

## **Work That Endures: Careers in Built Heritage**

by Martha Plaine

In a Toronto studio, Jean-François Furieri stands over his drafting table, pencil in hand. With confident movements he sketches wreaths, rosettes and garlands. When he's satisfied with the design, he moves to a computer to execute the more precise image he's looking for to restore the decorative plaster work on a balcony in a historic theatre.

In another part of the studio, apprentices pour liquid plaster into custom moulds for a detailed frieze that will be part of the same restoration.

In Victoria, senior heritage planner Steve Barber is ready to do battle if necessary. There's a construction boom under way, sending property values skyward, and he knows what this can mean for historic buildings.

In Québec City, Tania Martin meets with prospective students, telling them about a course she will lead next summer. Tania specializes in religious heritage, and the course will deal with the challenges of preserving community churches—both the structures and the memories that convey the value of these sacred places.

Buildings usually take the spotlight in heritage conservation. Rarely do we shine it on the people who are hard at work restoring and rehabilitating treasured historic places such as Calgary's Lougheed Building, Toronto's Pantages Theatre or Ottawa's Library of Parliament.

They are a diverse group: planning professionals, engineers, developers, architects, technicians, designers, artisans and tradespeople.

What they share is a passion for history and architecture. It turns out that they also share a readiness to innovate, adapt, and use new technologies to help preserve what is old.

No matter what work they do, these professionals, tradespeople and volunteers agree that the best part of the job is the satisfaction derived from knowing that theirs is work that endures.

## **Renaissance Man of Heritage**

There is no typical work day for Donald Luxton. One day he's consulting on historic paint colours in Vancouver's Point Grey neighbourhood. Climbing a long ladder, he chips a paint sample from a dormer window on an Arts and Crafts-style home. Back in his office, he'll examine the paint under the microscope.

Another day he's doing research at a cemetery on Vancouver Island. Pencil and paper in hand, he observes the moss-covered gravestones and sculptures and the layout of paths, flower beds and shrubs, jotting down notes along the way.

He could be lecturing on heritage principles at the British Columbia Institute of Technology or giving a slide presentation about the Lions Gate Bridge, art deco design or early B.C. architects. He's written books on all three subjects.

Donald has translated his passion for history and architecture into a busy practice as a heritage architect and consultant. His general interest in buildings dates from his teens. It was not until 1974, when the Birks Building—an 11-storey landmark built in 1913—was demolished to make way for a new bank tower, that his interest expanded to include historic architecture. It was a defining moment and he resolved to try and prevent such unnecessary destruction.

After his architecture training at the University of British Columbia, Donald embarked on a career in relatively uncharted territory: heritage conservation. He found it rich with opportunity for heritage consulting, teaching and writing.

One of his many career successes was the Mole Hill Community Housing Project. The buildings in the neglected Mole Hill neighbourhood had been slated for demolition by the City of Vancouver. Instead, after seven years of hard work, 27 heritage homes ended up being preserved, painted in historic colours and made available for public housing. Community services, a centre for people with HIV/AIDS, community gardens and a community recycling project are some of the bonuses of the Mole Hill project. It's a model for intelligent rehabilitation and quality public housing.

And the reason Donald chipped paint samples from dozens of Arts and Crafts, Edwardian, Victorian and other period homes? That was a project for the Vancouver Heritage Foundation and Benjamin Moore Paints to create the True Colours palette of 35 Vancouver paint colours. Each year, owners of selected historic homes receive grants in the form of heritage consultation, historic paint analysis and free paint.

Benjamin Moore Paints is the corporate sponsor, and now colours such as Hastings Red, Mount Pleasant Tan and Point Grey are in demand by homeowners who aren't even involved in the program.

### **Property Developer Proves Investing in Heritage is Profitable**

For Calgary's Neil Richardson, entering the field of heritage property development came by accident.

He was a commercial lawyer looking for office space in downtown Calgary when he found an affordable property. In 1994 he bought the 1911 Toronto Dominion Bank building for a good price with his father—a structural engineer—as his business partner. The Heritage Property Corporation was born.

In the property development business the bottom line counts for more than historic sandstone and restored façades. But Neil insists there is money to be made—and a social return on investment—when a historic building is left standing. The challenges lie in figuring out how to bring it up to code, preserve its historic fabric and find it a suitable new use.

One of his firm's most ambitious projects was preserving the landmark Lougheed Building at the corner of 6th Avenue and 1st Street SW. The Lougheed was built in 1913 in the Chicago style. In 2000, the previous owner had obtained a permit to demolish it and the adjoining Sherman Grand Theatre in order to build a 22-storey condo tower on the site. It looked like a done deal.

But a public campaign to save the Lougheed and the Grand, as well as a near-disastrous fire in 2004, helped convince the owner to sell. The Richardsons bought the building and registered it as a historic property.

Buying the Lougheed was one thing. Financing the restoration was another. As it turned out, the building was eligible for a \$1-million federal grant from the Commercial Heritage Properties Incentive Fund, part of Parks Canada's Historic Places Initiative that ended prematurely in September 2006. The federal money paved the way for municipal tax incentives and provincial matching grants.

By the fall of 2007 the Lougheed's marble floors were fully restored and the interior rebuilt. Neil moved his new office there, as did a law firm. The Grand Theatre, the old vaudeville house where Sarah Bernhardt, Paul Robeson and the Marx brothers once played, reopened as a theatre for the 21st century.

### **Master of Plaster Creates Fantasy from Gypsum and Water**

Jean-Francois Furiere is a third-generation master plasterer. He learned the trade from his father and grandfather in Cannes, France. Today his great skill puts him in demand all over North America.

His studio, Iconoplast Designs Inc. of Toronto, restores architectural and decorative plaster columns, friezes, ceilings and balconies for some of the most beautiful heritage buildings in North America.

Projects include One King West, the Royal Ontario Museum and Pantages Theatre in Toronto.

In New York City, the firm's plaster works adorn the Selwyn Theatre, the Lyric/Apollo Theatre and the Manhattan Opera House.

Plaster work is an ancient art, one of the oldest building professions. Archaeological evidence dates decorative plaster work back more than 4,000 years to the Egyptian pyramids. Skilled plaster workers are the dinosaurs of the building restoration trades and they may be a dying breed, worries Jean-François.

But the master is doing his best to keep the ancient art alive.

It takes long years of study and practice to learn the trade. Jean-François employs six apprentices who assist him in every aspect of the work, from studio design and mixing perfect plaster to complicated installations.

It's physically demanding. Hours are spent high on scaffolding, reaching overhead to stabilize plaster or reinstall decorative ceilings, medallions and friezes. Artistic ability is a basic requirement, but a master tradesperson must also be strong in math and chemistry and bring an analytic approach to the work.

"The beauty of my trade is that I learn something new with every job," explains the master. "I have to figure out how the plaster I'm restoring was created and worked."

Women can succeed in the field. The father of four daughters, Jean-François would welcome any one of them carrying on the family tradition.

### **King of Copper and Tin**

Cameron Forbes is vice-president of Heather & Little, a Toronto-based company that specializes in custom ornamental sheet metal. In the world of heritage sheet metal—especially copper—Heather & Little is king.

The company's work crowns some of Canada's most exceptional heritage buildings: the copper roofs of the Centre Block of the Parliament Buildings and its Library of Parliament, Ottawa's Supreme Court of Canada and Château Laurier Hotel, Toronto's City Hall and Winnipeg's Legislative Building. Other high-profile jobs include San Francisco's City Hall, Harvard University's Memorial Hall and the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

Heather & Little gave Cameron his first break when they hired him as a young apprentice. By dint of hard work, skill and determination he made his way to the top and guided the company to focus on heritage restoration.

Yet Cameron very nearly didn't get into the sheet metal trade. After high school he drifted from one job to another, unable to find work he cared about. He finally enrolled at George Brown College to learn sheet metal fabrication. During one session, he worked at Toronto's Canadian National Exhibition restoring roofs, skylights, cornices and soffits on some period buildings and making repairs on tin and galvanized steel. For the first time, he found himself totally engaged and fascinated with the historic materials at hand. He was soon hooked on heritage metalwork.

What Cameron loves most about the trade is the intellectual challenge of each job. For the Parliament Buildings, Cameron's team worked out a system of folded seams for the heavy gauge sheet copper. The old soldered joints had caused the roof to buckle and fracture with temperature fluctuations.

"When you finish a job such as the dormer windows of the Legislative Assembly Hall in Fredericton or the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa, you know that what you've done will be there in 100 years," he says. "There is no greater job satisfaction."

### **Keeping Sacred Places Alive**

In Québec City, Tania Martin meets with prospective students to discuss a field course in built heritage and conservation. The students are working towards masters degrees in architecture, but Tania is hoping the course will attract students from other disciplines too. Historians and geographers are welcome.

The course involves measuring and photographing early 20th-century church architecture in two neighbouring French Catholic and English Anglican parishes in the Gaspé region. Students will be consulting historic archives, maps and parish records and conducting oral histories. This last activity—the oral history—is crucial, Tania stresses, since people's recollections and memories often convey the real value of sacred places.

Tania is an assistant professor of architecture at Laval University in Québec. She holds a Canada research chair in built religious heritage and is a member of the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada. A young woman at the beginning of her career, she's focusing her research on the meaning and significance of sacred sites in Canada.

### **Veteran Urban Planner King of the Tax Incentives**

Steve Barber, a veteran in the field of heritage planning, is trying to avoid future losses of historic buildings in B.C.

Victoria is experiencing a construction boom. Property values are going up along with highrises and condos. As senior heritage planner for the city, Steve knows that pressure to redevelop threatens historic buildings.

The buildings most at risk are those built between 1945 and 1975—during the Modernist period. Steve has ordered a survey of these buildings, and the planning department will consider each one for its heritage value. The finest nine or ten will be selected for designation.

Victoria has followed this process for many of its Victorian, Edwardian, Italianate and Arts and Crafts buildings. But the city's heritage would be incomplete without good representation from the Modernist period.

"Heritage did not stop in 1945," Steve explains.

With degrees in environmental studies and design, he began his conservation career with the City of Winnipeg's planning department. One of his first projects was writing the design guidelines for the historic Exchange District. He listened to the concerns of many entrepreneurs who had difficulty seeing the value of incorporating retail and services within a district of heritage warehouses and commercial buildings.

By the end of the project, even the doubters saw that smart heritage restoration could boost the retail sector, increase tourism, raise property values and bring in more tax revenue for the city.

Steve has worked for Victoria's planning and development department for the past 20 years. When he arrived from Winnipeg, he found a city that already had a system in place to provide grants to homeowners of heritage properties.

He then helped to develop a program of tax incentives for the residential conversion of commercial properties. The tax incentive program went into effect in 1990 and results have been spectacular: 16 downtown buildings have been rehabilitated, creating 305 new residential units and \$63 million in economic spinoffs.

In 2001, Victoria was awarded the Heritage Canada Foundation's Prince of Wales Prize for Municipal Heritage Leadership.

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

### **Power to Canada's Volunteer Advocates**

In 1983 a storm battered the coast of Nova Scotia's Cape Breton near Ingonish. During the night, waves struck the old lighthouse and swept it away. There was no loss of life. The structure was out of commission and no one seemed to know its history. The loss of that lighthouse grabbed the attention of Barry MacDonald, a native of Cape Breton now living near Dartmouth.

Today he's an active volunteer with the Nova Scotia Lighthouse Protection Society. One of the society's most important efforts has been lobbying for a national *Heritage Lighthouse Protection Act*. Canada has 600 surviving lighthouses. Fifty have resident keepers. The Department of Fisheries and Oceans has dwindling funds for basic lighthouse maintenance. Many are falling apart. Others have been demolished, burned or vandalized.

The new law would allow non-profit community groups to assume responsibility and care of local lighthouses. Groups in Nova Scotia, Quebec and other provinces already do this. They have converted lighthouses to heritage museums, cafés, inns and interpretation centres for tourists. Quebec promotes its Lighthouse Trail to visitors and non-profit community associations care for 20 of its 43 lighthouses.

The kind of legislation that Barry and others are pushing for would provide protection similar to what exists for historic railway stations.

But the campaign has hit snags, despite the assistance of high-profile supporters like Senator Pat Carney and the Heritage Canada Foundation. The proposed legislation has stalled in the Senate or the House of Commons several times due to elections and other procedural delays. Today Bill S-215 is before the House, and Barry is again rallying the troops to support it.

He points to the various building materials of lighthouses—the iron structures of Newfoundland, the stone and granite ones like Sambro in Halifax Harbour, or the limestone of Imperial Towers in Georgian Bay. No other form of built heritage conjures up so many images of loneliness, romantic longing and memory.

"This is not just for us, it is for our kids and grandkids," says Barry. "The heritage of lighthouses connects us with something that came before us. Lighthouses are magical and we want to see the magic continue."

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