Places for People—Our Heritage of the Everyday
by Martha Plaine

“I love barns.”

Dolores Schultz spoke these words earnestly, almost as a statement of faith. While it is true she loves barns in general, it is one barn in particular that is the main object of Mrs. Schultz’s affection: the barn in Bashaw, Alberta, that she and her husband inherited from his parents, Frederick and Agatha Schultz. Now that barn is in the safe keeping of Dolores and her adult children. They consider it a legacy that connects them powerfully to the grandfather they never knew in person.

Familiar buildings like a barn, corner store or bakery may not be the stuff of everyone’s passion. Probably few of us even consider these everyday structures as “architecture,” a term we reserve for important buildings and monuments designed by professional architects. The National Gallery in Ottawa, Toronto’s Roy Thompson Hall, and the Art Deco Marine Building in Vancouver—now those buildings qualify as architecture!

But it is a fact that the majority of Canada’s heritage buildings—the ordinary, everyday structures that line the streets of cities, towns, and rural areas—were not designed by professional architects. This built heritage of Canada is “non-architect’s architecture,” or what architectural historians call vernacular architecture.

“Vernacular” is a word coined by linguists to refer to the “native language of a region” as opposed to a superior (often imposed) language like Latin or Greek. Vernacular often meant “vulgar,” in the sense of ordinary or untutored. That is how architectural historians apply the word to describe the native buildings of a region.

Vernacular architecture is distinctive to a particular region, based on local needs, preferences, and the materials and skills available. This type of architecture is an aspect of cultural expression rooted in a place, set of values, and sometimes in an institution. This isn’t to say that builders of vernacular structures haven’t begged and borrowed from other styles. Quite the contrary: vernacular building designs often reflect other building styles, including classical and academic traditions.

Schultz’s Grand Barn, Bashaw, Alberta


Photo: Corey Schultz
The Schultz Barn, Bashaw, Alberta.

The Schultz barn was built by Dolores’s father-in-law Frederick, a homesteader from the Ukraine. He was by nature a careful man, but when it came to building a barn for his livestock and grain, he let his imagination soar.

Rather than the usual timber barn, Frederick envisioned a grand barn of stone. He supplied his own building material, with stones dug from his own fields. Next, he hired Ed Gunch, an itinerant stonemason, to help him with the design and construction of a massive two-level barn banked into a hillside. The upper level of thick timbers was capped by a gambrel roof and cupolas for decoration.

On the Prairies, stone was a material usually reserved for important town buildings like banks and schools. The Schultz barn may have raised a few eyebrows among neighbours who considered it ostentatious display.

But the family understood that in his way, Frederick Schultz was an artist. He created something both beautiful and enduring: a fabulous barn that his children and grandchildren treasure and intend to safeguard for posterity.

An Acadian Gem in New Brunswick

In Shediac, New Brunswick, Carmel Brun grew up with an appreciation for antiques and heritage buildings. As a child, she spent many afternoons accompanying her mother to estate sales and antique stores.

More than thirty years ago, Carmel and her husband moved to Shediac to work and raise their family. Strolling along Main Street, she noticed a beautiful old house that dated from 1825. Rumour had it that the house had been moved from Grande-Digue, a nearby village, and hauled across the ice by a team of horses to Shediac. The house was the childhood home of the great Acadian patriot Pascal Poirier. Carmel was smitten; she fell in love with the house. It seemed to embody the very soul of "l'Acadie."

Photo: Studio Sormany

Shediac councillor Carmel Brun in front of the Pascal Poirier House which she worked to see conserved.

Pascal Poirier (1852-1933) had been the twelfth and last child of Simon and Henriette Arsenault Poirier. He distinguished himself as a brilliant writer, a scholar, a lawyer and proud advocate of the Acadian people. Prime Minister John A. Macdonald named him senator, the first Acadian so honoured.

Descendants of Poirier inherited the house and lived in it for more than 150 years. Then a new owner talked of levelling the house to make room for a commercial project. Carmel Brun and other town councillors rallied to the cause and convinced Shediac to acquire the house. Under the guidance of architectural historians, the house was restored, and original Acadian features like the unique H-beams were uncovered. Now the Pascal Poirier House is home to an art gallery and history museum.

Tilting, Fogo Island, Newfoundland and Labrador

Some of the finest examples of vernacular architecture often go unrecognized. For a while that was the case in Tilting, a remote fishing outport on Fogo Island in northeastern Newfoundland. By chance more than design, Tilting had managed to preserve its traditional built heritage of fishing premises, saltbox houses, and wooden picket fences.

Many residents of Tilting trace their roots to the 18th century when families from Cork and Waterford counties in Ireland settled on Fogo Island as planters, or permanent residents.

Kinsella Property, Tilting.

The McGrath brothers are such a family. The McGraths grew up in a saltbox house, where their mother Gladys still lives. When the brothers married, they moved into houses near their parents' home, in the McGrath family neighbourhood. They worked alongside each other in the cod fishery, processing their catch on the wooden stages their grandfather had built at the shore.

The arrangement of the village into family neighbourhoods— and the collection of traditional houses, fishing premises, fences and landscapes—makes Tilting special. In fact, the Government of Canada designated the entire village a national heritage district.

Leo McGrath skippers a boat and makes his living fishing crab and turbot. He remarked that no one takes the old buildings for granted any more. Several traditional houses have been restored as museums, residents take a new pride in their village, and visitors from away are flocking to Tilting to learn about its history.

Dawson City's Gold-Rush Hotel, Yukon

Yukon Hotel, Dawson City. Photo: HCF

Peter Jenkins, a successful innkeeper in Dawson City, Yukon, speaks in unbusinesslike terms to explain what motivated him to undertake the expensive renovation of a Gold Rush-era log hotel. Jenkins says it was a "labour of love" to bring the Yukon Hotel on Front Street up to current building standards. It may have been the colourful history of the hotel that compelled Jenkins to come to the hotel's rescue.

The Yukon Hotel dates back to the early days of the Gold Rush, when Dawson City grew overnight from tent city to boom town. A local businessman, recorded only as J.E. Binet, acted fast at the start of the Gold Rush to put up a modest log building which he may have intended to run as an inn or tavern. But in 1898, real estate in Dawson was so scarce that even before the mud chinking between the logs was fully dry, Binet had made a deal with the Government of Canada to lease the building as office space for the new territory. He received $1,000 a month, an exorbitant amount in those days. In the 1930s the Binet Block, as it was called, was purchased by a lady hotelier who renamed it the Yukon Hotel.

That the hotel has survived intact for more than 100 years is a near miracle. Over the years fire has destroyed many more substantial buildings. Now that renovations have been completed, Peter Jenkins takes pleasure in welcoming a new generation of travellers to a modern, luxurious Yukon Hotel. Yet the exterior of the hotel looks remarkably like the image in photos of 100 years ago.

Ukrainian Four Corner Settlement, Gardenton, Manitoba


Photo: Jean Charney
St. Demetrius Church, Gardenton.

Bill and Anne Pohaychuk raised their family in rural Manitoba not far from the family homestead where Bill grew up.

In the late 1890s, Bill's parents left the Ukraine, and sailed to Canada. They arrived in their new country with one trunk containing all their belongings. These included an axe, a saw, a honey extractor and a tool for extracting oil from sunflower seeds. To establish title to their land, the Pohaychuks were obliged under the Dominion Lands Act to build a house and inhabit it six months of the year, cultivate a certain acreage, and make improvements to the land.

These conditions made it impossible for Ukrainian homesteaders to settle in towns or villages. To lessen the loneliness, they located their houses at the four inner corners of adjacent homesteads. It was a pattern that came to be known as a four corner settlement, another type of vernacular architecture.

The Four Corner Settlement in Gardenton—near where Bill Pohaychuk grew up—is a surviving example of the pattern. Although most of the farm buildings are derelict, the church that Bill's parents helped build

is still standing strong. The silver-domed St. Demetrius Church is the spiritual centre of the small Ukrainian community. The Pohaychuks take pleasure in being among the people who care for it and ensure its survival.

A Farmer's Bank in Rustico, Prince Edward Island

In Prince Edward Island, an impressive stone building that predates Confederation was designed not by an architect but by a self-taught carpenter and mechanic who also happened to be the parish priest.

Father Georges-Antoine Belcourt arrived in Rustico in 1859 to serve a poor farming community. A brilliant and energetic man, Belcourt realized that his flock needed more than spiritual healing if they were to survive the dire economic conditions that prevailed on the island.

For one thing, farmers were perennially short of cash. As a result they were in real danger of losing their farms to creditors. Belcourt established a bank—a farmers' bank— to make small, low-interest loans, or what today we might call micro credit. To house the bank, Belcourt designed an imposing stone building, two storeys high, with space for a lending library and bank offices on the main floor and a large parish hall on the second level.

The bank was constructed of red sandstone, locally quarried, hand-cut by the church parishioners. The story is that Father Belcourt instructed his congregation to quarry stone and carry it in their sleds when they came to church each Sunday.

The bank opened in 1864 with capital of about $1,000. It operated at a profit for some thirty years. Eventually, it was forced to close because of the Federal Bank Act, which required banks to hold large reserves. Historians believe the Farmers' Bank served as a model for the Alphonse Desjardins caisses populaires.

Édouard Blanchard returned home to Rustico after his career with the federal civil service. He has strong memories of his childhood, when the Farmers' Bank was the centre of community activity, and the bank's library was the only library in town. Édouard recalls that his father told him stories he had heard from his father: how Father Belcourt and the Farmers' Bank restored Rustico's sense of purpose and pride.

Édouard felt it was an honour to join the Friends of the Farmers' Bank, a group that raised funds to restore the bank as a museum.

"The people of Prince Edward Island have always understood the importance of co-operating with one another," he said. "Father Belcourt showed us with this bank what co-operation can accomplish."

Ottawa writer Martha Plaine has an interest in architecture, travel, tourism and the arts.