

An evolving heritage: Cooperation and the emergence of 'main street' heritage in Canada 1970-1985

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Abstract

This paper examines ways heritage conservation practices changed to address rapid suburbanization in Canada between 1970 and 1985. The paper suggests that cooperation between heritage experts and parties working beyond the field was a critical factor in developing new community-based conservation approaches for conserving urban heritage in small and mid-sized communities. The paper concludes by considering how the concept of interdisciplinary cooperation, as shown in this case, may help address current questions facing urban heritage conservation.

Heritage conservation practices in Canada shifted markedly during of the late 1970s and early 1980s. During this time it became clear that the architectural heritage of towns and villages was being undermined by the rapid suburbanization and the subsequent decline of locally owned businesses. The built fabric of established community centres faced irreparable decay and demolition.

In response, heritage practices shifted focus from preserving monumental structures toward conserving commercial streetscapes, or what were called at the time main streets. Central to this change was a new sense of cooperation. Well-established historians and heritage architects began to seek allies beyond the field among local business interests, through economic development programs, and within community building initiatives. What emerged was a new, broadly defined definition of heritage conservation as an integrated community-focused initiative.

The challenges of the 1970s in Canada anticipate today's questions of globalization, mobility, and rapid urbanization. As such, the shift brought about in Canadian heritage practices at that time may provide an informative case study of how the field can evolve to address emerging challenges to sustainability within an increasingly globalized context.