Bonavista lays claim to approximately 1,000 heritage buildings (more than in any other Newfoundland town) dating from the early 19th century to the province's confederation in 1949. The lay of the land is unique for a Newfoundland fishing town. It is set on a broad, flat plain intersected by marshes, which has allowed for a large settlement (4,500 inhabitants) and a most unusual street plan. Typically, east coast fishing villages are tiny by comparison, tucked into picture-postcard coves that drop down fog-laden hills to the sea.

The group spearheading the preservation efforts in Bonavista is the Bonavista Historic Townscape Foundation (BHTF). Made up of the Bonavista Historical Society, the Town of Bonavista and various local community organizations, the BHTF implemented a management plan in the late 1990s to determine how to best preserve Bonavista's historic resources while generating new and sustainable economic activities. Since 2000, a spate of heritage buildings have undergone restoration through the assistance of the Foundation's preservation committee.

The group's approach to heritage restoration is anything but traditional. Rather than go after grant money through government heritage departments, the Foundation went to the Atlantic Canada Opportunity Agency's (ACOA) Fisheries Restructuring Alternative Measures (FRAM) fund for financial assistance. The fund was set up to provide compensation for people suffering from the cod fishery moratorium in effect since 1992.

To meet the fund's criteria, the BHTF created a unique preservation model which stipulates local labour and locally made products—such as period-style windows and doors—shall be used in the restoration of the town's buildings. The intent is to help local tradespeople and craftspeople develop practical old-world skills which they can apply to future restoration projects throughout Newfoundland.

"Heritage tourism is one of the few economic bright lights in the coastal villages of Newfoundland, so why not ensure that the historic building stock is properly restored and preserved by locals?" asks David Bradley, Chair of the BHTF's subcommittee that sets priorities for restoration projects. "You can't underestimate the value of a cultural landscape from a tourism point of view because people like to visit whole communities, not just (historic) sites."

This year is the second of a two-year \$500,000 grant program through the FRAM fund for restoration projects in Bonavista. The money (up to a maximum of \$25,000 per project) covers up to 70 percent of the total restoration cost. Last year 11 properties were restored, including the Roman Catholic Church, the United Church Central School and the Tenement House. (The BHTF had yet to select the projects for 2004 at press time.) The two-year program follows the "immensely successful" pilot project in 2000, which



Gateway to the James Ryan House, a national historic site. Paterson Woodworking reconstructed the fence and gate and reinstated the original lamp.

kickstarted BHTF's restoration efforts through the FRAM fund. The \$300,000 grant helped 10 owners restore the exteriors of their homes using local labour and products such as traditional doors, windows, clapboard siding and roofing, points out Mr. Bradley.

From day one, rather than simply select the most significant architectural gems of Bonavista's past for restoration, the Foundation's objective has been to restore a wide range of building types that best represent Bonavista's heritage building stock.

Convincing residents to do expensive restoration work to their homes hasn't always been easy for the Foundation. "To make this initiative a success, we had to devise a program that would allow property owners to participate without fear that their decision was complete folly, ultimately leading to their financial ruin," explains Mr. Bradley.

Shane O'Dea is a believer in the BHTF's preservation initiative. A well-known architectural historian in Newfoundland, Mr. O'Dea is impressed by the BHTF's near self-sufficient economic development model. "They have had remarkable success. They have manufacturers of doors and windows on stream, and there are small local contractors doing extremely fine woodworking. There is a sense of real pride now that Bonavista can produce carpenters and contractors who can come into St. John's and find employment because the quality of their work is so good it is in demand. It really means that local people are developing their own industries."

One of those local businesses is Paterson Woodworking, a custom millwork shop that reproduces historic architectural details, windows and doors. Business has steadily grown since the woodworking shop hung its shingle in Bonavista in 1988. "When I came to this area there was very little restoration going on," explains owner Mike Paterson, who started out making reproductions of traditional Newfoundland furniture.

In the early 1990s he became involved in the restoration of windows, doors and other architectural elements of the Ryan Premises, a 19th-century architecturally significant cluster of warehouses and merchant shops in Bonavista. Now a national heritage site, the premises were the headquarters of James Ryan Limited, a mercantile complex which supplied the needs of area fishers and cured, stored and shipped salt cod internationally. The complex was restored in 1997 through an ACOA heritage initiative.

Since then, Mr. Paterson has been involved in several restoration projects in Bonavista through the BHTF initiative, including the 160-year-old St. Joseph's Catholic Church. His job was to fabricate eight replicas of the original 3.8-metre-tall (12.5-foot) Gothic-style wood windows, which were beyond repair. Each window features carved wooden tracery and about 35 panes.

The woodworker says he completed about \$100,000 worth of business in reproduction windows and doors in Bonavista this past year. "That kind of work would have been non-existent three years ago," he remarked.

Increasingly, his skills are in demand in other regions of the province, including St. John's. "We always had somewhat of a profile around the province, but what's happening in Bonavista has boosted that profile," exclaimed Mr. Paterson. While traditional wood doors and windows cost more than vinyl ones, the woodworker has an answer for those cynics who sneer at the higher price of old-fashioned building materials. "Why is someone willing to pay more for a luxury car than they are for an economical model? Because they are interested in quality."

Through the efforts of the BHTF to specify the use of faithful reproductions of historic building materials in all of their projects, two building supply centres in Bonavista have come up with traditional materials for the new and growing market. One of those materials is 15-cm-wide (six-inch) clapboard with a 2-cm (three-quarter-inch) butt. "We lobbied the local building centres for the materials we needed, and they went out and got them from sawmills in the province," says Mr. Paterson. Now, the town is developing a reputation for having a ready supply of traditional building materials, and demand for those materials is growing throughout the province.

The BHTF's restoration standards are high, Mr. Paterson says, pointing out that materials and workmanship must be in compliance with strict criteria set by the Foundation. Only materials that are authentic reproductions of historic elements are accepted, and only stainless nails are permitted to fasten exterior materials exposed to the weather. The Foundation works directly with the contractors throughout the restoration process to ensure that its standards are met.

Homes and other buildings likely to qualify for restoration money typically have features identifying them as having a "Bonavista style." A good example is the double-front-peak two-storey house indigenous to Bonavista. The BHTF also bases its selection criteria on buildings in highly visible locations.

Keith Hewitt and his wife received a grant through the BHTF to replace the clapboard, windows, front door and roof shingles of their 19th-century house. The money also covered some costs for the repair of their historic front porch and veranda. "Without the grant we couldn't have done this," explains Mr. Hewitt, who says it took \$36,000 (\$25,000 of which was grant money) to complete all of the work.

"Bitten by the bug," he is now restoring the interior of his double-front-peak house solely with his own money. It is the kind of thing, he says, that is happening throughout Bonavista these days. "We are seeing a lot more people restoring their old houses. Even people building new houses are using traditional spruce clapboard and doing other things that are in keeping with the local heritage."

Bonavista's preservation movement hasn't been limited to individual buildings. Shortly after the BHTF's pilot got off the ground, \$1.9 million was allocated for the revitalization of the main thoroughfare, Church Street, through ACOA's FRAM fund. The objective was to improve pedestrian access and increase business activity by converting the street—made into a one-way 23 years ago—back into a two-way. The money went into street widening, on-street parking and parking lots, storm drainage and landscaping. Mr. Bradley says the efforts enhanced the charm of the narrow street, which has a variety of mixed-use buildings.

Town Clerk David Hiscock believes the BHTF's heritage efforts over the past few years have boosted the town's economy. "If you drive through town, everywhere you look there are buildings being restored." What's more, housing starts over the past year have topped 30, the best numbers in more than a decade.

Pointing out that tourism is one of the spin-offs from a revitalized community, he says there are signs that Bonavista is seeing more visitors through peak travel seasons than it did five years ago. "Obviously a lot of that has to do with the Townscape (BHTF) and its restoration projects."

Residents are more easily sold on the value of restoring their properties these days than they were in the 1990s. In the past, typical improvement projects to a home's exterior might have involved vinyl siding and vinyl or aluminium windows and doors. "Now, when residents look around them and see neighbours' houses being restored, they realize that if they modernize the exterior they will stick out like a sore thumb," says the Town Clerk.

While heritage is proving itself in Bonavista, no one is suggesting that the movement is an economic substitute for the fishery. There is hope that the fishery will recover, although few expect it to return to the bountiful days of the 1970s. "If the fishery comes back in some form, obviously we're not going to lose the restoration projects. It will just make us a more diversified economy," says Mr. Hiscock.

Many fishing communities in the region will never entirely recover from the economic shock of the demise of the fishery. But Bonavista is looking forward, not back. The preservation initiative is "working really well," says Mr. Bradley. "When you have a substantial heritage resource base as we do in Bonavista, its preservation and development will lead to new economic opportunities."

It is not an overnight solution, however. "It's a slow process that occurs over the long term in conjunction with tourism development. It will not employ hundreds of people in just a year or two."

Mr. Bradley and other supporters of the preservation movement believe that the BHTF's initiative can work elsewhere in Newfoundland and Canada, provided it is based on a sound management plan that catches the ear of appropriate government funding agencies such as ACOA's FRAM fund. "While the incentives should vary depending on the economic circumstances of a particular area, if we want Canadians to help preserve our architectural heritage, we must devise proper mechanisms to assist them, rather than expect them to make decisions which, from their perspective, are economically irrational."

Don Procter is a Toronto-based freelance writer who is passionate about historic buildings.