

# *The British Contribution to the Architectural Identity of Old Québec*

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Québec today is championed as a monument to the French presence in North America. In fact, it is for this role, and for its identity as a fortified town, that the historic district of Old Québec was nominated to UNESCO's distinguished list of world heritage sites. But while Québec thrives today as an indisputably French city, it was not always so.

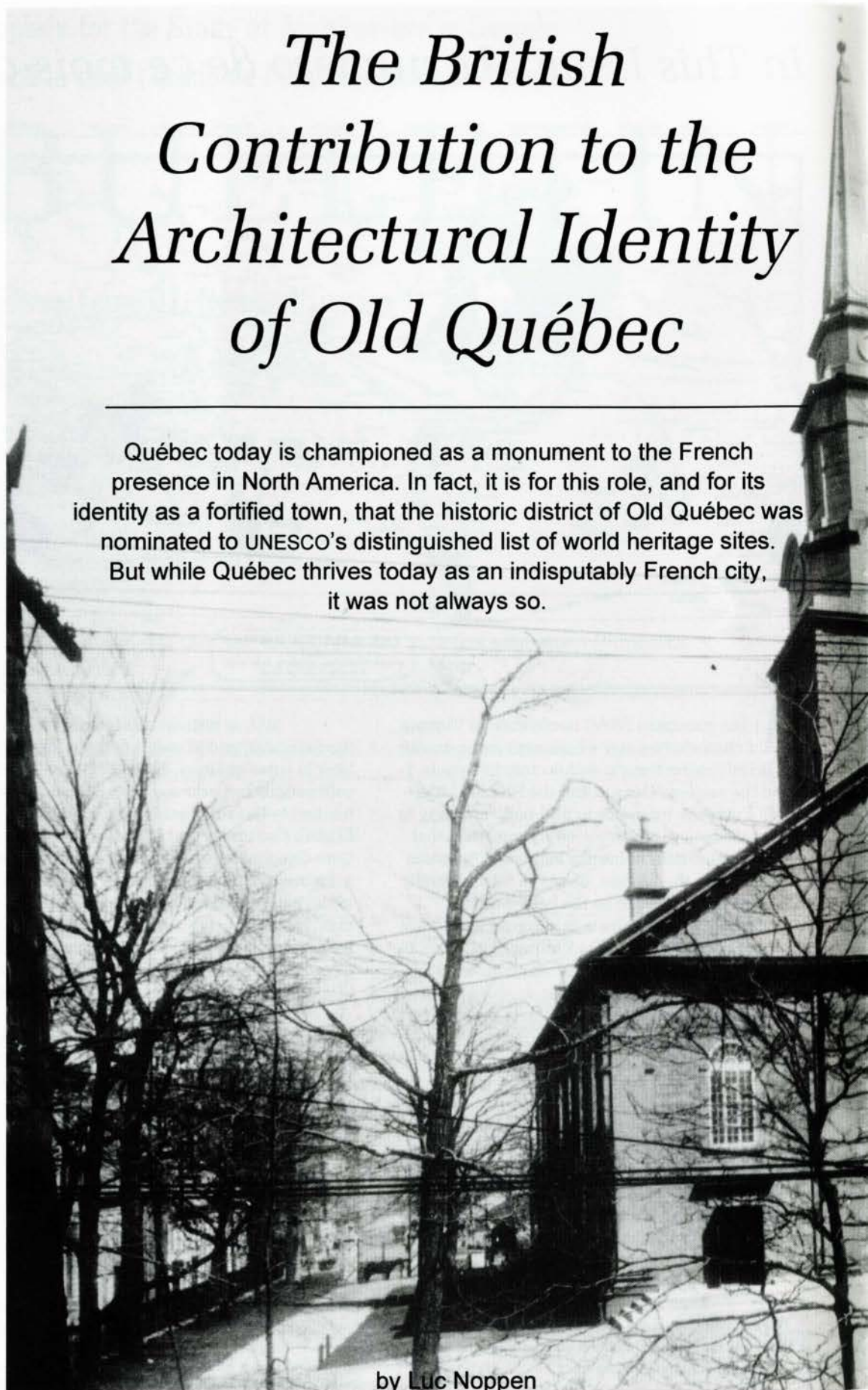
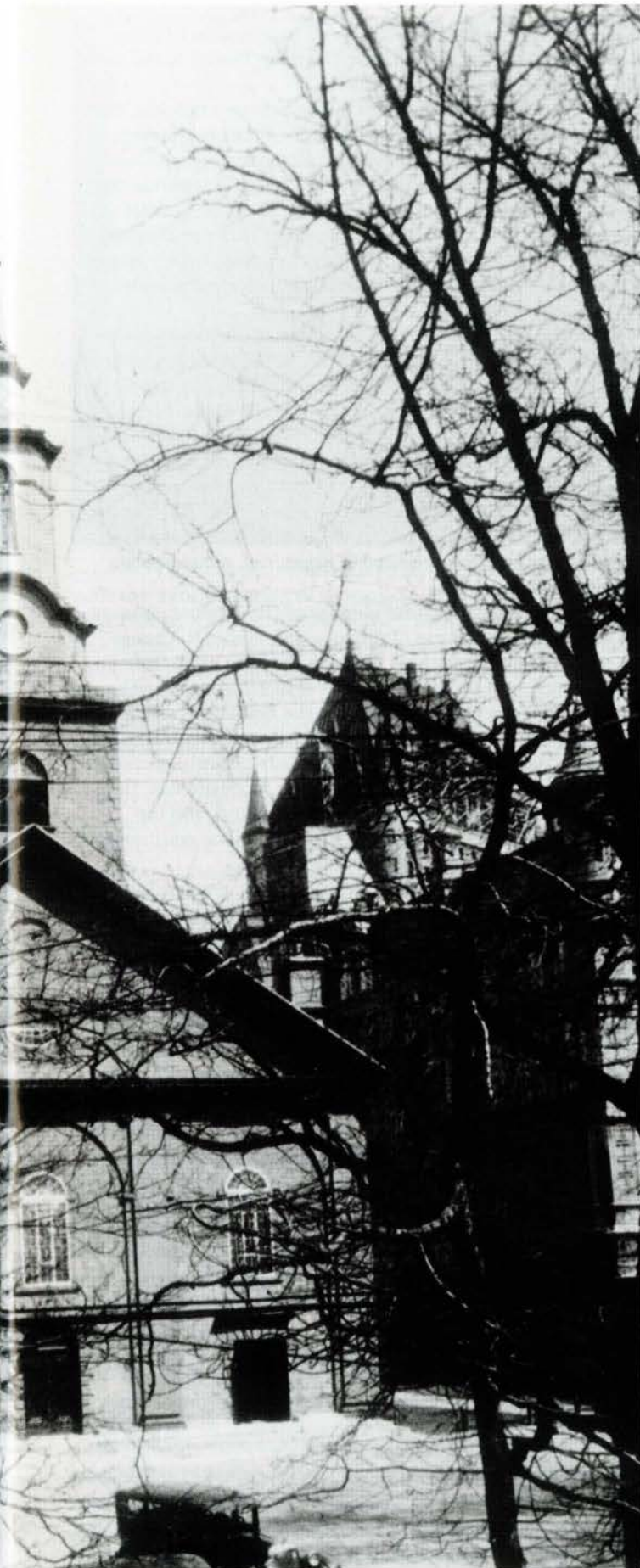


Figure 1. The Anglican cathedral, Québec City, about 1930. (Archives nationales du Québec, GH-573-54)

by Luc Noppen





The long process by which Québec's French identity and image were shaped (beginning with Confederation, which officially established Canada's cultural duality) has been explained on numerous occasions.<sup>1</sup> Briefly, the process of creating a French identity for the capital of the province of Québec<sup>2</sup> began with the late-19th century penchant for creating history. This popular movement saw the introduction of buildings and monuments inspired by French architecture of the 16th and 17th centuries, giving Québec the desired image of historical continuity. Later, the liberal ideology of men such as Lomer Gouin and Louis-Alexandre Taschereau, who were striving to create a secular state, resulted in the French model being imposed upon institutions, obliging them to be built in the architectural style taught at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris.<sup>3</sup> Subsequently, beginning in the 1930s, Taschereau's Liberals sought to give the province a capital city worthy of the name, whose supremacy, without breaking with continuity, would inevitably come to be taken for granted. With the creation of a new administrative district<sup>4</sup> the city began to regain its French character, notably in its toponymy.

And then Place Royale was "rediscovered." From the end of the 1950s, national modernism was confirmed in the preservation and development of the surviving relics of the glorious era of New France.<sup>5</sup> It was in this context that the idea of recreating Place Royale was born,<sup>6</sup> henceforth billed as "the cradle of Francophone civilization in North America." This concept was followed by a stream of restorations to recreate the image of an idyllic (but ever-so-problematic) New France.<sup>7</sup>

This construction, carried out for the purpose of creating an identity, originated from a respect for the original concept, an actual space-time whose age inspired awe in admirers of antiquity and increased its symbolic value in the eyes of its "curators."<sup>8</sup> For the urban tissue of Québec does, in fact, bear the indelible imprint of the French occupation, and traditional uses have guaranteed that, even long after the Conquest, the silhouettes and unassuming austerity of the architecture continue to be familiar reminders of the early 18th century.<sup>9</sup>

It remains, nonetheless, that 90 percent of the buildings in Québec's historic district date from the 19th and 20th centuries, and not from the French Régime.<sup>10</sup> Only a few traces and fragments survive from that earlier period, alongside buildings largely rebuilt or restored since the end of the 19th century. An overall, objective assessment reveals an important paradox: the oldest buildings in Old Québec, the symbol of the French presence in North America, date from the British Régime. So, in fact, the French image of the city originates from a sort of global intuition residing beyond the actual age of the architecture; it is only with the passage of time and *a posteriori* that this image has acquired the credibility that allows it to substitute for what actually exists—and to corrupt, even dictate the interpretation of it.<sup>11</sup>

The following example illustrates this nicely. It is generally thought<sup>12</sup> that the Anglican Cathedral of the Holy Trinity of Québec, built between 1800 and 1803 on Place d'Armes (figure 1), is of much more recent construction than Notre-Dame cathedral, begun in 1647, or Notre-Dame-des-Victoires church, said to date from 1688, or even the Hôtel-Dieu church, which was completed a few months before Holy Trinity. Based on these early construction dates, the three French Catholic churches were listed as historic monuments in 1966, 1929, and 1961 respectively. Notre-Dame cathedral was, in fact, completely destroyed by fire in 1922; Notre-Dame-des-Victoires was entirely rebuilt in 1760 and again in 1818, and its interior was completely redone in 1854; and the Hôtel-Dieu church was entirely remodelled in 1830.





Figure 2. The interior of the Anglican cathedral as restored in 1993. (Paul Laliberté, SRP - Université Laval)

Considering the fires and the reconstructions, alterations, and restorations of these Catholic churches, there is no doubt that the Cathedral of the Holy Trinity is the oldest church remaining in Old Québec.<sup>13</sup>

It was only recently, after the restoration of the three Catholic churches, that the true value of the Cathedral of the Holy Trinity as an ancient building emerged. After work was completed on the other churches, the cathedral looked old-fashioned and decrepit—just what was needed to attract the attention of those interested in the past, and in things from the past. Historical research proved that the fabric of this venerable-looking building was in fact authentic,<sup>14</sup> and old, according to the recognized comparative frames of reference. The next step was listing the building, which was done in 1989. Its full worth has now been brought to light with the recent completion of a very extensive restoration project (figure 2).

The Cathedral of the Holy Trinity, which was not part of the movement to resuscitate and then restore the French Régime, reveals a layer of the architectural history of Québec that numerous restoration projects have almost erased. The connotation of its common name, “Anglican Cathedral,” may explain why it was never included in crusades to authenticate the architecture of Old Québec: the British period in Old Québec was forgotten in the “Frenchifying” process, and the cathedral’s “rehabilitation” was neglected. But this did not keep it from influencing the character of a built environment of another order. If narrow partisanship is put aside when looking at datings or individual buildings, the omnipresent “English” heritage, which had undeniably survived the Conquest but which the authorities preferred to forget, can, alone, explain the uniqueness of Québec City today.

The British contribution to the architectural identity of Old Québec consists of the changes they brought to housing, to the use of urban space, and to the image projected by the city. These changes left an indelible mark on the built environment; they also shaped the cultural behaviour of the francophones of North America. The history of the British contribution began about 1800 when the British government, desiring to make a good impression, went to great lengths to create a fitting image for its new colonial capital. At Place d’Armes, for example, the British authorities created for the first time a nucleus of public buildings for Old Québec. A courthouse, the Cathedral of the Holy Trinity, the Union Hotel, the Château Haldimand, and the Château Saint-Louis (an existing building, renovated and enlarged by the addition of a storey) were all rendered in the classical English style of architecture.

The intentions of the British authorities were clear. For their new buildings they chose a refined architecture inspired by the 16th-century Italian architect Andrea Palladio in place of the original architecture of Place d’Armes, which had been seriously damaged in the bombings during the Conquest—and which, although derived from French classicism, was seen to have suffered when left to the devices of mere artisans. The British desire to create a more civilized environment is evident from the transformations they undertook. It was also clearly stated in a speech made in 1805, when the first stone of the Union Hotel was laid:

Experience shows that in all countries, progress in architecture generally goes hand in hand with the blossoming of civilization and progress in science. In every country whose inhabitants must settle for public buildings and housing that are crude and devoid of decoration, we can only expect to find an uncouth and unrefined society. By making improvements to the buildings, we can follow quite accurately the progressive stages achieved by the community as it evolves ....

The speaker continued:

In this far-off colony of the British Empire, we cannot claim to compete with the mother country [Great Britain], in any of the arts or in the refinements of life. However, in her attentive care and under her protection, we can gain from her teachings and her example.

Then, on the subject of the new construction bordering Place d’Armes:

It is not without a certain pride and satisfaction that we observe the level of public-spiritedness inspired by a number of buildings constructed recently in the Province, as well as by various public works that have been undertaken. This is very promising for the prosperity of the country and gives hope for rapid progress in the development of the colony.<sup>15</sup>



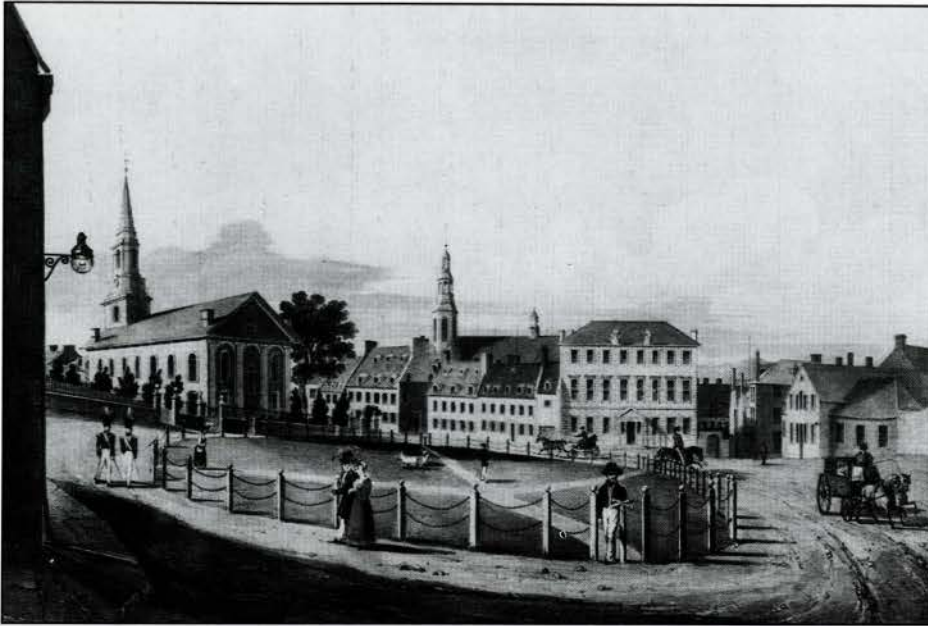


Figure 3 (left). Place d'Armes, Québec City, in 1832, as drawn by R.A. Sproule. (Musée du Québec)

Figure 4 (above). The Québec Citadel, built 1820-30 to plans prepared by Elias Walker Durnford. (Jean Audet, Parks Canada)

The complete transformation of Québec's built environment was coupled with the transformation of its society. The "official" portrait of the capital in the era of New France was a conventional bird's-eye-view representing the Upper Town and the Lower Town from an imaginary perspective, depicting what was deemed appropriate, rather than what was actually seen. The standard depictions of the capital of the British colony, on the other hand, adhered to a rather Anglo-Saxon frame of reference, showing the city from within, the new institutional quarters occupying a prominent place in the establishment (figure 3).

The British period was also one of considerable and ambitious undertakings, notably the construction of fortification walls around the city and a citadel by the military engineers (figure 4). The French had drawn plans for both, but never got around to building them. It was these very fortifications, into which all the energy and resources in the capital were channelled between 1815 and 1830, that enabled Québec, the only fortified city in North America, to be designated a World Heritage site.

As the speaker at the Union Hotel alluded, the British brought to the colony a new manner of living, the single-family dwelling, which they had adopted more than a century earlier. In Québec, the British came up against an older Mediterranean concept inherited by the French in the 16th and 17th centuries, that of collective housing divided into units such as an "apartment" or, for those less well-off, a "common room." The British were thoroughly astonished to find this kind of housing in Québec. They considered it outdated and conducive to intolerable promiscuousness, and set about filling all the available space within the fortified town with their new kind of housing.

British social customs also had an impact on existing housing. Whereas Parisians, mainly apartment dwellers, rented the horse-drawn carriages they used, the British owned their own domestic carriages. They set about adapting the existing buildings in Québec to accommodate them. But the elegant stables and coach-houses that accompanied single-family houses in the British system required access to the rear of the properties, and this access was not possible on the lots divided under the French Régime. The solution was to open carriageways through the existing façades, creating what is now a characteristic feature on the streets of Old Québec.

The first new houses built by the British in Québec were conventional structures of one or two storeys, resembling existing Québec buildings but with interiors divided for single-family occupation. Subsequently, from about 1815-20, a large number of "Georgian" or "London-style" houses appeared (figure 5). In form these houses were more recognizably British, built in an attempt to introduce a system of terraced houses, the speculative category of housing for British towns. In Old Québec, rue Sainte-Angele, rue Saint-Stanislas, rue Sainte-Ursule, rue D'Auteuil, rue des Grisons, rue Mont-Carmel, rue Brébeuf, avenue Sainte-Geneviève, and avenue Saint-Denis are largely composed of single-family houses built between 1790 and 1850 (figure 6).



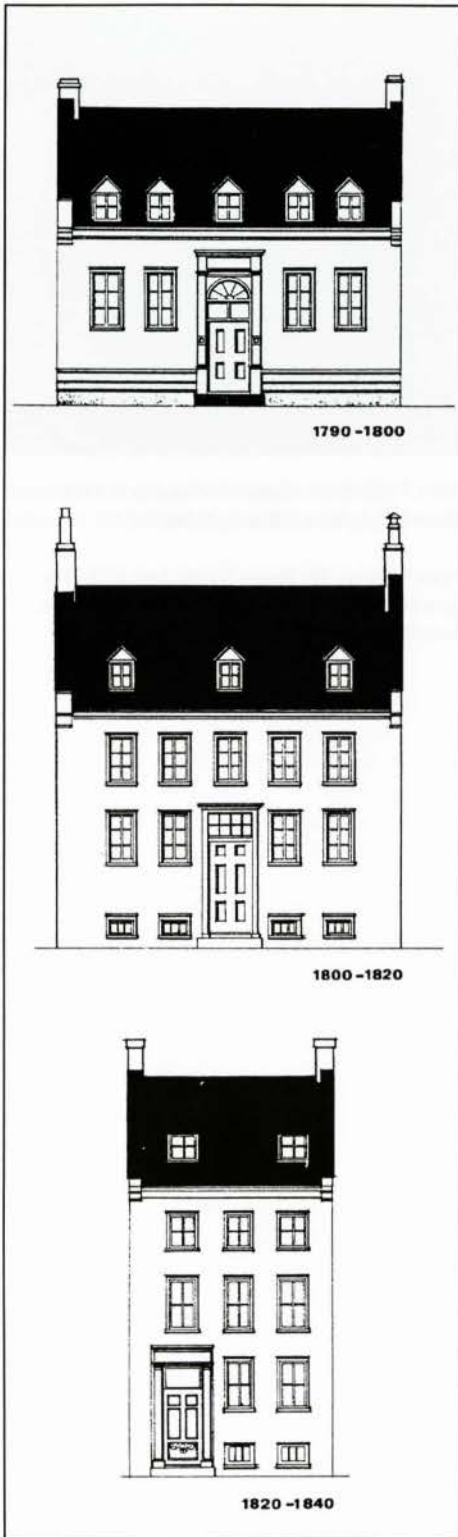


Figure 5 (above). Typical types of houses built in Québec between 1790 and 1840. (André Cloutier)

Figure 6 (right). Avenue Saint-Denis as seen from the top of the citadel, c. 1940. (Inventaire des œuvres d'art)



These streets give Old Québec its unity, creating a homogeneity in what is referred to as the "classical city." The houses were modelled after the architecture of London's residential suburbs, with Westminster, Mayfair, and Victoria around the commercial City, as well as Edinburgh's New Town, serving as models for the housing that transformed the capital of Lower Canada.

The new districts in the capital were developed exclusively for housing, with commercial functions such as the port, markets, and factories relegated to other areas of the city, where the density of these non-residential functions was greater than ever before. At the same time, the British established an economic system based on the exchange of goods produced in accordance with predictable levels of consumption. From that time on, markets were intended only for local merchandise, fresh produce, and bulk products, while a new kind of building, the store, was used for the sale of manufactured and imported items. Québec's new commercial district saw the introduction of shop signs about 1800, and bowed display windows in the English style about 1820. The commercial storefront became the characteristic feature of the new type of architecture, with a commercial establishment on the ground floor and accommodations for the shopkeeper's family upstairs.

From the Lower Town market to the St. John suburb, by way of the Upper Town market, the streets of the capital of Lower Canada were lined with elegant storefronts, forming the first, and still only, commercial axis in Old Québec. Many storefronts on rue Buade, côte de la Fabrique, and rue Saint-Jean survive as eloquent reminders of this change in consumer habits. And today, more than ever, this architecture of the first half of the 19th century sustains the economic activity of the historic district of Old Québec.

The introduction of single-family housing within Québec and the separation of districts according to their functions triggered the urban sprawl previously held in check by the collective housing and the mixed functions of the city under the French Régime. The British concept of the city led to the creation of suburbs of sparse urban activity and to the development of land farther out for villas. The territory occupied in 1830 by the city, the suburbs, and the outlying vacation areas today corresponds approximately to that of the Québec Urban Community. Knowing the Mediterranean concept of the city prevalent in France up to the 19th century, had it not been for this expansive growth it is likely that Québec City would have been rebuilt over and over within its walls, each period wiping out the previous one like a palimpsest.<sup>16</sup>

The British contribution to the architectural identity of Old Québec, then, is apparent first and foremost in the restructuring of the environment. From 1800, the city was divided into districts according to specific functions, the inhabitants living in residential districts alongside but separate from the non-residential. The typically Anglo-Saxon urban expansion which resulted is responsible for the survival of the old historical centre of Québec. And while the density on some residential streets has increased with the introduction of apartments among the mainly single-family residences, the residents of Old Québec have clung to the habit of not living on commercial streets.



Nothing resembles Old Québec more than the Beacon Hill district of Boston, an 18th-century housing ensemble which, having developed earlier on the North American scene, holds a position of historic precedence over Québec. But a comparison of the two districts reveals certain differences, primarily because many of the British planners of Québec were Scots, which was not the case in New England. The political clout of the Scots in Québec was such that, in 1809, they managed to build St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, much to the displeasure of the Anglican bishop, Jacob Mountain.<sup>17</sup>

The forthright architectural tradition of the French met with the approval of the merchants and builders from northern Great Britain. Construction in Québec in the 19th century continued to be in stone, though in a range of colours similar to those found earlier in Edinburgh.<sup>18</sup> The creamy white of the French whitewash was replaced by the bluish white of the old Scottish capital, as illustrated in Cockburn's numerous watercolours of 1829-30. The darker sandstone from the quarries in Sillery and Cap-Rouge later gave the fortifications and the façades lining the streets of Québec the colours of Edinburgh's New Town (figure 7). Towards the end of the 19th century, certain public buildings were painted brown to resemble the brownstone of the new districts in Edinburgh and Glasgow. British emigration by this time, however, was already widespread, leaving many more reminders of this trend throughout western cities.

In Québec the Scottish reference was no less explicit: the city administrators clearly indicated their intention to establish in Québec a New Edinburgh when designing the city on the plateau outside the walls. With Confederation and the creation of a territory for the "distinct" French-Canadian population, the project was renamed: New Edinburgh, beside the Parliament Buildings of the new province, became the "Champs-Élysées" of Québec.<sup>19</sup> History was already beginning to change the way in which Québec's past would unfold.

While the passage of time and the emergence of a critical history have nuanced the way we see the chronicle of Québec, it remains that the francophones of North America are no longer French (as everyone will agree), and are yet today in search of an identity. As far as the built environment of Old Québec is concerned, the scope and the influence of the British contribution are re-emerging as the understanding of its specific character develops.

Nevertheless, the matter of the validation of a building such as the Cathedral of the Holy Trinity is far from being seen as the beginning of an enriched history of Old Québec; it is now simply an event to be studied on its own.<sup>20</sup> In the present political context, the last thing to deliberate is the inherent British character of the old capital. In the 1960s, the new nationalistic and traditionalistic élite were busy rebuilding Place Royale for the purpose of confirming the establishment of the French settlement in the city—a modern-day revenge against the clerico-nationalistic ideology which placed the mythical site on the Île-d'Orléans.<sup>21</sup> Today, they are busy completing the "Frenchification" of Québec. And if a critical approach to restoration no longer permits the physical construction of a national mythology,<sup>22</sup> history and toponymy seem to have taken up the torch. The Musée du Séminaire has made way for the Musée de l'Amérique française, and a new Musée de la Nouvelle-France would come into being just as soon as a sovereign Québec could come up with the necessary millions. As for the streets and squares, they too have been bent to the cause. Many names with British historical connotations have recently been replaced by names considered more consistent with the French image.<sup>23</sup>

OLD QUÉBEC, THIS BASTION OF TOTALITARIAN "FRENCHNESS," is not only left without choices regarding any new architecture that would respect this *onerous* history, it is also paralyzed under the weight of a dubious heritage.<sup>24</sup> And while there is little new construction going on in Old Québec, the preference of certain authorities towards a one-sided history would appear to threaten the subtleties of an environment that is characterized, as has been shown, by layers of different historical periods and heritages, both French and English. What a pity if our age bequeaths to these memories rekindled daily by the architecture around us nothing more than a watered-down past, brought to light in vain.



Figure 7. The house constructed for Benjamin Tremain, merchant, at 89 rue d'Auteuil, Québec City, in 1818. (Paul Laliberté, SRP - Université Laval)



## Endnotes

- 1 For example, in Lucie K. Morisset and Luc Noppen, "A la recherche d'identités: usages et propos du recyclage du passé dans l'architecture au Québec," in Luc Noppen, ed., *Architecture, forme urbaine et identité collective* (Sainte-Foy and Sillery, Qué.: CÉLAT [Université Laval]/Septentrion, 1995), 103-34.
- 2 Luc Noppen, "L'image française du Vieux-Québec," *Cap-aux-Diamants* 2, no. 2 (1986): 13-17.
- 3 Luc Noppen, "L'architecture d'État: l'époque de Louis-Alexandre Taschereau," *Cap-aux-Diamants* 3, no. 4 (1988): 23-26.
- 4 See Luc Noppen and Lucie K. Morisset, *Québec la capitale* (Ville de Québec, 1996) (forthcoming); Luc Noppen, *Analyse contextuelle, principes et orientations. Rapport d'étape du projet de réaménagement des axes René-Lévesque et Dufferin Montmorency*, report prepared for Gauthier Guité Daoust, architects, and le Groupe Lestage, presented to the City of Québec, June 1993.
- 5 Since the end of the Second World War, an impressive body of writing (even if only counting information concerning the preservation of a "heritage" being brought to light,) has been drawing a clearer picture of "history" as written under the Duplessis administration: Trudel, Morisset, Barbeau, and Hébert, to name only four, collaborated closely on imparting of this version of New France. Noppen and Morisset, "A la recherche d'identités."
- 6 On the subject of Place-Royale, see Luc Noppen, *La restauration à la Place-Royale de Québec. Une étude sur les concepts et sur la nature des interventions. Le choix d'un concept actualisé: une proposition*, Université Laval, May 1978.
- 7 Luc Noppen, "Place-Royale, chantier de construction d'une identité nationale," *Villes reconstruites: du dessin au destin* (Paris: l'Harmattan, 1994), 2:301-06.
- 8 Françoise Choay claimed recently that the primary and determining factor in determining the authenticity of a monument was, and remains, age. See Françoise Choay, "The Belonging to the Past," in *L'allégorie du patrimoine* (Paris: Seuil, 1992).
- 9 This is what Gérard Morisset, a keen francophile and a participant in construction for the purpose of creating an identity, alludes to: "So it is not at all surprising that within about ten years after the Conquest, Québec once again had the pleasant look of a small French provincial town." Gérard Morisset, *Québec et son évolution. Cahiers d'histoire n° 4* (Québec: Société Historique, 1952).
- 10 This according to the *Concept général de réaménagement du Vieux-Québec* (Québec, August 1970), 60.
- 11 On this subject, Marcel Trudel's speech in which he passionately appeals for the creation of an "outdoor museum" to protect the French heritage of Old Québec comes to mind. He insists on the necessity of getting rid of commercial storefronts and going back to a French-Canadian concept of advertising and window displays. He claims, in desperation, that "there is still enough of the old architecture left to create an outdoor museum: the little that remains from the 17th and 18th centuries will be shown to better advantage and we can save, within the walls, the beautiful and still abundant architecture of the first half of the 19th century. This is precisely the architecture that gives Québec its old-world character." Marcel Trudel, *Conservons notre héritage français. Cahiers d'histoire n° 3* (Québec: Société Historique, 1951), 15.
- 12 If "age" is understood today by the scientific community in terms of symbolic value, it is certainly one of the criteria *sine qua non* for monuments, in public opinion. This example of an excessive longing for what is old is anything but rare. At the very awakening of a historic conscience in French Canada, Arthur Buies was inspired to claim, ironically, "I cannot resist the temptation to mention in passing that one of the greatest weaknesses of ours, the Québécois, is our love of what is old because it is old. We like nothing more than a burnt-down house, and the longer it has been burnt-down the better." Arthur Buies, *L'ancien et le futur Québec* (Québec: Darveau, 1876).
- 13 Luc Noppen and Lucie K. Morisset, *Foi et patrie: art et architectures des églises à Québec* (Québec: Publications du Québec, 1996). See also Luc Noppen and Lucie K. Morisset, *La présence Anglicane à Québec: Holy Trinity Cathedral (1796-1996)* (Sillery, Qué.: Septentrion, 1995).
- 14 This double concept of "apparent age" and "real age" comes from Alois Riegl, to whom critical thinking on architectural conservation is deeply indebted today. Alois Riegl, *Le culte moderne des Monuments. Son essence et sa genèse* (Paris, [1903]: Paris: Seuil, 1984).
- 15 Quoted in Pierre-Georges Roy, "L'Hôtel Union ou Saint-Georges à Québec," *Bulletin des recherches historiques* 43, no. 1 (1937): 3-17.
- 16 The deciphering of these buried vestiges is the particular sphere of interest of archaeologists and restorers trained to interpret towns that were built in layers.
- 17 Noppen and Morisset, *Foi et patrie*.
- 18 While buildings in England were increasingly of brick rendered with untreated plaster, the British in Québec continued to build in stone.
- 19 Danielle Blanchet, *Découvrir la Grande Allée* (Québec: Musée du Québec, 1984), 47.
- 20 In this case, the exception most likely confirms the rule. It is apparent that a unilateral process of sanctioning for the purpose of creating an identity that, until now, seems to have shaped the body of historical monuments in the province is more propaganda than archival objectivity. Indeed, as Alois Riegl points out, no object is a memorial in itself. It is significant, however, that the systematic francophile validation which becomes apparent here, "for the purpose of survival," as the historian Dumas wrote in 1951, today connects the fates of the buildings in Québec with the "commemorative monuments" defined recently by Françoise Choay: "The specificity of the monument comes precisely from the way it acts on the memory. It works on it and transforms it by influencing the emotions in such a way that the past is called up and adapted to fit the present. But this past which is summoned up, assembled, conjured up, if you will, is not just any past: it is specific, and selected for vital purposes, insofar as it can directly help to maintain and preserve the identity of a community, be it ethnic or religious, national, tribal or family." Choay, 15.
- 21 Luc Noppen, "L'Île d'Orléans, mythe ou monument?," *Cap-aux-Diamants* 5, no. 1 (1989): 23-26.
- 22 Françoise Choay, among others, has recently aimed a sharp, denigrating criticism in this direction: "In Canada, the centre of Old Québec, which is on the world heritage list, stems from a huge project begun in 1960 for nationalistic purposes and to promote tourism. It led to the demolition of a group of early buildings and their replacement by others, chosen on no scientific basis, in the style of French 18th-century architecture." Choay, 166.
- 23 The mishaps with respect to the reminders of the Victorian period in Québec speak volumes on the transformations on the "memory of place" imposed by the admiration for all things French. An example of this is a statue of Queen Victoria by British sculptor Marshall Wood, intended for display in front of the Parliament Buildings. Never placed on the intended spot, it was relegated to the Lower Town in 1889, when the city acquired it for a park named in honour of the Queen. It is this statue that was blown up by the Front de Libération du Québec in 1970; its remains are now on display in the exhibit *Mémoires* in the Musée de la Civilisation, in Québec City. Ever since rue Victoria became rue Père-Marquette in 1937, parc Victoria remains one of the few reminders of the Queen in Québec.
- 24 This situation, an extreme case of the "obvious excesses in the practices of historical heritage" described by Choay, leads inevitably to "the decline in the competency to build." This is illustrated by both the number of architectural projects frozen because of the pervasive patrimonial orthodoxy and the few new buildings in the historic district of Old Québec, the latter being exact copies of age-old buildings. Noppen and Morisset, "A la recherche d'identités."

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