



## VIEWPOINTS

Reprinted from the December 1984/January 1985 issue of *Canadian Heritage* magazine

### Building a Cultural Identity

Last May, in Rostock and Dresden, East Germany, I attended a five-day international conference whose main theme had the imposing title, "Monuments and Sites: Their Contribution to the Definition of Cultural Identity."



Jacques Dalibard

This conference was a major event. It had been planned for three years. It was attended by more than 500 architects, planners, engineers, historians, and government officials. Forty-five countries were represented.

Ninety-nine papers were submitted. More impressive than the number of participants was the number of variations on the conference theme. Architecture's relationship to cultural identity could be viewed, participants suggested, in numerous ways. Many speakers, of course, said a country's great institutional buildings contributed to a sense of cultural identity. Rachel Angelova said that it was the vernacular buildings and the villages that best expressed in her native Bulgaria the development of the national cultural and artistic tradition. Julian Smith of Canada said that in new countries it was recently-built structures which provided a common reference point. Alpha Konaré said that in Mali buildings were ephemeral: it was not structures that were preserved so much as the construction skills which made them. Others wondered about the nature of national identity: what was it? Did it exist?

That last question is one with which a lot of Canadians could identify. After all, there was a time when this country seemed to turn the search for an identity into a kind of

national obsession. That was certainly the case in 1964, when I became a senior designer for the Canadian pavilion at EXPO 67. I participated in a brain trust that year and consulted people like John Porter, Lister Sinclair, and Laurier Lapierre to discuss not only what the pavilion should look like but also what it should express. What was this Canadian identity we wanted it to reflect? We decided to make the pavilion represent the country's resources and achievements. The image we created reflected certain realities about Canada: the pavilion was the fair's largest, offered a sense of openness, and was made of disparate parts. In these ways, it mirrored a reality but we still didn't know at the end what exactly made up the Canadian identity.

The word "identity" is an interesting one. It comes, the dictionary tells us, from the Latin *idem*, meaning sameness of essential or generic character. In this sense, the word suggests a union of one thing with others (people "identify" with this or that). But the word also is used to suggest the other side of the coin. When police ask us to identify a suspect in a lineup, we're looking for characteristics which distinguish one from the rest. If we apply these two shades of meaning to Canadian culture, we're asking both what it is that makes us Canadians and what it is that makes us different from others.

The responses to those question will vary with the answerer. A sociologist will say one thing, a political scientist another, an historian something else. The area I am most interested in is the built environment. What I and my colleagues at Rostock ask is: Does the built environment say something about our national identity? Does it distinguish us from others? It should. Since a country spends more time, energy, and money on its buildings than it does on anything else, surely the way we build sheds light on our collective character.

I think that our architecture does tell us a great deal about who we are. But we have to look closely to find it. The reason is that here in Canada we

have a tremendously varied look. So varied is it, in fact, that it is sometimes hard to get a handle on exactly what it is that makes us us. The mental gymnastics our special appearance demands of us reminds me of a scene in Jules Fieffer's play *Little Murders*. In it, a New York detective, pressed to solve a rash of 150 murders, paces a floor, certain that to solve the crimes he must unlock the one thing they all share in common. At last, he knows what it is. "The one thing that they all have in common," he shouts, "is that they have absolutely nothing in common."

The character of Canada's human settlement up to the mid-20th century is something like that. As you travel across this country, it becomes obvious that punctuating the vast spaces are little pockets of humanity that, in many ways, are cut off from one another, no two, outside a region, looking alike. In the fishing villages of Nova Scotia, brightly-painted houses stand on a landscape of rock and earth and water, their positions apparently haphazard but, in effect, located to minimize the impact of a harsh climate and a rugged topography. In Quebec, we find along the St. Lawrence a continuous line of farmhouses fronting long and narrow fields, and punctuated every 15 kilometres by villages with their silver-roofed churches and imposing presbyteries. Also on the river, we discover rising out of the St. Lawrence a rocky promontory on which is imposed the pattern of a French provincial town topped by a railway hotel in the style of a fairy tale castle. In Toronto, there is a microcosm of Canada's multicultural mix. Kensington Market. Spadina. College Street. Cabbagetown. These are neighbourhoods and streets which serve as stage sets for the successive ethnic groups that give them their colourful and ever-changing character. Or, take the prairies. The interplay of parts: the flat landscape, the wheat fields, the grain elevators, the railway tracks, the tell-tale church whose spire or dome betrays the origin and religion of the town's inhabitants. Or, a

community in B.C.: the town's mostly-wooden buildings precariously hugging the side of a mountain and threatening at any moment to drop into the lake below. These places are unmistakable. These places have distinct looks.

Why is this so? There are, I think, several reasons. The first is, as I suggested, the sheer size of our country. We are so much larger than almost every other country that

made of an amazing variety of people: Inuit, Indian, French, English, Scottish, German, Italian, Portuguese, Japanese, Chinese, Ukrainian, and many others. When representatives from various nations arrived, they brought with them their own ideas about how to build. Naturally, when they built they took into account such variables as climate, topography, and materials but echoes of home found their way into

first Europeans arrived, the country was a real estate proposition. Economic considerations were foremost in the minds of those who risked money charting and exploiting Canada's lands and waters. Whether it was for fish, furs, minerals, lumber, wheat, or oil, it was for the country's staples that Canada was developed. The early fishing fleets, the Hudson's Bay Company, the Canadian National Railway, almost all of the country's

JOHN WILKINSON



outsiders have difficulty at first understanding our scale. Friends from Europe come for a brief holiday and bring with them a checklist of places they want to see. Montreal. Niagara Falls. The Rockies. They have no concept of how far apart these places are. All that space means a wide range of topographies. Rugged shorelines here. Forests there. Prairies. Rolling hills. Mountains. Glaciers. Tundra. Each of these natural environments demands a different kind of building. Each of these regions offers different materials with which to build. This alone insures that our look is regional. A country the size of, say, England or Poland can have a surprising number of different landscapes, but they come one on top of the other and permit a continuity of building styles. Because of our distances, we have no such continuity. When you go from Normandy to Brittany, you see things change gradually, the stone and rooflines of one area slowly changing into that of another. In Canada, because of our distances, the changes are abrupt.

Another thing which gives our communities their different faces is multiculturalism. This country is

numerous building styles. The upshot is that our built environment is not homogeneous. Architecturally, we have never been a melting pot. We are a country of derivative, discrete building styles.

True, other countries can point out that they, too, are the product of several waves of immigration and that their architecture also is the product of ethnic cross-fertilization. The difference in Canada is both spatial and temporal. The size of Canada, we have already noted, automatically creates a regionalism. Time also is important. Most countries are much older than ours. In them, the centuries have tended to blur ethnic differences. This blurring has not happened to such a degree in Canada. Our imported architecture — whether it is a Dutch barn, a French farmhouse, an English manor house — has not had time to interrelate and evolve into a patina of sameness.

There is another way in which our architecture reflects our history. And it, too, adds a level of complexity. Canada was founded as a business proposition. This might not sound quite as attractive as saying that we were founded because of some noble philosophy of political freedom, but there we are. From the moment the

builders had, at bottom, a financial reason for being here. This led to a boom-and-bust syndrome.

Communities grew and flourished then went into decline as one or another staple was used up. This cycle of development created temporal layers (some regions built or rebuilt in one century, some in another). These waves of development add a richness to our built environment that is found in very few places in the world.

There is another consideration which makes the Canadian architectural mosaic even more interesting. And that is the question of juxtaposition. I said earlier that the architectural styles we find in this country are derivative. What is absolutely our own is the way that these various styles stand side by side. Where can you find a Gothic church, a neoclassical bank building, a Scottish warehouse, and a French farmhouse? Not in Scotland. In Old Montreal. Where can you find a Picturesque style railway station, a Ukrainian church, and a grain elevator standing cheek by jowl? Not in the Ukraine. In a Canadian prairie town. Or where can you find on the same street an Italianate villa next to a log cabin next to a boomtown

false-fronted store? Certainly not in Italy. In Dawson City, Yukon. It is, in Canada, the piling up of many disparate parts that gives the whole a special look of its own.

For the past 20 or 30 years this special look of ours has been threatened. Maybe it was because we have so few cathedrals and castles and mansions that we didn't notice at first that our historic built environment was disappearing. Our monuments were not, for the most part, great buildings. Our monuments were really the sum total of a lot of structures that were a part of everyday life and commerce. Our heritage of buildings is an entire Newfoundland outport, an entire Saskatchewan town. It was easy, at first, to let parts of this building stock slip away. What if we lost a row of quite ordinary houses here, an old mill there? It wasn't as if we were losing a great cathedral or a great fortress, was it? What, of course, were slipping away were the very things that made us unique: our regional differences, our time and space layerings, the strange juxtaposition of our buildings.

What began to replace this texture is now well known: standardization of building material was introduced a few generations ago. Official architecture and the architecture of institutions and businesses had traditionally placed aesthetic considerations alongside economic. After the Depression and World War II, however, builders began erecting structures as inexpensively as possible. Art went out and cheap hardware, flimsy wall finishes, and mechanical construction techniques came in. In Canada, a new wave of urbanization led to the development of highrises and highways and parking lots and chain stores and franchise restaurants and tracts of suburban housing that all looked the same. When this sameness hit, St John's and Saskatoon, Sherbrooke and Sudbury started to look alike.

It is against this greying of Canada that groups such as the Heritage Canada Foundation fight. A nation's cultural identity is made up of many things: its history, its political philosophy, its institutions, its literature, its performing arts, its natural surroundings, its built environment. When any one of these pillars is endangered, the nation's cultural identity is weakened. The elements which make up the look of Canada — our vernacular, crazy-quilt look — are threatened by the continuing mismanagement of our built environment. Our job is to point out that the richness of our

communities resides in the diversity of their appearance. If we fail, some observer at some future Rostock will be able to solve the riddle of our lack of cultural identity by looking at our towns and cities and saying, "That's it. The one thing they all have in common is that they have everything in common." ✱



*Executive Director*  
*Jacques Dalibard*

---



The Heritage Canada Foundation  
La Fondation canadienne pour la  
protection du patrimoine

(613) 237-1066  
P.O. Box 1358 Stn. B/  
C.P. 1358 succ. B  
Ottawa, Ontario K1P 5R4