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## THE OLD CITY OF QUEBEC AND OUR HERITAGE IN ARCHITECTURE

A. J. H. Richardson

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*Don de Dieu, j'èray valoir* — Gift of God, I will develop you well. This is the motto of the City of Quebec, suggested of course by the ship *Don de Dieu*, which brought out Champlain and Quebec's first inhabitants.

Whatever the intended symbolism, there could be no better pledge for those with power to influence the city's physical character. The famous site, the rocky head of a long ridge along the St. Lawrence, is a gift of God indeed for the builder or planner with a sense of townscape. It certainly also carries problems — and responsibility.

Those who built Quebec in the past, by and large, *ont fait valoir*; they created a city with an individual character to match the great rock on which it grew, to heighten the visual excitement of the constantly varying planes and levels of the hill. What was that character? Before we consider its value for us today, let us look at it in a little detail, in order to get the true flavour.

Our study can be chronological. In the years up to Confederation we can see three successive types of town, on three successive scales, at Quebec. Within the third one, built by the style-conscious, eclectic nineteenth century, even the variations in detail, the succession of architectural fashions and refinements, can be traced almost by decades.

The first two of these little towns spanned hundred-year intervals from the founding of Quebec. The earlier, the seventeenth and early eighteenth-century settlement, though it was soon closely-built on its narrow river-bank, yet remained a town of one- and two-storey, if highroofed, houses. Most of them too, were one-chimney buildings — so we can understand Mère Marie de l'Incarnation when she said "... the excessive cold does not permit us to make large spaces. There are times when our priests are in danger of having their fingers and their ears frozen". Only the great religious buildings rose above this general level. The smallness of scale comes home to us when we look at the great manuscript plan of 1713 in the *Depôt des Fortifications des Colonies*, in Paris, and find that the "Jacquet" or "Montcalm House" at St. Louis and Desjardins Streets — that is, the provincial *Artisanat* Shop, now dwarfed even by the oldest of its neighbours — was still then one of the bigger houses in the Upper Town.

This "Jacquet House" seems to have reached its present form (having been "enlarged and raised") between 1678 and 1690, and its 51½° roof matches the steep pitch of the contemporary north-west wing of the Ursulines. This and other documents suggest that from the crowded Lower Town of Quebec in 1700 there still thrust up a number of mediaevally high-peaked gables and "pavilion" roofs, accenting the vertical wall of the cliff behind. On the Upper Town levels, where convents and houses could scatter out among gardens and orchards, and where little brooks still ran down some of the rough streets, the private houses (as described in deeds and court records) did not need to rise above a single story and gable. Here they must have fitted into the landscape as in a country view by Durer, or Brueghel. Most, in fact, still from the contemporary record, were timber-framed with a stone fill, in the mediaeval tradition — the buildings that in their old age, by about 1730, began to appear in property descriptions as "an old house of *colombage*, falling into ruin", "almost entirely ruined", and so forth. But some of the grander residences — the Governor's Château St. Louis, the Intendant's Palace, the house of the great trader and explorer Louis Jolliet at the base of the cliff under the Château — had the newer, seventeenth century form of roof called after the French architect Mansart. Already old in style, too, judging by what has survived, was the interior woodwork, the heavy square-framed stairways, the "domino" pattern of wall panels that emphasizes the right angles — still basically a heritage of the early, not fully emancipated Renaissance.

As the eighteenth century wore on the town expanded, building pushing out along St. Louis, St. Jean, and their cross streets near the walls; the houses filled in through the "Quartier Latin" near the old buildings of Laval, fashionable when Montcalm lived on the Ramparts and the military engineer De Léry on the Street of the Ste. Famille, "De Léry Hill". But there remained a spacious air to the Upper Town. Even on a busy street like St. Louis, Madame Péan, the mistress of the Intendant Bigot, could still have her stables and courtyard across the way from her house; even later the Honorable Thomas Dunn and the Honorable Antoine Juchereau Duchesnay could retain long frontages for *their* yards. But now the houses were growing vertically; Richard Short's views of Quebec in 1759, the record of deed, court minute, land roll, show us that by then two-storey houses had become common on Upper Town streets (though as Peter Kalm said they were still "generally but one story high"), and three and even four-storey ones as space became still more valuable in the Lower Town. As early as the 1720's doubles were being built, and somewhere between 1750 and 1775 a great triple, each unit with a sixty-five foot front, two storeys and a tall basement, went up near the northern end of St. Pierre.

Most of the new buildings of eighteenth century Quebec were (in their exteriors) only less mediaeval than the seventeenth century ones in degree, not in kind. The slope of the roof only gradually lessened — it is still 48° in the “Maillou House” on St. Louis Street, whose upper storey was added about 1770. This house has the staggered chimney arrangement so common in this century, chimneys fore and aft of the roof ridge as the longitudinal bearing wall in the middle of most houses kept them off the gable point; this continued the irregular roof effect, and when there were chimneys both back and front at the gable, they were joined by curtain walls with a further massive antique appearance. When most of the seventeenth century buildings had gone, in 1830, Captain Basil Hall the traveller could still call Quebec “quite as irregular in shape, height, position, and colour, as many of the extravagant parts of the Old Town of Edinburgh. The roofs are very steep, . . . stuck full of storm-windows, galleries, platforms, cupolas, and every kind of projection . . . the effect of the whole is very lively”.

The thriving town had its modest share of eighteenth-century building luxury. Madame Péan’s “mirrors attached to the fireplaces, wall mirror in the drawing room and . . . pictures above the doors”, in her St. Louis Street house, are mentioned often in deeds and advertisements of the building; wallpaper, such as the blue *chinoiserie* design of branches found under a modern covering in 17 St. Louis (probably dating from Duchesnay’s occupancy), is often noted by the 1780’s; the house of the Company of the Indies beside Notre Dame des Victoires in the Lower Town Market had a slate roof when its builder, Fleury de la Gorgendière, sold it to the Company in the 1740’s. Much of the mid-eighteenth century interior woodwork in the town must have gone up in smoke during Wolfe’s fire-bomb attacks in 1759; but the fine work surviving in convents such as the Hôpital-Général and Hôtel-Dieu has the full-bodied sweep and solidarity of the Baroque, and house and convent examples of the late 1760’s and thereabouts show a masterly, if restrained, handling of the more intricate curves of the Rococo in one of the great periods of efflorescence of the French-Canadian artistic skill. Quebec hardware of the eighteenth century also indicates the ease with which the craftsmen could handle these two styles.

With the nineteenth century came the rapid urbanization of the whole Upper Town. In every decade, on nearly every street, on the site of old stable-yards and market gardens, big three-storey stone mansions rose for one or other judge, high functionary, wealthy merchant — gradually increasing in size from Thomas Place’s house with Ionic details (on the site of 79 St. Louis), begun about 1803, to the two towering residences at 14 and 16 St. Denis Street, put up side by side, facing the glacis of the Citadel, half a century later. Capitalists, builders, big property-owners, filled in nearly all the remaining spaces with their pairs, trios and rows of buildings, often of equal height with the single

mansions. Such were seven houses built adjoining on Ste. Angèle Street in the 1830's and 1840's, by the joiner Pierre Trepanier and the artist Joseph Legaré; four very tall semi-detached cust-stone dwellings put up for the Ursulines, for rental purposes, in 1845 or 1846, at the corner of D'Auteuil and St. Louis; and builder George Blaiklock's "Stadacona Terrace" of 1847-49 on Grande Allée, with its central gable feature. By the middle of the century big square hotels, higher still, were rising in Upper Town, and business blocks in the Lower Town for the lumber capital of Canada.

The complete building up of the city blocks put space at a premium, and it drove the houses further upward to attenuated, elegant proportions. Even the growth in comfort contributed; more fireplaces and chimney flues (note the number of chimney pots) brought long, slim chimneys by the late 1820's, reduced again in size as more and more stoves were used. So in Quebec the introduction of nineteenth century townscapes was accomplished without much loss of grace or character (there *are* a number of dryly-designed, shallow facades), or loss of a local flavour. Unmistakeably Old Quebec were the tall doors flush to the sidewalk, of this early nineteenth century, with their high panes overhead illuminating entrance stairways to inner front doors inside. Still the rows of houses seemed to belong to the Rock of Quebec; they marched up the slopes, gable above gable and chimneys turning their axes with the streets, "rising" (said the *Quebec Directory* for 1844-45) "gradually above each other in the form of an amphitheatre — embellished and diversified by large buildings and lofty spires, pouring a flood of light and splendour from their bright tinned roofs."

Nor did the now constant arrival of new styles and refinements dry up the artistic springs of the town. As usual, Quebec craftsmen managed to impart their own particular verve to styles often monotonous in other parts of the country. There is a Quebec character to the subtle roof curve and great chimneys of 24 Mount Carmel, though built in 1820 or 1821 with the newly-fashionable "*toit brisé à l'anglaise*", or low pitch hip roof. About the same time Charles Marié the joiner, working with both French and English copy-books (his library is still in the Archives of Notre Dame de Québec), enlivened his mantels and door-heads with floral and shell carving of great grace; other woodworkers (the craft is noted in the province) carved stair newels, door-spandrels, stair risers, with beavers and maple leaves, and one terminated the long serpentine stairrail of 43 Des Remparts Street (built 1832) with the head of a snake. At 25 Ste. Geneviève, the cut-stone mansion of Cirice Têtu (now owned by Dr. Charles de Koninck), woodcarvers and plasterers, probably under the superintendence of the architect Charles Baillairgé, produced between 1856 and 1858 a splendidly opulent Greek Revival interior. At 56 St. Louis the plasterers covered walls and ceilings with a finely controlled riot of

tendrils, in a revival of Louis Quinze. 14 St. Denis was given a series of august capitals in rich Corinthian, a well-proportioned newel of solid brass, elaborate plasterwork, and white porcelain knobs painted with flowers in blue and gold on every window shutter.

The artistic heritage given Quebec by the craftsmen of three centuries, to our present knowledge, was the richest with which any town of Canada has been endowed. For one thing, it was the most varied — from the quiet and aged, massive stonework of the Hôtel-Dieu cellars to the supple grace of the Louis Quinze mantel and panel-heads in 15-17 Desjardins, thence to the Greek splendours of 25 Ste. Geneviève. At certain periods, I feel, Quebec has not really matched the distinction of the best work in other centres, in the early nineteenth century for example the beautifully-proportioned richness of the interiors of the Province Building and "Gorsebrook" in Halifax, the grace of some Ontario mantels and curving stairs, the balanced Greek purity of Halifax's Mills House, and the city as a whole is weak in good early clapboarding. But all taken together, I think there can be little doubt (and we can now speak with a growing precise knowledge of our heritage across the country) that this city is the prime treasury of Canadian architecture and its associated arts, as well as of various concrete survivals of our social history — for example, the variety of heating and kitchen equipment, such as early nineteenth century bake ovens, kitchen and fireplace grates and iron mantels, hot air registers, stone kitchen floors, ceiling hooks for provisions.

For both outside and in, a great deal has survived, even though so much has gone. Approximately four hundred pre-Confederation houses remain in the Upper Town within the walls, probably over a hundred more in Lower Town and out along Champlain Street below the Cape, an uncounted number along and between Grande Allée and St. Jean Street without the walls. There are actually some streets largely without any basic exterior change, in fact, the perimeter streets of the Upper Town, St. Denis, D'Auteuil and a good section of the Rue des Remparts. St. Louis, though not quite so complete, shows a wider range in styles, or could, with only a moderate restoration; it could, in fact, be an open-air museum of Quebec City architecture from the seventeenth century down. And on several of these streets are some of the longest "chains" of early buildings in Canada. St. Louis has a row of six on one side, another row of eight (one is considerably refaced), almost across from it. Ste. Angèle has another seven consecutively arranged, Ste. Famille in the "Quartier Latin" three *eighteenth* century all together and a fourth in the same block, linked by other old buildings. The slides I have already shown, which are far from the only examples, give an idea of the unexpected riches which remain *inside* the buildings. Here are pictures of a few more. They result from examination of less than ten per cent of Quebec's old buildings;

even with some of these a few more surprises may still await us, in corners such as the unlit attic room at 36 Desjardins, lined all round with nineteenth century wallpaper, its colour preserved by the darkness of over half a century.

This is probably the largest concentration of pre-Confederation architecture in Canada, at least an equal number with what has survived in Halifax. Also, much of it is important or representative in the architectural history not only of Quebec but of older Canada. Nearly all the buildings I have already mentioned as characteristic of the various periods of Quebec's growth still remain. From a national point of view, for example, "Stadacona Terrace" is probably the oldest terrace left in the country (part of one still older, "Clapham Terrace", adjoins). And all of this is preserved on such a townsite.

Quebec has also been one of the most enlightened Canadian centres in preserving its heritage. Within the last half dozen years, historic conservation authorities and private individuals have acquired, with the intent of conserving, about fifteen of Quebec's finest old buildings, and have embarked on the restoration or repair of more than half of them — the Commission des Monuments Historiques ou Artistiques de la Province de Québec is well in the forefront of this work. In this way have been saved one seventeenth, seven eighteenth and six early nineteenth century structures, all above average examples in a good if incomplete cross-section of styles. I have here counted Louis Jolliet's house at the foot of the Terrace elevator, owned by Mr. Harold Braff, as an early eighteenth century building, because that is the form of its present roof and chimney arrangement which sets the character of the whole; the original mansard roof of this historic building, which you will recall was shown on a plan of the 1680's, has clearly been replaced at an early date. Other private owners who have undertaken restoration are Mr. and Mrs. John McGreevy, whose house on Des Grisons Street, full of character and period detail, is almost the only remaining gambrel-roofed building in Canada, Mr. and Mrs. J. Van Veen, whose residence at 60 St. Louis Street is one of the most attractive, complete and well-documented of the tall early nineteenth century houses of the town, and M. Gérard Guay, who has recently restored a most interesting eighteenth century building at the corner of Ste. Famille and the Ramparts. The Ligue de la Jeunesse Féminine and M. Eugène Rivard have maintained with special care two houses (7 Ste. Genevieve and 105 Ste. Anne) possessing some of the finest woodwork in Canada.

Quebec is also the only city in this country where the Board of Trade has laid out very large sums to aid the restoration of an old building, the "Maillou House" at 17 St. Louis. Already many years ago, the largest provincial inventory of old buildings (the Inventaire

d'Oeuvres d'Art) was begun in Quebec — it includes many structures in the city — and the Société Historique de Québec more recently covered the town in a tabulation of its important early architecture.

Yet in spite of this effort, I think not surpassed in any other Canadian locality, it is obvious from what I have earlier said that the whole task of conservation which might still be undertaken here is immense. The abundance of surviving early architecture even means there are not one, but quite a number, of townscapes, aesthetically significant groups of buildings that merit consideration, especially as so few groups survive elsewhere. In fact, whole quarters (Ste. Anne Street to the Citadel, Garneau Street to the Ramparts, St. Jean Street to the northern walls) still retain a predominant period flavour which might be worth conserving, if not as an invaluable part of our cultural heritage then quite simply as tourist bait.

There are also a number of active threats to this heritage — threats common to many Canadian towns, but some of which (only some) gallop faster here, and make more noticeable inroads, largely because in Quebec they are bound to touch some of our early architecture sooner. As every year passes, the dangers from insensitive repair and replacement increase, but fortunately in Quebec many of the old buildings are soundly built.

Quebec is not a heavily industrialized or commercialized city, and the temptation to convert from residential to shop or factory use is not such a danger here, either, for our early architecture. Where it operates most is in areas where it has already cut such a swath (St. Jean Street for example) that there is little still to save, and few area values to preserve. In a provincial capital, Old Quebec has been in more danger from the space requirements of Government, which more than once in the now distant past (for example, the Court House) has plumped down great masses of sterile architecture in locations vital to the survival of general aesthetic or historic values. Concentration of the Provincial Government's building efforts just outside the walls may help to draw away this threat, though it is warmly argued it will bring closer a third danger, that is, the encroachment into the old city of consequent traffic and parking arrangements. As elsewhere, the public monuments sometimes outscale their surroundings, though the Laval monument, the Archbishop's Palace and the Upper Town Post Office form a bold theatrical group that has its values.

Traffic and parking already threaten the Upper Town in another important facet of Quebec's development. As one of the great tourist capitals of Canada, the city draws daily into this area a constant stream of traffic, sightseeing and seeking food, lodging and shops, and of course requiring parking space. This familiar threat to our old architecture is probably more acute in Old Quebec because the streets are so narrow



and the open spaces so few. It may soon run wild as the City Government is forced to clear the busier streets of parking, thus driving it into the blocks. And still there is the traffic flow itself, which alone destroys the atmosphere of the old town pretty thoroughly.

Fortunately, the building of the vast Château Frontenac (like the Price Building skyscraper, not a bad accent on the Rock when seen from across the river, but overwhelming at close quarters) apparently exhausted the need for big hotel construction for many years, and modern traffic has now drawn much of this general type of accommodation to the suburbs. But the tourist trade has hurt the face of Old Quebec in a smaller-scale yet more widely spreading manner; I mean the proliferation of signs, lights and windows of tourist shops and homes, which actually kills the best character of the old city more surely than does the largest nearby construction.

Another creeping danger, common to other cities, has been the provision of electrical services. Let anyone who wants to see what this has already done to Quebec wander down past the Basilica and note what the wires, heavy timber telephone poles and a girder power-line tower have done to the old Ste. Famille Street — the Street of the Holy Family, “Côte de Léry”, “Hope Hill” — and to the adjoining Ramparts and site of the Hope Gate, all pictured so attractively in old stereoscopic photographs and in the watercolours done about 1830 by Colonel James Pattison Cockburn.

Finally, a special and accentuating problem for Quebec is the snow and ice hazard, which is already affecting the very thing that contributes most to the period character of her old buildings, the roof and chimney line. I say accentuating, because it is apparently much harder in recent years to get the labour to clear the roofs of massive accumulations even endangering life and precipitating lawsuits, and to which the only obvious remedy is the substitution of flat rooftops.

So, the preservation of Old Quebec has no single, simple solution and I will not attempt any snap answers. Multiple problems suggest careful planning based on a multiple study, which in fact will undoubtedly have to consider the economic bases and purposes of the town and such other widely different determinants as geology and insurance requirements. Since the great tourist industry is undoubtedly the chief economic base of the old town, I would hope that its customers would not be over-convenienced at the expense of the very thing that draws them here.

Such planning should be simplified by the studies of Quebec's architecture that the Historic Sites Division of the Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources has embarked on and is continuing, for these are already bringing order into the story and rela-

tionship of this great quantity of buildings, so we are on the threshold of an accurate and properly-balanced picture of the city's architectural heritage. Part of the planning for a general inventory of Canada's architecture, this is a two-pronged effort, a close structural study of many buildings to determine their precise character and structural history, and a documentary study to *date* closely their construction and hence to sort out the story of development and bring out its real highlights. A great wealth of documentation has made this possible — assessment rolls back to 1821, directories and parish lists that are as good as directories back to the 1790's, newspaper advertisements since 1764, building licenses back even to a century earlier, property rolls, transfers and inventories, many masonry and joinery contracts, court records of forced sales and property inventories that even list or describe the rooms in many houses of eighteenth century Québec, a great collection of water-colours of her streets made around 1830, also numerous early photographs, more plans of the town than are available for any other in Canada, and a large scale model completed just after 1800 on which every building in Québec is shown.

The close structural study has already brought to light such vital parts of our heritage as the wall-cupboards, almost certainly by the master, in the house of Pierre Emond, Québec's greatest eighteenth-century house-joiner — the best of them almost entirely concealed behind a modern drying cabinet. It has enabled us to date even the *mouldings* of nineteenth-century trim in some cases to within ten or twenty year periods. It has brought out the structural history of such houses as M. Joseph Côté's, 111 Ste. Anne Street, where the original drawing-room mantels of 1828, 1829 or 1830 have been replaced by Victorian wood and marble ones about the 1850's and banished to newly-constructed rooms on the attic floor. It has enabled us to recognize style changes such as the transition from Palladian-Roman to Greek classical tradition, shown so concisely in the entrance door of Mme Camille Pouliot's house at 128 Ste. Anne — it retains its stiff Roman Ionic capitals but has discarded the round-headed Roman doorway for the straight-headed Greek one.

The documents have dated or given promise of dating to within two or three years a good three-quarters of the old buildings in Québec, of determining the architects, masons, house-joiners and plasterers of many (and hence even individual styles). This research has even documented, from the contracts, details of buildings that were copied from details in others — such as the graceful, winding stair still in 35 Rue des Remparts that was constructed by Charles Cazeau for Charles Turgeon to be similar to that in the house of Robert Paterson, also still surviving, at 73 Ste. Ursule Street. In the case of Holy Trinity Cathedral, it has a statement of nearly every workman employed on

the building and of the precise books of architecture from which each important detail was taken.

There are also the useful reassessments which always come from such close work. Careful seventeenth and eighteenth century town plans, for example, show clearly that the seventeenth century house of d'Ailleboust on St. Louis Street was *not* on the site of "Kent House" but in front of it, and therefore none of the seventeenth century walls can remain, as surmised. The big-chimneyed little house 15 Ste. Famille Street, reputedly built 1719 for the cooper Claude Dubreuil, appears from a first study of the early records of the Seminary to be on property not conceded by them till 1721 and then granted to M. Perthuis by a deed drawn up by *notary* Dubreuil. From such studies we can be sure of seeing clearly where the values lie, and of readjusting and perhaps pruning the conservation programme. But even for governments this is an effort consuming of time and funds. It is to be hoped the universities would see their interest in entering this great historical workshop of data, and working there in company with the Historic Sites Division.

The Royal Architectural Institute of Canada and the Public Archives of Canada are already collaborating with that Division in the organization of this inventory, and the Department of Northern Affairs in turn is aiding the Schools of Architecture in Quebec, Montreal and Toronto in the measuring of many of our early buildings. The effort for conservation in Quebec, and for a live current development of the town that shall *faire valoir*, would benefit greatly from *architectural* studies such as the real character and values of textures and colours in Quebec's early buildings, the practical possibilities of adjusting old Quebec houses to current uses, and the best aesthetic uses of Quebec's site potential. Thus, we could be surer of finding economic possibilities in restoration, of preserving the details that mean so much in the aesthetic quality of buildings, and eventually, perhaps, even of developing the potential of such exciting vistas as the long sloping angle of the Côte d'Abraham and St. Vallier seen from the *Soleil* building, and the seven-plane turning cross-roads of Palace Hill and the Ramparts.

In a year when even federal, provincial and civic governments have to watch their budgets closely, advice such as the architects could give to private owners might actually be one of the most useful means of getting limited restoration projects under way. This year, as never before, Quebecers have been thinking, writing and publishing on the preservation of their architectural heritage, and nearly every day the city's newspapers are helping to disseminate their ideas and lending a powerful support. I have no doubt that, with this interest concentrated on the possibilities of easy restoration scattered through a town where so much approximates its early character, some areas could be found where

a little money would go a long way, at least in those parts the public sees. Even incomplete face-liftings might show the forgotten beauty, suggest possibilities, and prime the pump for further limited advances — in the framework, essentially of a scale of values and a general plan well thought out in advance, orientations of which the studies I have mentioned are a first step already moving on.