

DIVERSE PEOPLES, DIVERSE PLACES

From Diversity Comes Inspiration



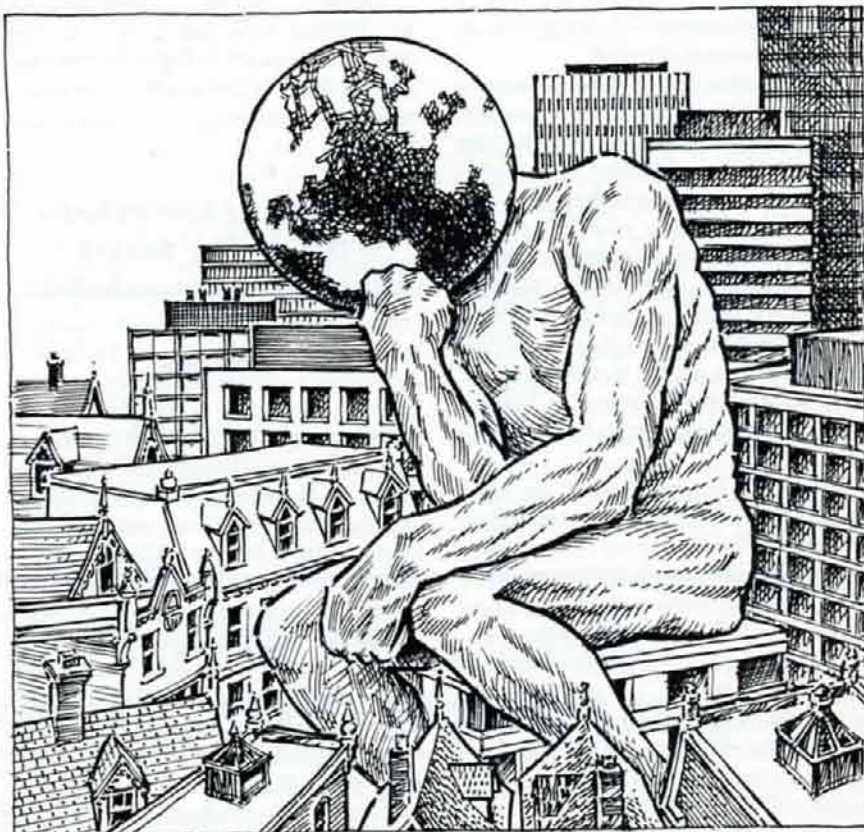
TEN YEARS AGO, Heritage Canada was contacted by a prominent conservationist about what he considered the deleterious impact Portuguese immigrants were making on a

neighbourhood in Toronto's Harbord Street area. The area, constructed in the 1880s and 1890s by the Irish and Scots, was characterized by Victorian buildings replete with elaborately-patterned redbrick façades, steep gables, decorated bargeboard, and bay windows. But now, the buildings featured what the Toronto conservationist thought were inappropriate colouring and accoutrements.

Soon thereafter, I visited the area and, while I discovered that some additions appeared out of character with the original buildings, I was most forcibly struck by the vibrancy of the neighbourhood. Not only was it physically distinctive in terms of its pastel colours, iron fences, and little gardens but it was also alive with the friendly bustle of its inhabitants.

Even more to the point, while many North American neighbourhoods had been destroyed by urban renewal, this one survived thanks to the care shown it by waves of immigrants: the Jews in the 1940s, the Italians in the 1950s, and the Portuguese in the 1960s and '70s. It was only in the 1970s, when it became trendy to rediscover the inner cities, that there was suddenly concern about the way the Portuguese were treating buildings that, were it not for them, might have been demolished.

The right of the Portuguese and of other ethnic groups to express their culture was never really threatened. However, it is now enshrined, encouraged even, in our "Charter of Rights and Freedoms" whose section 27 states,



Albert Prinsner

"The Charter shall be interpreted in a manner consistent with the preservation and enhancement of the multicultural heritage of Canadians."

This position constitutes an important reversal of our national attitude. Although, in the past, assimilation was not officially promoted, it was certainly taken for granted. What we are now undertaking is a deliberate experiment to build a society based on ethnic diversity. We are attempting to become, in other words, one of the world's first nations to be officially multicultural as a result of immigration.

It seems to me that multiculturalism is composed of two elements: race relations and cultural identity. The term

"race relations" has both positive and negative implications. At worst, it means racism. At best, it means a harmonious society enriched by ethnic groups which build synergistically on each other's strength.

Cultural identity, as it applies to ethnic groups in Canada, is the sense of self which derives from a composite of many interconnected factors including language, religion, history, tradition, education, art, crafts, and occupations. What I want to focus on here, however, is one aspect of cultural identity — our built heritage, which is our buildings and our patterns of settlement.

In Canada, our building stock is an uncommonly rich mix. Some parts of it — the igloo of the Inuit, the teepee of the Plains Indian, the grain elevator of the prairie farmer — respond to their

By Jacques Dalibard

environments in indigenous ways.

Most of our building types and construction techniques, however, started elsewhere: the early buildings of the French, English, Scots, Loyalists, Ukrainians, Mennonites, and Doukhobors were imported from the countries of their builders. These imports were soon adapted to the climate, soil, topography, and local resources as well as to already-established techniques and styles. The bell-cast roof found on many Québec houses evolved, for example, from the high-pitched roof of the Norman farmhouse, a response to Canada's heavier snowfall.

On a more superficial level, existing buildings were often modified cosmetically to suit the taste of new occupants whose origin was different from that of the builder. And in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the beliefs and philosophies of various ethnic groups were reflected in the style of monumental and institutional buildings and in prestigious domestic architecture. The French, for example, showed a predilection for Second Empire, the English for medieval styles, and prairie settlers for classical.

Ethnic settlement patterns are even more significant than are individual buildings. Through their settlements, ethnic groups traditionally expressed and protected their everyday cultural identity. Rural settlement, which involves the type, choice, division, and exploitation of land, the planning and grouping of farm buildings, and the establishment of rural communities, has very often reflected the traditions of the settlers. The craggy-shored Newfoundland outposts recall a tradition of periodic bay stations that dates from the 16th-century Basque fishermen. The settlement pattern is distinctly different from what we find in rural Québec — the French seigneurial system which featured long, rectangular strips of farmland, each with access to the river, and villages established every ten miles. And neither of them is like the block settlement of the Ukrainians in the aspen parkland north of the open prairie, chosen by the settlers because it resembled the landscape they knew at home.

Most urban communities were established by a single ethnic group. As a community developed, however, it attracted representatives of other groups who, because of their initial modest number, were generally integrated. Periodically, a sudden influx of a particular group would take place; a distinc-

tive ethnic area would emerge. As a rule, areas close to the centre of the community were the temporary residence of immigrants, the first places occupied by successive waves of newcomers before they assimilated or developed new areas as a result of improvements in their economic status. Each of these urban areas is characterized by four elements which ensure cultural identity: ethnic residential concentration, institutions, cultural activities, and ethnic-owned businesses.

Enough is left of the buildings and settlements of the late 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries that they make recognizable ethnic and architectural contributions to our environments. Our

Planning for ethnic diversity must become an academic subject.

built heritage, by reflecting our varied geography and the cultural contributions of successive groups of immigrants, has created an environment characterized by the regional differences, layerings of time and space, and surprising juxtapositions which make Canada an intriguing country.

Two types of forces are changing the physical aspects of our cultural identity. Time, social mobility, and intermarriage are blurring the lines which separate original settlements and groups, thereby diluting diversity. These are a natural part of becoming a nation and nothing can or should be done to impede them. But there is another force which is unnecessarily destructive.

Over the past 35 years we have witnessed a greying of Canada, as a faceless international architecture of shopping malls, apartment blocks, office towers, and bungalows has turned numerous neighbourhoods and regions into anonymous environments while, at the same time, creating vast tracts of suburbs. This process is a negation of the contribution made by the people who settled this country. Through it, we destroy our cultural wealth, the roots of our ethnic groups, and the identity of Canada.

We must make every attempt to preserve the contributions of the ethnic groups which have helped shape Canada's environment. The heritage

which is preserved offers us inspiration: it inspires everything from architectural forms to a deeper understanding of our diverse peoples, to a better comprehension of other nations. Museums, historic sites, and heritage villages are our traditional methods of conservation. But preservation demands a holistic approach that encourages the greatest possible number of people to participate in managing change that is respectful of our natural, built, and ethnocultural environment. This is precisely the approach which Heritage Canada chose for its Main Street and Heritage Regions programmes.

One of the challenging questions ahead of us is how to encourage new immigrants to participate in the decision-making process and make major contributions to our built environment. The potential for original contributions in terms of buildings is, of course, more limited today than it was in the past. Such things as recent building by-laws, design guidelines, and standardized materials often conflict with the values and traditions of the newcomers. Yet, the potential for new architectural forms and types of buildings is exciting. We have witnessed, for example, the appearance of temples, mosques, and community centres built by recently-arrived ethnic groups composed of Muslims, Buddhists, and other religious denominations relatively new to Canada.

In terms of settlement, whether newcomers expand their existing districts or create new areas, the perception and organization of space may be quite different from our existing patterns. The risk of conflict is great but so is the potential for vitality and originality.

One of the obstacles to collaboration is a lack of knowledge. Little research has been conducted on ethnic neighbourhoods and districts, not to mention race relations and cultural identity. There are few professionals who have focused on the field and there is little public awareness. It is essential that planning for ethnic diversity become an academic subject as well as an area of specialization for certain government officials. More important, we have to devise a process whereby newcomers and the established population work together with politicians, municipal officials, and developers to exchange knowledge, create mutual understanding, and manage our environment collaboratively. These elements seem to be lacking in the controversy now affect-

ing the Hong Kong immigrants who recently came to Vancouver. The new Chinese are perceived as destroying the character of existing neighbourhoods without making a substantial contribution to cultural identity. This, of course, is something that Canadian developers and builders have been doing for 35 years. But the Chinese have arrived at a time when Canadians are questioning this type of development. The recent Cadillac-Fairview controversy in Victoria is a good example of the new public awareness and activism. What makes the situation potentially dangerous in Vancouver is that the new developers are identified as a particular ethnic group. And the anger sparked by the recent changes they have created could easily turn into racism. (See story, page 29)

While the Hong Kong investors are not blameless in this controversy, it is ironic that their advisors are very often Canadian developers, real estate dealers, architects, and builders. But the government is most to blame. Its new "investors" category of immigrants encourages those from Hong Kong who are willing to invest \$250,000 and create jobs to move to Canada. At the same time, David Lam, a Hong Kong immi-

grant who arrived here 20 years ago and made a reported \$100 million in real estate, has been named the Lieutenant-Governor of British Columbia.

To send such signals is probably good for the economic development of the country. But the government should have anticipated the problems and created the proper climate to accommodate the sudden influx of Chinese immigrants. It should have put in place the proper mechanisms for research, information, and public consultation by promoting communication and understanding between the residents of Vancouver and the newcomers.

For better or for worse, the federal and provincial governments have shown unprecedented faith and optimism in human nature by adopting multiculturalism as a tenet of our "Charter of Rights and Freedoms." The importance of focusing on multiculturalism is self-evident at home and abroad. Global migration is on the rise. The problems it creates must be faced before they lead to racism. Canada can lead the way here. For example, most nations consider their built environment an expression of their culture. We must think of our built environment as an expression of our many cultures.

The two aspects of multiculturalism—race relations and cultural identity—are complementary. The latter one is both a preventive and an antidote for the potential poison of the former. A strong cultural identity inspires creativity and achievement which in turn engenders respect and eventually creates harmonious race relations.

Good race relations will raise the level of our civilization. This implies a more sophisticated citizen, one who participates in the management of his environment; one who deeply feels the importance of maintaining communities with a sense of place and a sense of continuity; one, in short, who understands and shares the emotion expressed in communities such as the Portuguese neighbourhood in Toronto's Harbord Street area. ♣

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