



Sainte-Marie-de-Beauce was Main Street's first Quebec project.

The Changing Face Of Main Street

■ Gordon Fulton is the current director of Main Street Canada. He gave PLACE these recent observations about the future:

PLACE: You've been involved in downtown revitalization for ten years. How does the movement compare today to a decade ago?

FULTON: Ten years ago there was a strong emphasis on physical improvements to downtown, almost to the exclusion of other needs. A lot of the conventional wisdom about revitalization was, in hindsight, cosmetic. Today we still emphasize physical improvement, but as a means to an end rather than an end in itself.

PLACE: And what is that "end"?

FULTON: A well-rounded or holistic revitalization, where the economic, cultural, social, and physical aspects of a community are addressed, none to the detriment of another. Ten years ago we addressed these matters intuitively. We wouldn't, for example, jeopardize a merchant's marketing image by creating an incompatible image for his building during renovation. But today we operate less on intuition, more on hard infor-

mation and proven techniques.

PLACE: Does this mean you are now at the "state of the art" in revitalization?

FULTON: If the Main Street approach continues to evolve as it has during the past decade, we'll see yet more sophistication. The project co-ordinators no longer have to invent the wheel every time they tackle something new. The exchange of information within the Main Street network is excellent; everyone can benefit from someone else's experience or expertise. This tends to increase the coordinator's chances for success. As for Main Street Canada, I would like to open the doors of the programme to more communities and downtown managers. But for that we need more resources. The more trained and informed people we have working on revitalizing downtown, the better the general state of revitalization will be in this country.

PLACE: What, then, of the future?

FULTON: I recently saw a small article in which a Toronto retailing consultant predicted the "de-malling" of Canada. "It's not dead yet," he said, "but the shopping centre is being challenged by old-fashioned pedestrian-oriented shopping streets." I think de-malling is unlikely, but I do think there is something to the challenge being

mounted by our main streets. The pendulum is swinging back to those anachronisms of personalized service, unique products, and pleasant environments. It's what I call the "realness" of Main Street. This bodes well for our approach.

PLACE: Is this another case of mall-bashing?

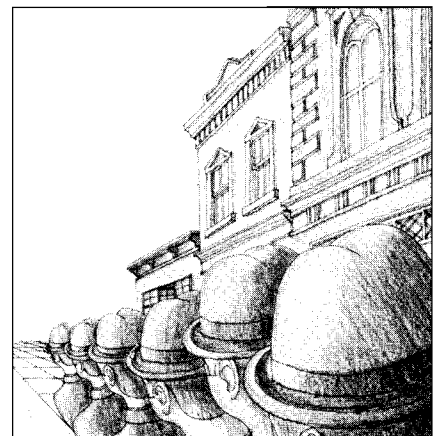
FULTON: No. This give-and-take between shopping centres and downtown will prove very healthy for our Main Streets. The implications for the movement are interesting: we must be willing and able to offer more than the malls, when the malls begin to adopt the Main Street imagery (as they surely will). They will, with their considerable resources, be able to create a caricature of Main Street that will be very seductive.

PLACE: But that sounds cosmetic.

FULTON: That's both the irony and our Main Street's saving grace. We don't have climate control or acres of parking, but we can offer an alternative. We can also offer more, if the malls choose to play at Main Street. We've been through this all before, and have learned that the *realness* of each downtown—its history, people, places—is the one thing that we can't afford to lose, as no one else has it, or can manufacture it.

PLACE: And the implications for Main Street Canada?

FULTON: The increased sophistication of the programme and co-ordinators will be tested. For our Main Streets to stay vibrant, we must keep on the cutting edge of revitalization. But in doing so we must not lose sight of our roots, the realness of each and every downtown. This is, and will continue to be, both our challenge and our trump card. It will be a fine balancing act, but I think we'll manage to stay on the edge.



Main Street is an initiative of Heritage Canada.
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