

BOOK REVIEWS/COMPTEs RENDUS

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*BUILT FORMS AND SOCIAL REALITIES:
A REVIEW ESSAY OF RECENT WORK ON
CANADIAN HERITAGE STRUCTURES*

This review essay began as a critique of recent work on the architectural histories of several Canadian cities but blossomed into a broader consideration of some of the links between academic research on Canadian historical landscapes and the debate to conserve some of the best and/or typical structures of that past.¹ While Alan Artibise and Gilbert Stelter have recently used the phrase "The Usable Urban Past"² as an umbrella for essays on early 20th century planning and politics, it is clear that the built environment also contributes a significant urban past: old buildings provide textural and cultural components that can and should enhance the quality of present and future Canadian cities. The assumptions underlying such a belief are, for the most part, vague and are reflected in the variety of approaches towards the study of the built past. These include romantic and nostalgic views, negative attitudes towards modern architecture, labelling for educational purposes, and also a perception of rehabilitation as an increasingly sensible way of cutting costs rather than embarking on expensive new construction.

The Canadian preservation movement is not easily defined. Its rationale is uncertain, both because of the relative infancy of volunteer groups and government agencies charged with conserving structures or streetscapes and also because the procedures vary considerably between different

municipalities and provinces. Furthermore, both the feasibility and desirability of preservation, conservation, or rehabilitation have to be seen in the context of a society based on strongly defended property rights, tax disincentives, and a general historical insensitivity. While the salience of property rights and the economic pressures to renew are in themselves complex issues that merit separate essays, this paper concentrates on the potentials and weaknesses of attempts to inculcate a historical sensitivity - namely the creation of a consciousness that the past is important and that a broad range of artifacts have important non-monetary value.

While many people might subscribe to the value of the past, only a clearly articulated and convincingly argued case for saving old buildings can possibly have currency in the face of strong market forces that are prompting the demolition or otherwise transforming structures for current needs. The task of articulating heritage value has, until recently, been dominated by architectural historians. Several recent publications that reflect their perspective are reviewed here along with examples of the growing literature describing various preservation strategies. Their strengths and shortcomings will be discussed. The embryo exists of a more egalitarian approach to understanding and respecting the built environments of the past, which can be regarded as a broadening of the lens through which we see heritage landscapes. Vernacular structures, symbolic of ordinary men and women, are