

## **Conducting Urban Heritage Surveys: A case Study of London, Ontario**

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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CONDUCTING URBAN HERITAGE SURVEYS:  
A CASE STUDY OF LONDON, ONTARIO  
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*John H. Lutman*

In Ontario, under the terms of the 1975 Heritage Act, each municipality may set up a Local Architectural Conservation Advisory Committee which is empowered to recommend the designation of buildings as architectural or historical monuments by the city council. One of the chief duties of such committees is preparing the background information on which such recommendations can be made.

In London the Committee was fortunately organized before the city began work on a major revision of the general plan. Accordingly, the Committee was ready to appoint two researchers and a supervisory subcommittee to make a detailed report on the West London and Central London Planning Districts which were the first to be revised. The work was done between June and October of 1975. As London was among the first in the province to conduct a survey under the terms of the Act, the approach and methods, the difficulties and lessons learned from the London survey may be of value in providing a model to other municipalities in Ontario and other provinces (under their heritage legislation) which contemplate conducting a survey in their community.

A. ORGANIZATION

1) Terms of Reference

In any such survey the terms of reference should provide that an examination be made of all buildings in the areas under study and that any previous surveys be taken into consideration. In London some preliminary work had been conducted by the Canadian Inventory of Historic Buildings (CIHB). From such researches, schedules may be prepared for consideration by the Committee, listing buildings

and areas worthy of consideration for inclusion under provincial designation or, possibly, some local form of protection through zoning or demolition delay through local by-laws. Also a listing of buildings may be noted which appear to be marginal for inclusion in the latter group.

## 2) Data Bank

It is advisable that research space and a special data bank be established where the research files of the Committee should be kept and made available to interested researchers and interested members of the public. (In London the Regional Room at the D. B. Weldon Library of the University of Western Ontario was appointed research headquarters and a file was set up.) Such files may serve as a base with which already extant data could be amalgamated and in which future information could be placed as required. This procedure has two distinct advantages:

- a) Collection of all extant data on one site in a single file. This should help prevent any waste of time in resurveying which may have taken place in the past.
- b) The organization would provide both a base and established precedents for surveys of other planning districts at a future date.

## 3) Preparations

Coordination with the Canadian Inventory of Historic Buildings (CIHB) is recommended, as the Inventory can be of great help in offering information on research and organization. They may possess computer lists and microfilm reels of buildings for your particular community.

Coordination with the Planning Department of the municipality is strongly suggested. Discussions with certain of its members should be held periodically and progress reports should be submitted. If possible, members of the Planning Department might accompany the researcher(s) on a tour of the parts of the municipality under examination.

B. PROCEDURES

1) Methods of Research

In embarking on a survey, a consistent method of research should be followed. The course that was developed for the surveys of West and Central London proved most useful and may be applied to other communities.

Before even touring the designated area(s), certain preparatory steps were taken. The CIHB computer list and microfilm were examined, establishing which buildings were in the areas of study. Topographical maps were secured from the Planning Department and the buildings on the CIHB list were plotted. Data sheets were prepared incorporating the research information. (Sample copies are found at the end of this article.) A filing system for the data was organized by street and number.

Armed with the maps, walking surveys of the subject areas were made and all buildings on the CIHB list and all others in the district were examined. Some buildings on the CIHB list were consequently deleted and consideration was given to others not on the list. Wherever possible, internal examinations were made of the buildings. The architecture of the selected buildings was described and photographs were taken from different angles.

Returning to research, historical investigations were conducted on the structures selected. The sources employed included city directories, assessment roles, insurance plans, various other maps, bird's-eye views, published histories, pamphlets, newspapers, architectural plans and specifications books, pictures, and registry office records. Interviews were also conducted with residents of the areas, other knowledgeable people and members of the Planning Department, as noted. It is worthwhile to remember that interview information, gained from elderly community members, in some instances, must be carefully screened, as there is a tendency to overestimate the age and importance of buildings.

Comparable works on other cities were consulted. For Ontario, good examples were Margaret Angus on Kingston, Peter Stokes on Niagara, Eric Arthur on Toronto, and the pamphlets on Victorian Hamilton and Dundas.

## 2) Difficulties Encountered

Certain research difficulties are bound to be encountered. For West and Central London, the major problem was a lack of time in which to do detailed research on every building. With so vast an area to cover in the four months allotted, it was possible to prepare only a basic historical check on most of the buildings. Thus, the time factor limited the study to city directory searches at five year intervals, but it was found that they provided insufficient additional information to merit continuing this type of examination in the time that was available.

Time also prevented detailed searches of registry office records, but title searches by local Fanshawe College of Applied Art and Technology students are still being prepared for the buildings selected. However, reasonably precise construction dates on most buildings were found, and the information gathered was sufficient

for the suggested designation of buildings in two schedules.

Some of the source materials were regrettably incomplete. This was particularly true of West London, formerly the incorporated village of "Petersville", which was annexed to the city only in 1897 and experienced a different development from the rest of London. The city directories, which are one of the most valuable sources for reference in the central area, did not contain street listings for West London before 1892, although buildings could be traced back through the nominal listings, which did include London West before annexation.

To supplement the directories, Township of London assessment rolls were used. However, these presented problems of their own; properties have been much subdivided and there was frequently more than one family residence on a lot. Nevertheless, careful comparison of the directory listings and assessment rolls made it possible to make estimates of the construction dates of some of the earlier buildings.

It should be noted that those maps which were of the greatest assistance in working on the central parts of the city, were of little help in the western part of the city. For instance, the Insurance Plan of 1881 does not show London West, and though the 1912 edition does include part of the village, it does not cover the entire area encompassed within the present London Township. Other maps and drawings were often incomplete, or inaccurately plotted. The two bird's-eye views of the city dating from 1873 and 1893 were, unfortunately, short on accuracy and long on imagination, especially for the distant parts of the urban area.

The difficulties with sources in London West were compounded by the fact that street names and street addresses have changed over the decades. After the area was annexed to the city in 1897, those

street names which conflicted with names in London were changed. The old city maps and street listings in the directories had to be checked to sort out these names changes. The Insurance Plans and directories were often of assistance in pinpointing changes. Similar difficulties may be found in research on other municipalities.

### 3) Basis for Selection of Buildings

Certain criteria should be established in the selection of buildings of historic and architectural interest. For West and Central London the following criteria was employed and may be applied to other urban surveys:

#### a) Architecture

Architectural style and features which distinguished a building were sought. This was the single most important factor in the designation of most of the buildings that were recommended. Personal observation of buildings, plus CIHB researches and discussion with various individuals, was the major source for judging architecture.

#### b) Condition

The selection was limited to buildings in a reasonably good state of repair, which had undergone no major structural alterations. It was maintained that major alterations destroyed much of a building's value as an example of an architectural type.

#### c) Setting

Buildings were selected on the basis of being good individual

examples of historic architecture, or as parts of a larger streetscape, which provided an example of a pocket of "typical" architecture for an historic period.

Generally speaking, under this point it should be noted that streetscapes should be given particular attention. From a planning standpoint, buildings are best selected in groups, rather than left as isolates. Invariably, not all buildings in a streetscape, if judged individually, merit scheduling. However, as part of a composition of several structures, their individual qualities are enhanced and made more interesting.

d) History

Buildings of historical importance to the area were put on the list unless altered beyond recognition. Historic importance was largely determined on the basis of a building's role in the development of the community, by the occurrence of an important event within its walls, or by the significance of a former occupant.

4) Basis for Rejecting Buildings

a) New Structures

In West and Central London, buildings constructed later than 1914 were not included, as the survey was terminated at this date. One or two exceptions were made where the structures blended in with surrounding older buildings, as part of a streetscape.

It goes without saying that buildings of historic and architectural interest do not cease to exist after 1914. For western Canadian cities, buildings constructed in 1914 are of



some antiquity. Each municipality, then, must set a terminal date for its survey.

b) Modified or Modernized

Buildings which are greatly modified, or had sizeable additions which detracted from their original appearance were not selected, unless the addition was at the back of the building and did not affect the appearance of the facade.

Other modifications which detracted greatly from the historical appearance of buildings were enlarged windows, addition of dormers, removal of "gingerbread", alteration of design features, demolition of porches and verandahs, extensive painting of brick exteriors and the addition of siding. Alterations may detract so greatly from the architectural merit of a building that it may no longer be of sufficient architectural interest to necessitate further research. An architecturally altered, historically important building does present a problem. If restoration is not a practical possibility, the erection of an historic plaque rather than designation would be the better commemorative solution.

c) Feasibility

This primarily refers to the problem of attempting to save too many buildings: The greater the number of buildings scheduled for preservation, the greater the difficulties in preserving them. For this reason, only the most significantly historic, and only the best examples of architecture must be selected for the scheduling lists.

Conclusion

Obviously, no two communities in Ontario or in the rest of Canada present the same picture with respect to buildings of historic and architectural merit. Nor do all have the same wealth of research resources as London possesses; nor may the methods and the problems of the London survey be entirely applicable to other communities. However, a well conducted and organized survey will yield the research information needed to justify the designation of an historic and architecturally important building and help ensure its preservation for future generations to enjoy.

Data Sheets

## DIRECTORY INFORMATION

ADDRESS:

| DATE: | OCCUPANT | OCCUPATION | ASSESSMENT |
|-------|----------|------------|------------|
| 1973  |          |            |            |
| 1968  |          |            |            |
| 1963  |          |            |            |
| etc.  |          |            |            |
| 1863  |          |            |            |

## MASTER DATA SHEET

ADDRESS:

GEOCODE:

NAME:

DATE OF CONSTRUCTION:

OCCUPANCIES:

OWNERS/OCCUPANTS:

SIGNIFICANCE:

SOURCES OF INFORMATION:

ARCHITECTS/BUILDERS:

STYLE/FEATURES:

ALTERATIONS:

CONDITION: