

Steve Barber
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There is a development boom going on in Victoria. New highrises and condominiums are going up. There is tremendous pressure to redevelop.

That's cause for concern for Steve Barber, the senior heritage planner for Victoria. New building activity puts pressure on Victoria's stock of heritage buildings.



Barber fears for the buildings most at risk: buildings from the modernist period from 1945 to 1975.

"Some people might be surprised to hear it, but heritage didn't stop in 1945," he says.

As a heritage planner, Barber values the diversity of building styles and periods in Victoria. Modernist architecture, he knows, does not have the same general appeal as Victorian, Edwardian, and Arts and Crafts.

So he has to act fast. First, he ordered a survey of the city's modernist architecture. The planning department will then consider each building and its heritage value. Finally, they'll choose the finest nine or ten buildings to designate.



Royal Victoria Suites,
1411 Government St. before
restoration work. Credit:
Steve Barber, City of Victoria.

Barber has worked for Victoria's planning and development department for the past twenty years. When he arrived, he found a city that already had a system in place to provide grants to homeowners of heritage properties.

He helped the city expand its grant program to include owners of downtown commercial buildings. TIP, or the Tax Incentive Program for the residential conversion of commercial properties, went into effect in 1990. The results have been spectacular. Sixteen buildings, all in the downtown area, were rehabilitated. That created 305 new residential units and \$63,000,000 in economic spin-offs. Property values went up 10 to 12-fold, and crime went down.



Rehabilitated façade of
1411 Government St.
Credit: John C. Taylor

Although he is an expert in the field of heritage planning, Barber got into the field by accident. After a degree in Environmental Studies from the University of Manitoba, he earned a master's degree in Environmental Design in Architecture from the University of Calgary.

Then he got a call about a job opening in Winnipeg. He went for the interview and was offered the job in the city's heritage planning department. He'd always been interested in historic buildings, so he took it.

One of Barber's first projects had the potential to affect Winnipeg for generations: to write design guidelines for Winnipeg's Exchange District—which is now a national historic site.



Steve Barber in "Dragon Alley,"
the first TIP project.

It was daunting. But, in the course of the assignment, Barber learned some of the basics of heritage planning.

One lesson was to consult and listen to different perspectives. In Winnipeg, entrepreneurs and older property owners were sceptical about a heritage plan for the Exchange District. Younger entrepreneurs were more receptive to the possibility of incorporating retail businesses and services within a district of heritage warehouses and commercial buildings.

Another lesson was that heritage pays. By the end of the project, even the sceptics saw that smart heritage restoration could boost the retail sector, increase tourism, raise property values, and bring in more taxes for the city.

In Victoria, Barber has had the good fortune to work with a city council that is convinced of the value of heritage. In 2001, the city captured Heritage Canada Foundation's Prince of Wales Prize for Municipal Heritage Leadership for its commitment in making heritage conservation an integral part of its overall planning strategy.

"There is political leadership on council—and several councillors are active on the heritage front, at university and with the Heritage Canada Foundation," he says.

Another bonus is that Victoria has a community network dedicated to heritage. For instance, the Victoria Civic Heritage Trust is concerned with the rehabilitation of downtown. It is an independent charitable organization that operates at arm's length from government.

Another group, the Hallmark Society, is passionate about old houses. And there is provincial support, too, with an increasingly active Heritage Branch.

Still, for all Victoria's success in heritage planning and protection, Barber looks with some envy south of the border to the U.S., where there have been federal tax credits for heritage rehabilitation in place since 1976.

"In Canada, we haven't been so lucky," he explains. "Victoria has been doing it on its own, but what we need is a federal program of tax incentives."



The "Dragon Alley" project involved the adaptive re use of Chinese tenement buildings from 1912 which had been vacant for over 20 years. The alley is now a pedestrian pathway that allows additional light into the residential units.



Hart Block, 529 Herald St. before and after its rehabilitation.
Credit: Steve Barber, City of Victoria (before)
and John C. Taylor (after)

Canadian Institute of Planners

<http://www.cip-icu.ca/>

City of Victoria Heritage Program

http://www.victoria.ca/cityhall/departments_plnsrv_hrt.shtml

City of Victoria Tax Incentive Program

http://www.victoria.ca/cityhall/departments_plnsrv_hrttax.shtml

Victoria Civic Trust

<http://www.heritagevictoria.org/moreinfo.html>

Hallmark Society

<http://www.hallmarksociety.ca/>