

Introduction

Did you know that Nelson, BC has the highest number of historic buildings per capita than any other city in BC outside of Vancouver and Victoria? Today, Nelson is renowned not only for its architecture, but also for its vibrant downtown core and pedestrian-friendly charm. But it wasn't always so....

“Main Street is the glory of Canada. If a community has no heart, it has no soul; and its heart should beat faster at the core. For here is the glory of the past, the symbol of stability, the structures that our fathers and their fathers erected, the visual reminder of another time that gives every small town a sense of continuity.” - Pierre Berton, foreword to *Reviving Main Street* (1985)

The Journey to Revitalization

In 1977, as part of a broader initiative around urban heritage conservation, the BC Heritage Conservation Branch began a study of heritage structures in Nelson. It was two years in production, took a further two years to complete, and culminated in the publication of *Nelson: A Proposal for Urban Heritage Conservation*. The book was a tremendous and comprehensive resource for the revitalization efforts, and remains a valuable resource to this day (although out of print, a copy is available for viewing in the gallery, and is also in the collection of the Nelson Public Library).

Around the same time at the federal level, the Heritage Canada Foundation started the *Main Street Canada* program in 1979 with the goal of revitalizing Canadian downtowns. At its core, *Main Street Canada* was “an economic revitalization strategy using heritage conservation as a tool and a catalyst.” (from *The Main Street Program, Past and Present*, prepared by the Heritage Canada Foundation)

Following a successful pilot project in Perth, Ontario, in 1981 the program received \$1.18 million from the federal government to fund additional pilots. Seven other communities were selected to participate in the program, including Nelson. By the mid 80's the program had expanded to include 70 communities nation-wide.

In BC, the provincial government had their own Heritage Area Revitalization Program and Downtown Revitalization Program strategies which also provided funding and support. The effect locally was that the downtown revitalization was a joint effort. Business owners were supported through the combined resources of both the federal and provincial programs, in addition to funding from the municipal government.

Hans Honegger, who had previously gained experience in Perth, was hired by Heritage Canada to help Nelson develop and implement a heritage policy. He worked for three years in conjunction with Bob Inwood, who was hired to act on behalf of the City and Province and was involved for the duration of the revitalization. Inwood's previous work included designing and building the facade for the Feather of Hawk store in 1976 at 526 Stanley Street (currently home to the Love of Shiva Boutique). In addition, many local trades, artisans and craftspeople developed new knowledge and skills based on the training and experience they gained during the revitalization.

Once complete, the project proved to be an economic boon to Nelson, both during and after the few years when it was most active. It was also undeniably a key contributor to the wider renown that Nelson has developed in the years since.

Present Day

Today, nearly 30 years on, Nelson's architectural heritage is on much firmer ground than it was pre-revitalization. Cultures change however, as do the environments they build around them. Although the urgency has diminished for many, there are still those that hold restoration and conservation as the gold standard. Others advocate using existing historical streetscapes as a starting point for sympathetic design, favouring a more diverse and layered approach. Additionally, the notion of heritage itself has become more inclusive, acknowledging more widely that the physical legacy of past generations isn't limited to the architectural (ie. natural heritage).

Regardless of your preference, I'll leave the last word to Alistair Kerr, a long time preservation consultant who retired in 2011. (Kerr and fellow preservation consultant Don Tarasoff were the principal editors of "Nelson: A Proposal for Urban Heritage Conservation"):

"Heritage conservation, even simply defined as architectural restoration, has come a long way since 1973, but I do think that we are about as mainstream as our current approach is going to get us, unless we broaden what we consider as heritage and seek alternative ways of conserving it beyond just architectural restoration. ...Ultimately heritage is not about things, but about cultural values and processes which are constantly in flux and need to be continually negotiated and renegotiated."

- excerpt from *Reflections at the end of a Career*, by Alistair Kerr, (May 19, 2011)

Rod Taylor, Curator

Thanks to:

- **the Nelson and District Chamber of Commerce** for generously sponsoring this exhibit
- **Bob Inwood**, for sharing his time and loaning some of the material you see here
- **Heather MacAskill** who photographed Baker Street present day, and provided invaluable and tireless assistance with graphic design
- Summer student **Lindsay Dew** for researching information on the buildings
- **Shawn Lamb** and **Pat Rogers** for kindly reviewing that information.