



The Yellowknife Post Office, Franklin Avenue provides a popular meeting place.

Yellowknife - A Town Without a Presence

by Ann Peters

Originally, I had planned to write an article about the history of the development of Yellowknife and particularly the "Old Town" area where the city was first established in the 1930s. However, my interest in heritage has always been rooted in my interest in places, old or new—what makes them, who makes them and why we make them. Having made Yellowknife my home for over twelve years now, I have watched this town change and grow, resigning myself to each unpleasant addition and breathing a sigh of relief for the occasional pleasant change. With the growing interest in heritage even in a city as small and relatively recent as Yellowknife, there is now genuine public concern about what is developed in the "Old Town" area—being of historic interest seems to justify that concern. What has not yet developed is public concern about new developments that will be with us for the next twenty years to come. Although this situation is certainly not unique to this city, because of its age, relative prosperity and location, Yellowknife makes an interesting case study of a place establishing itself.

Yellowknife is a very young and prosperous city, with an interesting past, a dynamic population and a beautiful setting. First settled in the 1930s with the discovery of gold, the city began on a rocky outcrop into the Great Slave Lake. Tent frames and log cabins sprung up around "The Rock" and bush planes, cat trains (sleds hauled across the ice by tracked vehicles), boats and barges brought people and supplies to this isolated settlement. The continuous growth of the town eventually forced a move away from its original site in the "Old Town" and up to a sandy plain less than a mile away, the "New Town." Unlike many gold rush cities in California and the Yukon, Yellowknife is still alive and well and mining for gold. It has also been the capital of the Northwest Territories since 1967 and a major transportation hub with flights arriving from across Canada and leaving for the many small communities and exploration camps throughout the NWT. With a population of approximately 12,000, Yellowknife is the largest settlement in the NWT.

Seeing Yellowknife from a distance, and particularly for the first time, is really quite impressive. Rounding a corner after driving or flying over many miles of wilderness, the skyline of this small city surprises everyone. Rising from the Precambrian Shield on the north shore of the Great Slave Lake, bathed either in the light of the midnight sun or the brilliant reflection from the snow, this small city appears like the Emerald City and the Land of Oz. Until you enter it.

What you do see walking along the streets of our downtown does not appear in promotional brochures, magazine articles or advertising. In most cases photographers depend on distant views or lenses to take interesting shots of our downtown. None of the photos included in this

article would do much to promote Yellowknife, and yet they are typical street level views Yellowknifers walk through day in and day out.

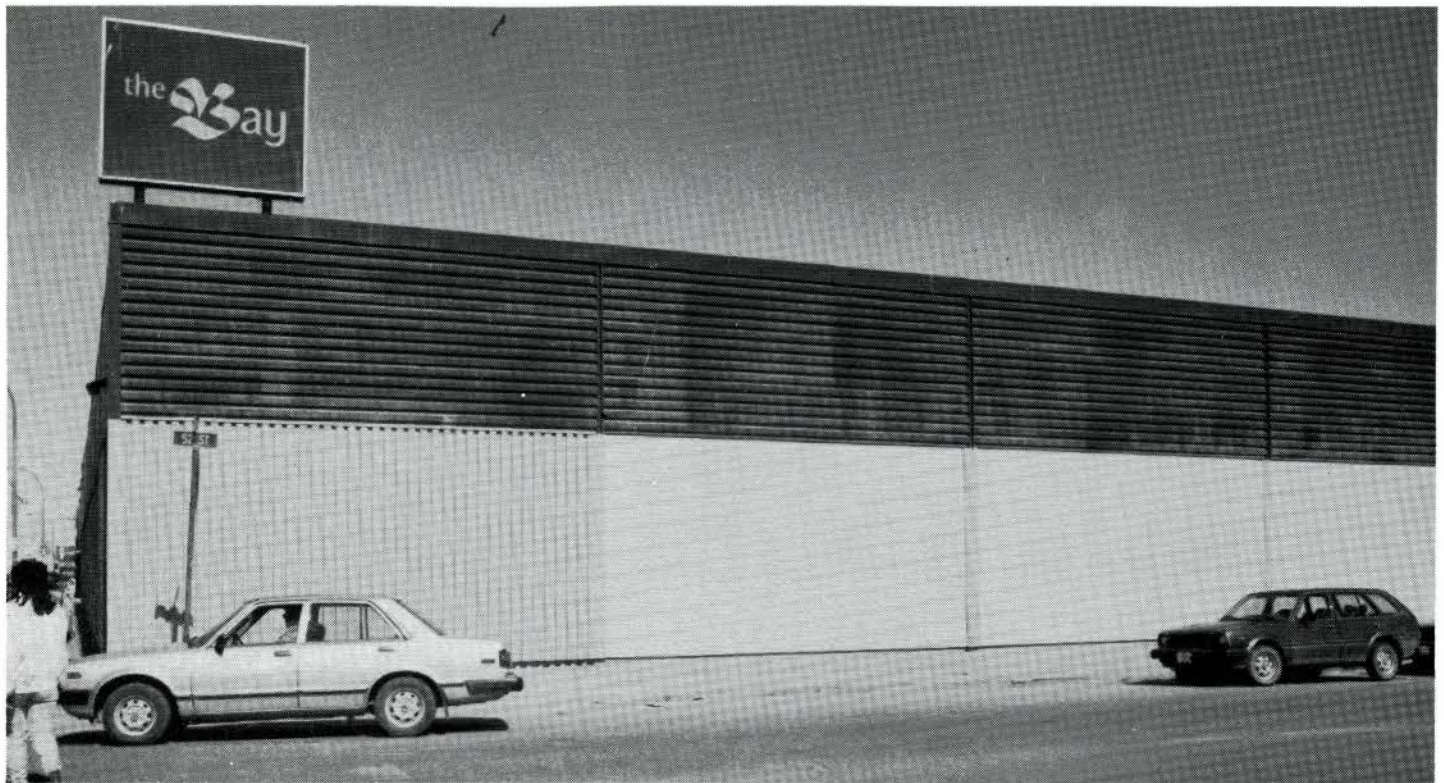
Certainly not an example of fine architecture, the Yellowknife Post Office is typical of many built in the 1950s across Canada. However, other attributes of this building make it an important public place. Because the building has been set back from the street the widened sidewalk in front of the Post Office provides a popular sunny space for people to gather. All summer long tickets to local events are sold, newspaper vendors gather, people wait for friends or run into them, and small public ceremonies are held there. With Yellowknife growing at a fast pace it seems only a matter of time before a new post office will be in order. One can only hope that attention will be paid to retaining the sunny plaza in front of a new building.

A complaint for years has been the number of blank facades along our main street. The Bay, an important building in any small northern community, is probably the worst offender in downtown Yellowknife. Although it originally did have windows, renovations in the late 1970s streamlined the building to give it the current "back of the building" look all around. Unlike the Post Office, when this building is replaced I doubt there is any feature of the present building that should be retained.

Wrapped around the Yellowknife Inn at the town's main intersection, over entrances to restaurants and bars, even over the sidewalk in front of an officer tower, awnings have appeared all over Yellowknife recently. The Awning Salesman is spoken of as a mysterious stranger who took the town by storm, with awnings appearing almost weekly in the fall of 1987, and cropping up regularly since then. For many awnings are considered purely tacky. For others, awnings have added, colour and illumination to previously dull facades. The most interesting result of the awning revolution may be the fact that they were noticed and became a topic of conversation. They are also indications that private building owners are interested in the appearance of their buildings and are willing to spend money on improving that appearance.

A fairly typical example of what private developers tend to build in small northern communities is the three storey office building, named Lahm Ridge Towers. While conforming to all zoning bylaws and providing standard government office space this basic metal clad structure does not take advantage of the very prominent site and potential for excellent views over the Great Slave Lake.

A surprise to many as they arrive in Yellowknife are the ten storey office towers which have created the modern day skyline of the City. At street level these buildings have provided uninviting entrances and



The Bay fronts Franklin Avenue with a windowless facade.



The Yellowknife Inn was recently decorated with canopy additions.

blank walls. The Precambrian building, which houses the Capital Twin Theatres, even has a twin tower, The Scotia Centre. Both buildings have complied with development regulations so that the towers are set back from the street, but it is unfortunate that the theatre with the potential to liven up the main street facade has been given a side street entrance. Once located where the Scotia Centre now is, the old Capital Theatre was almost as important a place to meet up with people as the Post Office.

Yellowknife has been planned with a typical concentrated downtown business district and new large buildings are slowly replacing older existing residences in the area. Treeline Trappings, a Native Crafts outlet located in a converted house has used the yard to provide seating, picnic tables for people to sit at and to set up a teepee in the summer. The store is another doomed building as commercially zoned land has become too valuable to allow it to remain. Again, the building itself is not important, but the fact that it provides a sunny public space in the downtown is an attribute that will probably and unfortunately be lost in any new development.

Not everything is wrong with downtown Yellowknife. It is still small enough that it is easy to get around on foot. Vehicular traffic remains light, although some people complain about the traffic jam at five o'clock, which lasts five to ten minutes. The City has set up a 30 foot Christmas tree in the main intersection during the Christmas season for the past few years which creates a wonderful town square filled with coloured lights during the longest darkest days of winter. On the longest night of the year thousands of people flock downtown to "Raven Mad Daze" when the streets are closed to traffic and the stores stay open until midnight. An influx of new businesses, stores and services has generally improved life in our city over the past few years and Chatelaine Magazine recently rated Yellowknife as one of the 10 best places to live in Canada. Additionally, not all our public buildings are poorly designed.

If Yellowknife is such a good place to live and a vibrant growing community, why is its appearance so weak and how did it get this way? Can public awareness of the forces that steer the development of a sense



Lahm Ridge Towers a standard metal clad structure for an important city site.



The Precambrian Building lacks the success of its predecessor, a popular movie house.

of place encourage them to make better places? Is information about what makes for developing a sense of place available and accessible to those who do most of our place-making?

If YK's streetscape is not worthy of consideration by architects—why isn't it? Architects are considered an elite bunch, defenders of "good design"—and in fact often view themselves that way. But where dentists have been successful promoting dental hygiene, architects have not made great strides in promoting good building design. Assuming that good design practices will somehow filter down to owners and developers has not proven true. Most architects (and obviously myself included) are great critics of building designs and love to sneer at the efforts of developers.

This sneering does not seem to have had a lot of effect on what gets built. In small cities, such as Yellowknife, examples of well designed public buildings are few. Why are architects involved so little in the design of our public buildings? The fear of architects costing a lot of

money and building something wierd and impractical is definitely a factor. Also, Yellowknife is still considered as a bit of a "colony" and professionals are more often than not brought in from Edmonton to do any design work. They, unfortunately do not have to live with their creations, or often are not familiar enough with the town and its dynamics to be able to properly design for it.

The group which probably has the greatest influence on the physical character of any town or city are the developers—those whose business it is to build on a large scale. In Yellowknife most new developments are obviously the most economical response to the space requirements of a growing town and little thought is given to public amenities or appearances. Of course cost is a factor, and many developers operate under the myth that good design costs more than poor design. Marketing products by their containers, although common for other commodities, has not yet become common practice in this town.

Of course, architects and developers aren't the only parties involv-



Treeline Trappings has achieved a sense of place with on site seating and relaxation area.

ed in place-making; municipal governments and private citizens have roles to play as well. The role of the public, or private citizens is much more difficult to define. Should they be the watchdogs or advocates? Does the public as a group even have a common viewpoint? Residents of Yellowknife have been conscious of the distinct character of their town since its beginnings in the 1930s. Yellowknifers are generally proud of living here and like living here. Different things have contributed to the character or sense of a place here that make it special and distinct to them including the; weather, people, story behind it, location and the natural setting. However, people often have a hard time distinguishing just what physical elements contribute to that character. Development has been a heated issue in a town where pressure to expand has been continuous since its beginnings. At the many public forums and debates that have been held over the last ten years numerous contradictions have surfaced. While there is a great demand for more housing there is a desire not to see new housing developed in existing open areas because they have grown accustomed to using these areas for recreation. A large number of boaters want a marina developed in town but no one living on the waterfront wants boat launches and marinas located in their neighbourhood. Generally people want to see Yellowknife's "Old Town" area protected from change, but residents of the Old Town no longer want to live in small shacks with no running water and are building themselves large new houses. There is a real shortage of reasonably priced housing, but developers who are supposedly responding to market demand are luring customers with double garages and Jacuzzis.

Municipal government has an important role to play ensuring not only that zoning bylaws are observed, but that they encourage only development that will be an asset to the community—ones that will im-

prove, not detract, from the quality of life. But what criteria can we use to judge developments? Recent attempts by the City to establish guidelines for construction in residential areas have been challenged as unconstitutional. Being a small municipal government probably also hampers the effectiveness of the City of Yellowknife in controlling development. Responding to public pressure is difficult when so many conflicting views are presented at public meetings and the staff simply isn't available to sort it all out. Maintaining and administering the existing infrastructure seems to be all the City of Yellowknife can manage.

Creating a beautiful city has been a popular movement throughout world history. London, Paris, Vancouver, Ottawa and even Peace River, Alberta have made the appearance of their cities an important priority. Presumably this can be achieved through private initiatives, but the experience of most cities has been that a governing body is necessary to coordinate and ensure that new developments contribute to the city. In Yellowknife an awareness of the importance of the quality of our built environment is growing and local merchants are beginning to talk about improving the appearance of the downtown area. The Chamber of Commerce recently applied for a Heritage Canada Main Street project which should steer them in the right direction and could have a major impact on the town.

When it was decided in the 1950s to move Yellowknife's downtown to its present location above the original townsite, some residents named the new townsite "Blunderville." Perhaps in time that name will be proven wrong, but it still has a long way to go to achieve the sense of place that the "Old Town" had, and still has. Given another ten years, perhaps downtown YK will come of age and become a place worthy of attention. □