PROTECTING THE PAST is a tricky proposition, particularly in times of rapid growth. No one wants to inhibit prosperity and the material benefits it brings. Indeed, the transformative power of a booming economy can stimulate great cultural creativity. Art and architecture blossom when confidence abounds.

The downside of boom times is that the cultural layers of previous eras can get trampled in the rush. In times of rapid change, how we do ensure that change is not based upon a false premise of its own sake, but for the sake of progress in the form of an enriching blend of the new and the old?

We can start by defining what we are aiming at—a better city. We should aspire not just to better cities, but to great cities.

What makes a great city? I have my own list of defining factors: economic prosperity, cultural diversity, livability, cultural achievement, and architecture—these are all essential.

But to be truly great, a city must also have a special quality that defines it and makes it distinctive. There is a certain je ne sais quoi that is the essence of a place. This quality is impossible to quantify; indeed, it is difficult even to describe. But whenever I visit a city for the first time, I search for it with a sense of anticipation. I think of "Etonne-moi!" Astonish me!

"Etonne-moi!" is a cry that I have heard from Canadian architects and planners, and from people who care about their communities. It is a cry for wonder, for amazement. It is a call to action to the developer who bulldozes, the civic leader who consents to the destruction of buildings, the politician who pushes for progress at all costs, the citizen who stands by as history is lost.

The capacity of a city to surprise and astonish is based on its distinctive personality, which is a product of the interaction of people and place. A great city is one in which people like to live and work, and in great measure their feelings in this regard are a response to their physical environment. Every great city has a rich mixture of space and structure, new and old, that is fundamental to its identity. Great buildings contribute to it, but they are also shaped by parks—spaces, plazas, boulevards, public squares—and by natural landscape and geographical setting.

In great cities, change and growth build upon the past. They cherish character, they do not obliterate it. And heritage conservation enriches the character of our cities.

How, then, do we promote heritage and protect the potential for building a great city? I have three principles that I would like to invoke, principles that I think both define the issues and point us towards answers.

The public interest

Heritage is a public concern. Civilizations are built by a slow process of accretion. In cities, the centres of our civilizations and the crucibles of our culture, it is vitally important that we protect this process right.

Consider how hard Canadians strive to integrate heritage into their lives. Think of the popularity of residential births and high-tech office space in old industrial buildings, and the vibrancy of shops and restaurants in rejuvenated heritage districts. In most of our cities, a Victorian neighbourhood has been rescued from dilapidation and decline by people who fell in love with its character and lovingly restored its old buildings.

A viable form of development

If you need proof that the public is interested in heritage, you need only look to the market place. Marketers increasingly employ a heritage-based ethos to sell products. Corporations recognize heritage as a vital ingredient in the society in which they operate and compete. In many places, heritage is the principal component of a package of attractions that draws tourists.

Enlightened developers understand that heritage buildings are an asset. Where once they might have bulldozed, they now integrate heritage into their plans, protecting natural and cultural features as valuable, even precious, assets. They do this because they know that heritage enriches quality of life. They market lifestyle, and lifestyle sells.

Public interest in heritage has created a new breed of developer who converts heritage buildings into high-end commercial or residential spaces that bring premium returns.

Of course, still we have the developers whose economic calculus does not transcend the simple-minded equation of dollars and square feet. In spite of the tremendous public support, heritage buildings continue to be at risk.

Heritage through planning

We have to plan for the past as well as we plan for the future. Heritage issues must be considered at the forefront of the planning process, in order to integrate sound conservation into development plans.

In Ontario, some of the biggest successes in the heritage sector over the past decade have come from just such an approach. While the Ontario Heritage Act, despite our best efforts, remains unresolved, real advances in preservation have resulted from the introduction of heritage considerations into government processes concerned with land use planning.

Heritage is now one of the issues that must be examined in reviews of new development under Ontario's Planning Act. It is also integrated into the federal and provincial decision-making and assessment processes. We can look forward to heritage considerations being built into more land-use legislation in the future.

But it's not enough to have heritage recognized as a legitimate concern. The ability of planners to act on heritage principles depends on detailed and accurate information about heritage resources. We need comprehensive heritage master plans that contain inventories of archaeological, architectural, historical, and cultural landscapes. This means that a lot of hard work remains to be done in surveying resources, evaluating significance, preparing inventories, and building databases.

All of this, of course, takes time and money. How do we generate the political will and financial commitment required to invest in a planned approach to heritage conservation?

Getting there

We can start by recognizing a looming crisis: We are all aware that Canada's cities are falling behind their counterparts in the United States. American cities have recognized that they had serious urban problems and set out to design the solutions to them. About them. They learned that heritage is essential to the vitality of their cities, and have made heritage preservation a cornerstone of their urban renaissance.

Meanwhile, Canadians continue to rework along, unaware of those very elements that make our cities work in the first place. We have not been a loose unit of our heritage buildings in the last thirty years. We tolerate our heritage preservation laws, private-sector hegemony in our downtowns and on the farmlands bordering our cities, and neglect of public assets such as cultural parks, waterfronts, and green spaces. Canadians need a wake-up call, and its our job to make it.

Those of us who care about heritage, who care about our cities, have to make the social and economic case for our cause. This means showing people that it can be cheaper to restore or renovate than it is to demolish. It means showing that the boom in cultural tourism, where heritage is a special quality that defines it and makes it distinctive.

What lies ahead

Clearly, the heritage and planning communities have much to do if they are to build cities with the potential for greatness. But a lot of promising things are happening in the heritage field right now.

"Smart growth" is the right approach to development that is sensitive to people and place—and for us, the most promising. It is a powerful social movement that has been made to the protection of natural areas and cultural heritage, to building healthy communities.

The second element involves planning. Building compact, efficient, people- and environmentally-friendly urban spaces takes forethought. We should embrace the "smart" in "smart growth," which envisions cities where natural and cultural heritage are integrated into daily life, and relies upon planning as the means of achieving this goal.

Heritage incentives

I have long been concerned about the lack of economic incentives favouring preservation. We need more incentives to encourage downtown core development and revitalization. Incentives that encourage developers and owners are rewarded for preserving heritage buildings. Within a sympathetic tax environment, market forces will work to save heritage buildings.

Building momentum

I think we are entering a new era for heritage. Look at everything we have gone for us:

» A vital public interest in heritage, evident in the dedication of tens of thousands of volunteers to communities across the country, and in the lifestyle and choices of millions of Canadians.

» Private interests that are discovering the benefits of investing in heritage.

» The integration of heritage into urban planning.

"Etonne-moi," Diaghilev instructed his dancers. At first blush this seems to be an anti-planning sentiment. Diaghilev was relinquishing control. Yet he felt formidable for so much of the real work, discipline, and planning that had come before. You can't plan for creative achievement or legislative greatness. But the preconditions of creativity and greatness can and should be planned. Depending on the necessary conditions, and there is no telling what may happen. Plan to be surprised!

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