

# Searching For Quality Along Nova Scotia's Main Streets

by C. John Thorpe

This paper deals with the administration of the Province of Nova Scotia's Mainstreet Program, and touches on the problem of encouraging aesthetic quality in government cost shared refurbishing of downtown commercial facades.

The majority of Nova Scotia communities have populations of less than 3,000. The people that live there and in surrounding rural districts enjoy a somewhat pastoral lifestyle. Most have never travelled outside the province, several have not even visited Halifax, the province's capital. Being an almost island community, bordered only by other Maritime provinces, this way of life remained relatively preserved until perhaps the 1950's.

At that time, Nova Scotia was bombarded by several outside influences. We could see a different, more materialistic way of life in Upper Canada and the States by watching television. We became beholden to the automobile, paving almost 8,000 km of hitherto seasonal tracks. In 1956, the first shopping centre opened for business. This introduced a completely different approach to retailing, one that the independent downtown storeowner had no previous conception of. Competition with his peers was fine but the new almost military approach of the mall operators left him babbling on the side line. Many decided that "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em". Those that remained tried to compete, often cutting back on overheads, stock and maintenance, trigger-

ing the deterioration of the downtown. Now over 50 shopping centres exist in the province providing over 650,000 square meters of additional retail space and attracting almost 60% of total retail sales.

In a move to counteract the economic and physical deterioration of our town centres, the Province introduced its Mainstreet Program in 1978. We felt it was important to demonstrate the potentials of refurbishing from the start, and therefore leaned towards the encouragement of visual improvements in public areas. The Province shared 60% of the costs of projects with municipal units. To complement these improvements, applications for 30% funding were accepted from commercial building owners for the refurbishing of storefronts. The first year involved only a handful of communities and was regarded as an experiment to evaluate the various approaches adopted.

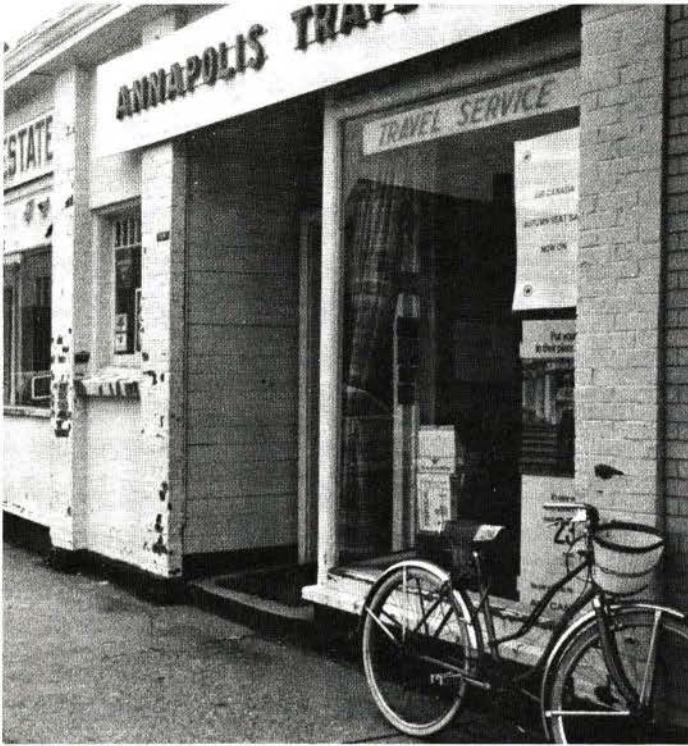
Subsequent to this modest beginning the Mainstreet Program has expanded to approximately 60 communities and groups or virtually every town in the province. The result has been an injection of approximately twenty million dollars in downtown revitalization projects over the past five years. This has acted as the catalyst to generate the confidence of private investors to refurbish or relocate business in the traditional core areas. The downtown is certainly becoming the place to be, often at the expense of a peripheral mall.



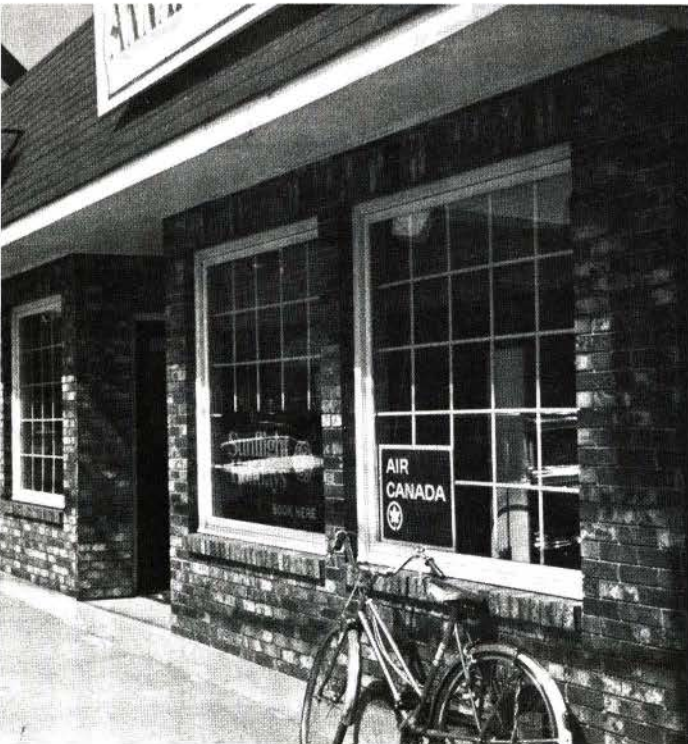
The Mainstreet Program will adapt to any community that provides a minimum convenience shopping area, many have only a small cluster of stores.



The average town participating in the Program has a population of less than 3,000. Revitalization is phased over a number of years. Here a streetscaping project is nearing completion of year one of a three-year plan.



*Not all buildings refurbished under the Program originally have any redeeming architectural features. Often the improvement is a compromise, though an attempt must be made to complement the streetscape.*



Of particular interest is the evolutionary nature of our Program. Rather than what we feel is a rather brash approach adopted in other provinces (by creating regulatory legislation upfront and hard and fast controls), we chose to gradually ease our municipalities and businesspeople into the program. Legislation has been adopted as required and at a time when the need was identified by those effected. Such legislation (Regulation for Shopping Centre Development, and Amendments to the Town Act to permit Business Improvement District taxation) was lobbied for by downtown business people and written to suit their specific requirements.

Of essence has been the program administration and decision making process. There are many social and physical differences between towns, and it would therefore be a mistake to wholly centralize project decision making. The program is open to any community that has a business district. Unlike Heritage Canada, we do not select the communities where we believe our techniques will be most successful. To join the program, each community is responsible for the creation of a representative group to oversee the Program. Many hire an individual to coordinate and manage their efforts. It was relatively easy for these local communities to identify and execute simple projects at the outset. In most cases, the results created quite an impact on the community, although aesthetically a few were rather mediocre. Some requested design help, and we responded by providing 75% of the cost for consultants. We also attached a few strings. The local groups were to work with professionals to arrive at projects that accented the specific character of a community. we encouraged them to identify goals for economic revival and to develop long-term phased implementation plans to achieve same. With this concept originating in the community, it was now made easy for the Province to insist that such planning be a Mainstreet Program prerequisite. In general, this has produced many tasteful, well planned projects, specifically suitable to the community.

This form of "conditioning", or the creation of positive developmental attitudes downtown, has been very successful. The plea for self taxation and the resultant legislation is a good example. To impose such regulation at the outset would probably have gone down like a lead balloon.

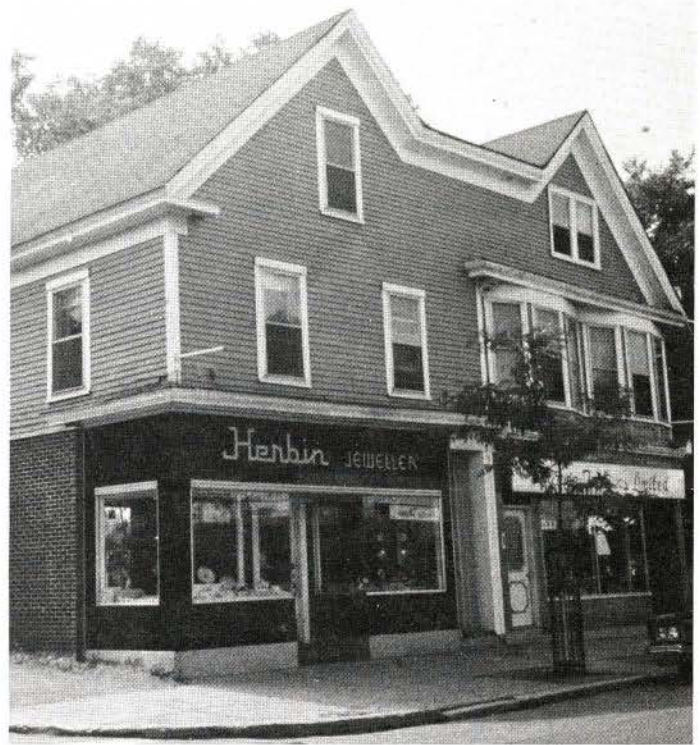
Although taking longer to become effective, this approach is beginning to pay off with commercial building facade improvements. To severely regulate the aesthetics of store front improvements in 1978 would have resulted in accusations of government meddling and an erosion of the good will that was being established by the Program. Unfortunately in a few cases, the Program did cost share on some less than desirable "face lifts". Downtown business groups were gradually learning how to work with architects and we found individuals and groups of building owners were realizing the benefits of seeking professional advice.

Presently, we are at a stage where we feel that more direction and control by the Mainstreet Program is acceptable and will result in many fine examples of facade improvement. This is being brought about by a more stringent application procedure that requires the commercial building owner to thoroughly plan and research his proposed improvement. To assist him in pulling his thoughts together and put them on paper, the Mainstreet Program provides funds up front to help cover the cost of dialogue with a professional. The completed application, which includes sketches and comprehensive details, is submitted to an Improvement Review Committee in the community. The Committee's function is to assess the impact and the appropriateness of the proposal in relation to its streetscape. Advice is offered to those applicants whose plans do not meet the intent of the Program. The Review group includes an individual with acknowledged design related talent, and a member of the Mainstreet Program staff.

We have received many compliments on the progress made by our Mainstreet Program. This achievement has been accomplished by; understanding the particular nature of the people we deal with; the gradual cooperative introduction of directives and thereby gaining the user's confidence; encouraging a familiarity with consultants by urging the seeking of advice; supplying back-up information on promotion, streetscaping techniques, parking, and basic data collection; and lastly by providing a regulated package that suits the developed experience.

Aesthetic quality, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. Restoration, revitalization, refurbishment, and improvement are all a matter of degree dependent on the norm established by the peer group concerned. Most certainly, what may be considered a giant step in one of our impoverished coal mining communities of Cape Breton, could well seem insignificant to a person hailing from an affluent Annapolis Valley town. We will not impose elitist Upper Canadian standards on our communities. What is important is that the local inhabitants achieve what they believe gives them the identity with which they are comfortable, thereby developing a feeling of pride. In this context, I can definitely say that quality is alive and well, and can be found on Nova Scotia's main streets.

In closing, I would pose the question, "Is downtown revitalization just a passing fad?". In a world where traditional value seems to be taboo, are we just dreamers on a futile crusade that may be spreading false hope to an already redundant commercial lifestyle? Or are we acting in just the nick of time to preserve and expand the essential socio-economic heartbeat of our communities? I trust that the latter is the case.



*Facade improvement does not always involve dramatic rebuilding. In this case, the two store fronts occupying the same building were made to complement one another, while existing architectural features were accented.*

