

Connecting People

Let me tell you a community revitalization story...

by François LeBlanc



Photo: HCF Archives

While I was Vice-President for Demonstration Projects at the Heritage Canada Foundation during the 1980s, we were approached by a small group of commun-

ity leaders from a large one-industry region in Canada. That one industry was not doing well. The regional economy was crumbling, young people were leaving, and the community's confidence and self-esteem were at their lowest. They said "Things are not going well for us at this time, but we still love our region and believe that we can turn things around. We would like to use our heritage as a tool to revitalize our region, attract tourists, and put our people to work. Can you help us?"

"Yes we can!" was our answer.

Above: HCF staff participate in an early Heritage Regions assessment visit.

En haut : Des membres du personnel de la FHC participent à une évaluation dans le cadre du programme Régions patrimoniales.

to Heritage Places

A reminiscence of an early HCF Heritage Regions project puts the spotlight on today's community revitalization efforts and their economic, environmental and social spinoffs.

Creating Tourism Opportunities in Labrador Straits



Photo: DestinationLabrador.com

Battle Harbour National Historic District is a living commemoration of the life and society of the southeastern Labrador coast dating back to the 1700s.

L'arrondissement historique de Battle Harbour est une commémoration de la vie et de la société de la côte Sud-Est du Labrador, remontant jusque dans les années 1700.

A rugged landscape dotted with scarcely populated villages, the Labrador Straits encompass a 100-km stretch of the south Labrador coast. The main industry continues to be the fishery, but a small business sector has remained stable over the past 20 years.

Back in the early 1990s, local residents signed an agreement with the Heritage Canada Foundation (HCF) that launched a three-year Heritage Regions project. HCF worked closely with the Labrador Straits Historical Development Corporation (LSDC), an organization created in 1985 to work with regional stakeholders in developing long-term economic plans and initiatives to help foster a stable and innovative business community.

Much was accomplished by the Labrador Straits Heritage Regions project, including



Photo: DestinationLabrador.com

a plan for implementing highway pull-offs for scenic views; access to natural and architectural attractions; a tourism strategy; and HCF's conversion of an abandoned historic church into a welcome centre and information gateway to the Straits.

Since then, the LSDC has continued to work closely with communities, businesses, municipalities and organizations within the Labrador Straits to develop greater regional cooperation, improved transportation and infrastructure, expanded local craft-based

The Heritage Regions program and its partner program Main Street Canada were developed around two basic principles:

- that local heritage resources can be the basis of regional economic, environmental and social revitalization; and
- that local residents should take charge of their own environment.



Photo: HCF Heritage Regions Program archive.

With these considerations in mind, we asked the leaders to begin the process by delineating their "region" on a map. We suggested approaching this exercise by thinking in terms of a "territory" similar to that of wild animals. Wild animals define the limits of their "territory" with a scent, and within this territory they can find enough food and other resources to survive. We urged that the same concept of "territory" be applied to a one-industry region. For all sorts of reasons, certain communities are part of the "family" while others are not. Clearly defining the "region" was the first step in the process of discovery.

Then we asked those leaders to organize a two-day bus tour and visit of their "region," reserving seats for a few Heritage Canada Foundation representatives and filling the rest with two representatives from each of the different communities included in their "region."

A scenic stop along Labrador Coastal Drive, Red Bay National Historic Site (opposite) tells the story of the early whaling industry through artifacts, displays and trails like the Boney Shore Walking Tour (right).

Le lieu historique national de Red Bay (ci-contre) est une escale pittoresque sur le circuit du littoral du Labrador. Il raconte l'histoire de l'ancienne industrie baleinière grâce à des artefacts, des expositions et la visite à pied de Boney Shore (à droite).



Photo: DestinationLabrador.com

industries, and new tourism opportunities. Last year, the investment of federal stimulus money in the region recognized the leading role the LSDC has played in tourism development. Nearly \$300,000 was earmarked for the construction of new highway pull-offs and staging areas along the Labrador Coastal Drive and for rest areas along the Labrador Pioneer Footpath, a tourism-based initiative designed to highlight local cultural, natural and historical development. ♦

Rimouski's Community-Driven Downtown Renewal



22 Saint-Germain St. East was one of 40 buildings rehabilitated in Rimouski.

Le 22, rue Saint-Germain Est est un des 40 immeubles qui ont été restaurés à Rimouski.

With a population of 43,000, Rimouski, Quebec has faced challenges typical of many smaller towns: big box stores luring consumers away and hurting local merchants; an imbalance in the mix of businesses; parking problems; lack of activity; poor marketing; and under-used commercial and residential buildings.



Photo: Fondation Rues principales

In 2003, the town made the decision to join the Main Street program. Introduced in Canada by the Heritage Canada Foundation (HCF) in 1979, Main Street differs from typical community and economic development approaches in two important ways, explains François Varin, who began his career with HCF and now leads HCF's Main Street partner in Quebec, la Fondation Rues principales (FRP). "First, Main Street is a 'self-help' program that systematically empowers elected officials, merchants, residents and other citizens to shape the destiny of their downtown. Second, it capitalizes on the community's unique identity, historic buildings, traditional events, locally produced goods and cultural traditions as ready-made tools for economic development."



We asked that the tour cover different areas, with each one highlighting a specific cultural experience. On the first morning we wanted to visit a “natural” site: a nature reserve or natural feature, a farm or special garden of particular significance to the people in the region. In the afternoon, we asked to

see “built” heritage: a village with typical architecture or an industrial site or plant that the leaders considered relevant to their one-industry regional heritage.

In both cases we requested that someone knowledgeable from each area act as our guide and that meals comprise local foods or specialties, and not the typical chain-restaurant fare.

The morning of the second day would be dedicated to meeting “living treasures,” again in different areas of the region, that would include craftsmen, musicians, painters, writers, athletes, or someone with a long-time knowledge of the area’s history. In the afternoon, we asked to experience a “tradition” considered unique to the region.

Because the Heritage Regions program followed a grassroots approach to the development of a common vision, community commitment and local leadership, it was imperative that the leaders organize the discovery tour. Without that initial commitment, we would not have anything to build on.

A few months later, someone from this group called us to say: “We’ve done it. The regional visit is organized. Please join us!”

Above: Author François LeBlanc (with camera) and then HCF executive director Jacques Dalibard (on the right) during a Heritage Regions tour of Manitoulin Island, Ontario, in the 1990s.

En haut : Au début des années 1990, l’auteur François LeBlanc (avec caméra) et le directeur général de la FHC Jacques Dalibard (à droite) visitent l’île Manitoulin, en Ontario.

With the help of the Main Street program, Rimouski's residents have achieved impressive measurable results:

- 34 new businesses and 131 new jobs over a five-year period;
- \$56 million in municipal investments and \$11 million in private investments;
- 14% drop in commercial vacancy rate;
- up to 80% participation rate amongst business people; and
- 40 underused buildings rehabilitated with the assistance of Rénovation Québec, representing \$4.7 million in public and private investment.

Mayor Éric Forest acknowledges the role Main Street played in Rimouski's success: "Thanks to the assistance of the Rues Principales Foundation, Rimouski was able to move forward on a lively, structured revitalization process that met the needs the downtown had in 2003."

The Corporation Centre-ville Caraquet Inc. joined with other local stakeholders and chose the Main Street approach as a strategy to improve the local economy and breathe new life into their downtown. They engaged la Fondation Rues principales (FRP) to coach Caraquet stakeholders toward a shared future vision supported by strategies and action plans. The results are impressive.

Caraquet now hosts large-scale revenue-generating events throughout the year.



Activity and interest were generated downtown by a new public market featuring many of the region's producers/processors, with products ranging from fruits and vegetables to baked goods and pastries, and planned activities to create a lively market atmosphere. The response was so enthusiastic that the number of market days was doubled in year two. New public spaces and art, trees and street furniture make the downtown more attractive. Caraquet's Acadian and maritime heritage is promoted and a marketing campaign encourages local buying. Residents report an increased sense of belonging, and tourists are attracted by Caraquet's uniqueness.

Within five years, 8 new businesses and 32 new jobs were created. There has been a 30% drop in the commercial vacancy rate and a 64% increase in the average property selling price.

La Fondation Rues principales:
www.fondationruesprincipales.qc.ca ♦



Photos: Fondation Rues principales

Above and right:
 Investment in historic buildings helped generate new commercial activity in Caraquet.

En haut et à droite :
 L'investissement dans les bâtiments historiques a stimulé l'activité commerciales à Caraquet.

Pursuing Prosperity and Preservation in Historic Caraquet

For Caraquet (pop. 4,500), New Brunswick, the challenge in 1993 was to make the downtown an appealing, attractive place for residents, visitors and consumers, while preserving its village-like historic and maritime character and improving commercial prosperity.



The visit took place, and by the time we reached the end of the second day and were enjoying refreshments at the hotel, the participants had forgotten that we were there. They talked amongst themselves with great emotion, with several openly weeping from what they had seen and heard during the

previous two days. The experience had brought home the richness of their region's heritage. During the wrap-up session, when asked if they would participate and pay to be part of another similar tour, the answer was a resounding "yes."

There was no longer any need for us to convince them of the cultural heritage value of their region or that others from outside the region would be enriched by it. There was also a new appreciation of heritage in all its forms—natural, built, living and intangible. The question then became: "What do we need to do next?"

In the end, there is no real secret or magic solution when it comes to community revitalization based on the identification, protection and use of heritage. First of all it is about people: people caring about their place, talking to others about its value and working with others to conserve it. It is also about money: generating revenues that will sustain the community and protect its investment in heritage.

François LeBlanc has been an architect and specialist in heritage conservation for over 30 years. He has held such positions as Chief Architect of historic sites with Parks Canada, Director of ICOMOS Secretariat in Paris, Vice-President of the Heritage Canada Foundation and Chief Architect of the National Capital Commission. Most recently he was Head of Field Projects at the Getty Conservation Institute in Los Angeles, U.S.A.

Restoring Neighbourhoods and Dignity in Downtown St. John's

A non-profit community service centre in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador is leading the way in integrating social enterprise initiatives with downtown renewal.

Initiative, providing nine affordable housing units for 29 people. Additional funds from the Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Corporation allowed the agency to renovate the properties.

A later development at Rawlins Cross in the heart of the Historic District reconstructed a St. John's landmark, the W.J. Murphy building at 142 Military Road, and a 1950s-era O'Mara-Martin building on the opposite corner, both redesigned to more closely reflect the original buildings on the site. They now house 24 rental units, office space and main floor retail, which has become part of SBCS's Real Work employment program.

"There is tremendous pride in the built heritage of St. John's. Our reconstruction of two heritage buildings in the city's centre has garnered incredible good will and done much to reduce stigma. So we improve the neighbourhoods we move into and people are proud to live in these buildings," explains Executive Director Jocelyn Greene.

Significant funding for the projects came from the Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative, the Rental Rehabilitation Assistance Program, the provincial Affordable Housing Initiative and the federal Homelessness Partnership Strategy.

SBCS is able to use the equity in these properties to acquire other buildings in need of renovation. "It has been a hugely successful kind of domino effect," says Ms. Greene. In 2009, the agency's real estate portfolio had 17 properties with 85 affordable rental units for a total asset value of \$5.5 million.

Although affordable housing is a major focus, the agency has also generated jobs and revenues for the community while protecting its investment in heritage.

The founding vision of Dr. Stella Burry was to provide programs and services for adults and youth with mental health issues, limited or no work history, involvement with the justice system, low levels of literacy or no support systems to live in the community.

Stella Burry Community Services:
www.stellaburry.ca ♦



Photo: Stella Burry Community Services (SBCS)

The W.J. Murphy building now houses the Hungry Heart Café.

L'immeuble W.J. Murphy abrite maintenant le Hungry Heart Café.

The award-winning Stella Burry Community Services (SBCS) agency has programs for marginalized youth and adults ranging from counselling, training, literacy and employment to providing affordable housing that ensures their security and stability.

SBCS's Real Home affordable housing program dates back to the mid-1980s when apartments became available for leasing through the City of St. John's. A partnership developed, and today 24 City-owned properties are managed by the agency.

Since 2002, SBCS has acquired seven houses in St. John's through the Surplus Federal Real Property for Homelessness