

PARADE OF HOMES

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It didn't happen overnight. But somewhere along the way Canadians woke up to the realization they didn't want to lose their heritage, represented by examples of buildings that predated their living memories: that predated both world wars; the turn of the century; Confederation and back, back into the too often forgotten reaches of early Canadian history.

The post World War II philosophy "all that is new is good", adopted by many of the then emerging breed of suburbanites and ex-urbanites was an oversimplified as the philosophy that "everyone is born equal". This is not to say much of the new architecture is bad or that housing designs have not improved, or for that matter some demolition is not necessary in the name of progress, orderliness and good planning.

But for a while it look as though to serve "progress" many of Canada's irreplaceable landmarks would fall victims to the demolition hammer. There were excellent precedents. Entire blocks of buildings across the country had been defenceless objects of scorn and derision until finally in the name of new and higher assessment, higher density and modernity the bulldozer came and they were no more.

With them went some gems of Canada's heritage and history. From the rubble emerged classy and glassy structures which architects and owners thought would likewise endure the test of time.

Even cemeteries were not sacred or secure from disruption. People laid to rest (or what was left of them) were uprooted and moved to new locations to make way for new developments and the saying "Rest in Peace" lost its meaning - at least for some.

Fortunately, not all reminders of the past were obliterated in the rush to give Canada a new look, which bore no resemblance to the old. Historical societies, many with little support outside their own ranks, were able to save some of the shining examples of the past. Various government and quasi-government agencies were able to save others and ad hoc organizations rescued still more with the hard won aid of municipal councils.

There were solitary buildings and residential areas which in the cycle of circumstance escaped the opportunistic invasion as their day of departure had not come. Meanwhile they provided oases of cheap housing for low-income families. Some further down the road to obscurity became flop houses, while others were abandoned altogether, their windows boarded up, while weeds grew in tangled masses around them and they stood like derelicts on a reef waiting for time to wash them away.

These examples of once proud addresses had all the ear-marks of the slums of tomorrow, of breeding grounds for crime; of eventual complete abandonment and decay.

But in many - if not most - instances it didn't happen. Perhaps it was a miracle. Perhaps sanity triumphed. In any event a combination of factors all had a hand in turning the tide including inflation, a new reverence for Canada's heritage, protest movements, the increasing cost of gasoline, a new awareness of the advantages of living closer to the city core, private and corporate perception of the economic possibilities of rescuing and reclaiming existing buildings, and a movement toward a simpler lifestyle.

There are now more than 7 million housing units in Canada, but only 1.2 million were built by 1920 or before and only 2.3 million by 1945 or before. So fully two-thirds of all dwellings are of

relatively recent vintage viewed from the standpoint of life expectancy.

But thousands of pre-1945 houses were weeded out to be replaced by massive private or public housing projects for as many as 12,000 residents on one site, like Toronto's St. James Town development.

Similarly, hundreds of commercial and industrial premises went the same route to make way for new shopping centres or high-rise office towers or mixed-use projects.

True, many of the demolitions and their replacements were good for the municipalities in which they occurred; many were good for business or good for Canada, such as Toronto's futuristic City Hall, Montreal's Place Ville Marie, Calgary's Calgary Tower, and Vancouver's Pacific Centre.

Among the casualties in this decade alone were Winnipeg's ornate old city hall in 1971; Toronto's John G. Howard Building in 1976; Montreal's stately Van Horne mansion in 1974 (to make way for yet another parking lot); Vancouver's Birk's Building also in 1974; Saskatchewan's Standard Trust Building in 1976, and many, many others.

But back to rescuing of existing, older well-constructed housing. Some individuals saw the advantages of buying such properties quite often at very low prices (among them the late newspaper baron Lord Thomson's boyhood home near downtown Toronto); gutting the interiors and replacing the electrical, plumbing and heating systems. The renovations cost about the same as the purchase price, with the result the owner had a new house inside and the elegance of yesteryear on the outside.

The movement gathered momentum in the 1960's, first by individuals and then by companies which saw the advantages of bringing whole blocks of old residences, many of the

row house variety, up to the safety standards of today.

The momentum has produced such fire examples of restoration as Hamilton's Hess Village and turned former hippie havens like Toronto's once-notorious Yorkville into sought after addresses for boutiques and accommodation. The same thing has happened as far away as San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury - birthplace of the hippie movement. Former near slums or potential slums have become prestige addresses - and that's not all bad.

Sections of downtown of some cities are following the trend by reclaiming, restoring and rejuvenating themselves, sometimes with government help, notably in Ontario and Saskatchewan, and making them places where the pedestrian is again king. Oshawa, Ontario is a leading example.

While Canada is admittedly in the shadow of the United States in many ways, the rejuvenation of its residential and commercial areas is not one of them. A recent U.S. study found there is a continuing economic erosion of American city centres refusing the assumption a major downtown renaissance is underway, based on isolated success stories.

Data compiled for the past-1970 period by the Urban Institute in Washington indicates the downtown areas of the U.S. keep sliding downhill while the suburbs are burgeoning.

FOOTNOTE: There has been much ado about higher average real estate prices in Canada than in the U.S. Because properties are more valuable here, it makes economic sense to reutilize them and convert them to new uses in step with the times, rather than let them fall into decay and depreciate in value. This one fact alone has probably done as much to prevent slum formation in Canada as any other.



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