

Feature

Prince William Street: A Catalyst For Change

by Valerie Evans

On the afternoon of June 20, 1877, fire swept through the central peninsula of the city of Saint John, New Brunswick, destroying more than 1,000 buildings in a mere nine hours. The fire, which started on the waterfront near the present site of the Hilton Hotel, decimated the city's commercial business district. It was so devastating that within two months the provincial legislature passed detailed building regulations supported by a building inspection system. One of those regulations was that all buildings in the uptown area had to be constructed of either brick or stone.

Prince William Street was primarily rebuilt between 1878 and 1881. Some of the businesses located on the street were the Bank of New Brunswick, the Bank of Nova Scotia, the Post Office, City Hall and a number of commercial buildings. The predominant architectural styles were Italianate and Second Empire, featuring mansard roofs, Roman arched windows and decorative entablatures. The original Bank of New Brunswick structure is Greek Revival in style, a common choice for banks during those years.

The period of intense reconstruction resulted in uniform four- or five-storey buildings constructed using similar building materials and with special attention to detail, evidenced today in the richly decorated sandstone and brick. Jim Bezanson, Heritage Development Officer, City of Saint John, explained how the extensive reconstruction encouraged a high level of competition. "Architects from Boston, Montréal, Halifax, and the Eastern seaboard submitted designs. The work also brought tradesmen, craftsmen and artisans to the city."

In the mid-1970s this area of Saint John was at a crossroads. While some people wanted to convert Prince William Street into a truck route, others wanted to revitalize the downtown commercial core by rehabilitating its unique built heritage assets.

As part of an incentive program to encourage development in the area, the City committed to selling ten of its own buildings on the street (once slated for demolition). Through the use of covenants, the heritage character of the buildings was protected, while the below market value price (\$5,000 each) sparked new investment and development. Of the ten buildings offered, nine were sold. "Prince William Street was the catalyst for change, if you will, within the historic core of Saint John," stated Mr. Bezanson.

From there, revitalization moved up King Street and Germain Street. Canterbury Street was completed later in the 1990s, with Princess Street waiting in the wings. A Preservation Review Board (PRB) tasked with establishing and overseeing a program of heritage conservation and rehabilitation was set up in 1978. The Board worked with the City's Legal Department to draft a conservation by-law and, by December 1980, City Council designated the area. In 1981, the Trinity Royal Preservation Area, a 21-block district in the city centre was also designated.

That same year, based on the recommendation of the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada (HSMBC), Prince William Street became the first National Historic Streetscape designation in Canada. The HSMBC defines historic districts as "geographically defined areas which create a special sense of time and place through buildings, structures and open spaces modified by human use and which are united by past events and use, and/or aesthetically, by architecture and plan."

In the case of Prince William Street, the HSMBC distinguishes the historic streetscape for its "rare concentration of homogeneous, primarily late 19th-century architecture." Its report goes on to note that the area, "traditionally referred to as 'Wall Street' . contains major public buildings, banks, hotels, insurance, shipping and legal offices, and the seamen's institute and mission. More than half of these structures were erected immediately after the Great Fire of 1877. The works of prominent architects of Scottish, American and Canadian origin, the buildings represent solid, dignified and sometimes

flamboyant interpretations of contemporary styles and building technology."

The centre of Saint John is the main attraction not only for its 125,000 metropolitan residents, but also for the approximately half-million tourists who visit the city every year. The Trinity Royal Preservation Area has been identified as a national asset, and Saint John itself has won several national awards. City Council and staff have been recognized for their excellent commitment to heritage preservation in the city, as have members of the community at large who have embraced the preservation by-law, with many taking advantage of it to reinvest in the property assets within the city centre.

Awards have included Communities in Bloom, the Heritage Canada Foundation's Prince of Wales Prize and the American Association for State and Local History's (AASLH) award to Saint John's Planning Department for its publication of Practical Preservation Guidelines. The Planning Department was also commended by the AASLH for its hands-on approach to resolving people's design conservation problems in a manner that is sensitive to the historic fabric and without incurring additional expense.

Since its enactment, the Saint John Preservation Area by-law has regulated any alterations or work to the exterior of properties on Prince William Street or in the Trinity Royal Preservation Area. This includes what is considered general maintenance-painting, door and window upkeep, signage, storefronts, landscaping, repointing masonry, siding, woodwork, and more. Volunteers appointed by City Council and the Heritage Development Officer administer the by-law. For instance, all new properties to be built in the Preservation Area must have their plans approved by the Preservation Review Board.

Mr. Bezanson said that of the 1,600 applications that he has dealt with during the past 14 years, an estimated 1,550 were approved first time by the PRB. Of the 50 remaining, he explained that approximately 30 were tabled and then approved two weeks later at the next PRB meeting. "We estimate that only 20 of those 1,600 applications were denied." The preservation by-law includes a section on building height: the height of a development cannot be less than 80% or more than 120% of the average height of adjacent buildings. Recently, the height restrictions were challenged by Paul Tobias, the owner of an apartment building on Germain Street in Trinity Royal, who wants to build a second apartment block on his parking lot that would exceed the height limitation. After consulting with the Planning Department on previous design concepts, he decided to by-pass the PRB process this time in favour of the front page of the local newspaper, where he stated that his application had been turned down.

Mr. Bezanson's version differs. "He was never denied any application-he never made any application." The Planning Department claims that height limitations on an earlier building project were calculated using only the adjacent buildings, as opposed to averaging the block, in order to give Mr. Tobias the most favourable review possible. This way he could have built a five-storey structure, but he chose not to proceed with the development.

When Mr. Tobias proposed the construction of a seven-storey building on the same site earlier this year, he approached City Council requesting an amendment to the by-law without formally applying to the PRB. A public hearing was set to debate an amendment that would allow the construction of a building exceeding the height limitation by 6.8 metres. "After considerable negative reaction from the community," said Mr. Bezanson, "the public hearing was cancelled, so the application has never been officially submitted by the Board."

As a result, however, the former Mayor and Council moved that the by-law be reviewed and updated where necessary by a committee of their choosing. Since that time, an election has brought a new Mayor and several new councillors to power. Nonetheless, City officials have recommended that the Preservation Review Board remind the new Council that its legislated mandate is to draft by-laws on heritage-related matters for Council's consideration.

Mr. Tobias's situation seems to be the exception, since most developers in Saint John are willing to work within the stipulations of the by-law. For example, in March 2004, the Irving Group of Companies announced it would be undertaking a major, multimillion-dollar development. This project, known as Heritage Place, will start on Prince William Street and encompass an entire block of King Street up to and

including a small portion of Canterbury Street. The PRB has approved all of the project plans. The development will reuse the commercial/retail boutiques at ground level, while rehabilitating the upper floors for office and residential use. It will protect the historic façade and be in keeping with the existing streetscape.

Neighbouring residents and heritage activists are thrilled and strongly commend the Irving Group of Companies for this plan, which will rehabilitate the existing buildings and reconstruct the traditional storefronts. A project of this scope will enrich the uptown area and will prove that working together is good for both heritage and development. What started on Prince William Street over 20 years ago as a means of reviving the commercial retail area has come full circle. That initial project was the catalyst for change that saw the community support investment in the city's built heritage resources as a tool for downtown revitalization. Much development in the core has evolved to try and relate to the historic Prince William streetscape. The results are evident even in places well outside the formal heritage preservation areas.

Valerie Evans is a writer living in Saint John.