

Figs. 1, 2.

Robert Mellin

## The Destruction of Urban and Architectural Character in St. John's, Newfoundland

This article is directed towards designers, planners, and heritage conservation experts who are concerned with issues that affect urban design in St. John's. I will focus on some of the less obvious, smaller scale details of heritage conservation and urban design in St. John's. I will not dwell on the larger scale acts of vandalism and neglect that have affected the urban design quality of St. John's over the years, but rather will provide background that summarizes recent events. By recent, I refer to the urban renewal period that started in the early 1960s, when architects, engineers, planners, and developers started to turn their backs on St. John's mode of congenial urbanism. At that time, the most obvious method of destruction of the traditional urban fabric was through demolition. Entire blocks were razed, such as Murphy's Range (fig. 1) on LeMarchant Road, in this case by Irving Oil in the mid-1960s for the construction of a gas station. Fig. 2 shows the site as it is today, a vacant-appearing gap in the streetscape. However, compared to the subsequent construction of dull-as-ditchwater and out-of-scale high-rise buildings such as Atlantic Place and the Duffett Building, projects visitors have no trouble discovering for themselves as they walk around town, sites like the LeMarchant Road Irving station now appear to be redeemable if appropriate urban design guidelines can be put in place for future development.

Citizen participation in the planning process was never valued in St. John's, and developers usually have their way with City Council even if local residents object. The commercial competition between two companies—Sobeys and Loblaws—to dominate the supermarket business in St. John's just resulted in yet another inappropriate development in a historic area of St. John's, in this case on Shamrock Field (fig. 3) near the site of the new provincial museum, archives, and art gallery called *The Rooms*. I am not against mixed-use residential and commercial development in old St. John's, but the uncritical construction of a suburban style supermarket set far back on the lot with parking in front of the building, with large highway-scaled signage and relentless lighting that turns night into day (fig. 4) for the residents who live next to this site is appalling.

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Fig. 3.



Fig. 4.



Fig. 5.



Fig. 6.



Fig. 7.

urban design regulations in St. John's. In heritage areas of some European cities that rely on tourism, developers have to construct temporary, full-scale on-site mock-ups of the massing of their projects so the public can assess the impact on the surroundings, including viewplanes.

Returning to LeMarchant Road, fig. 8 is a photograph of the original McKinlay Motors site west of Murphy's Range. The photograph shows how the scale and massing of the original garage was compatible with the elegant scale of the house. These buildings were demolished when McKinlay's premises were expanded, but the new building's height still respected the

There has been much discussion about "viewplanes" in St. John's in the past two years. The recent loss of one of the most cherished views in the city, the view from the Basilica out to the narrows, was a sad day for heritage conservation in St. John's (figs. 5 and 6: before and after). The developer who built these banal infill townhouses (fig. 7) is to be commended for saving the adjacent historic institutional building, but there was no excuse for blocking the view. If on-street parking had been used for these townhouses instead of parking under the units, two- instead of three-story townhouses could easily have been constructed and the view would not have been blocked. The view was compromised for the sake of convenient parking for a handful of new affluent residents. This points to the lack of

hierarchical character of the skyline in old St. John's. The height and massing of that new condominium complex (fig. 9) on the same site makes the lack of urban design regulations in St. John's painfully apparent. The building looks like it could have been constructed anywhere in North America, and it would not take too many more massive projects like this to change the entire character of the older residential areas near the harbour.

On the issue of heritage conservation in St. John's, buildings from the Victorian era are fairly well protected in many areas, but St. John's also had many remarkable buildings from the early modern period dating from just before and after Newfoundland's confederation with Canada. I have documented many of these structures with photographer Ned Pratt, and it seems progress is being made in boosting awareness for the need for a preservation strategy for early modern architecture. One of the worst recent acts of vandalism in St. John's was the destruction of the Beth El Synagogue (fig. 10) on Elizabeth Avenue, designed by architect Angus Campbell in the mid-1950s. This building was an architectural treasure worthy of national recognition, with a courtyard design that sheltered a "tree of life," very much in the spirit of many of Frank Lloyd Wright's projects. To top it off, after the demolition the congregation constructed, where the west wing once stood, a tacky monster home (fig. 11) that is completely out of scale with the neighbourhood. St. John's residents are not used to thinking about neighbourhoods planned in the 1940s and 1950s as historic, but the legacy of the planning work for Churchill Park and the houses in this area designed by architect Paul Meschino just after Confederation are worthy of preservation. Every year St. John's loses more of these houses to demolition for the construction of houses that are too large for their sites. Once again, urban design regulations to guide the massing and disposition of new projects in existing neighbourhoods would help to address such problems.

While taking photographs for this article, it was distressing to see so many recent housing and commercial developments



Fig. 8.



Fig. 9.



Fig. 10.



Fig. 11.



Fig. 13.



Fig. 16.



Fig. 12.



Fig. 14.



Fig. 17.

that detract from their surroundings, not because there were budget limitations but mainly because of a lack of appreciation for the basic architectural and urban design principles that informed the traditional architecture of St. John's. I am saddened by the visual illiteracy of many new development projects, only a small percentage of which are actually designed by architects these days. I cannot think of many recent projects in urban St. John's that live up to Kenneth Frampton's concept of critical regionalism, which challenges architects to base their designs on concepts that relate to the construction traditions, architectural precedents, and environmental requirements of a region without overtly copying the forms of the past. Instead, what we are seeing are projects that are unsympathetic to the authentic architecture of old St. John's, banal quasi-colonial or Mediterranean stucco and brick architectural fantasies masquerading as "timeless architecture," such as this new condominium project adjacent to *The Rooms* (fig. 12). The project is brought to us courtesy of the same developers who blocked the view of the narrows from the Basilica.

I first visited St. John's in 1973 and remember a place that, except for the loss of the old finger piers around the harbour and the construction of one high-rise building, was incredibly intact for a North American city (fig. 13). There were seemingly endless surprises to discover in the older residential and commercial areas, gems of unrestored architecture and unmanicured urban fabric that really looked like they belonged in a different era. A unified appearance resulted from the similarity of construction materials and details and in the restrained and perhaps even maudlin colour palette. Until the late 1940s, awareness of the importance of urban design and decorum was evident in the informal agreement to sculpt the form of a block of buildings, to



Fig. 15.



Fig. 18.

respect the hierarchical character of the skyline, and to conduct architectural design and planning as part of a process based on artistic principles that considered and emphasized the *connections* between buildings.

Walking around old St. John's, we still find evidence of these *connections*. The quality of the connections and interstitial spaces, the syndetic intervals between buildings, provide us with a yardstick for appraising contemporary architecture and urban design, and many new developments in the old downtown seem disconnected from their surroundings. Perhaps my outlook is too influenced by my architectural design students at McGill, who do not seem very interested these days in the design of heroic and acrobatic freestanding buildings. They are more interested studying the connections between things, and they prefer to work on left-over, abandoned, or marginal sites where they can pursue smaller scale, contextual interventions. I am encouraged by these aspirations, and hope that a new generation of architects and planners will retain this vision when they start their careers.



Fig. 19.



Fig. 20.



Fig. 27.



Fig. 34.



Fig. 36.



Fig. 21.



Fig. 28.



Fig. 35.



Fig. 37.



Fig. 22.



Fig. 29.



Fig. 23.



Fig. 30.



Fig. 24.



Fig. 31.



Fig. 25.



Fig. 32.



Fig. 26.



Fig. 33.

Most of the photographs for this article were taken in the spring of 2003. They provide a quick tour of two of my favourite residential areas in old St. John's, the neighbourhood around Atlantic Avenue in the West End and the neighbourhood around Gower and Prescott Streets in the East End, with a few stops in between.

The mixed use, residential, industrial, commercial, and institutional neighbourhood around Atlantic Avenue (figs. 14-18), managed to remain intact over the years because the topography and out-of-the-way location helped it to resist urban renewal and street realignments. The streets twist and turn with great irregularity, and as is typical for all the most interesting neighbourhoods in St. John's, the best way to experience the area is on foot. This area is an aggravation for drivers in a hurry, but fortunately for the residents, the tangle of narrow streets forces traffic to slow down or to detour around the neighbourhood. Atlantic Avenue reminds me of a bygone era of propinquity in St. John's, with small scale attached houses "built to the street" with no setbacks and with no change of elevation from the sidewalks to the main floor of the houses (figs. 19-21). No barriers impede entry, and privacy was not the objective. In this neighbourhood, people liked to look out on the activity occurring in the street from the parlour, and people out for a stroll enjoyed looking in houses, not unlike the curtainless houses in Amsterdam. The small scale of the houses was further reinforced by architectural elements like bay windows and dormers, and houses that were part of a larger terrace of houses could be personalized by details and painting. Streets in this area are narrow, and most of the parking is on-street, except for some new infill houses behind Atlantic Avenue that have a desolate extra floor at ground level devoted to parking (fig. 22-23).

What I really like about this West end neighbourhood is that misbehaved, irregular, and unmanicured spaces and dynamic collages of architectural elements (fig. 24) can still be found, a kind of urban contamination. St. John's residents used to associate with "slums." In the more affluent contemporary Newfoundland context where all houses now have running water and electricity, the term "slum" signifies a certain visual complexity rather than functional deficiencies in shelter. This



Fig. 38.



Fig. 40.



Fig. 43.



Fig. 50.



Fig. 39.



Fig. 41.



Fig. 44.



Fig. 51.

visual complexity is at its best in the courtyard and laneway spaces behind the houses, where house additions, out-buildings, fences, and gardens happily coexist. Mixed-use neighbourhoods with this type of character are attractive to artists, artisans, designers, and architects, and as a result, several new studios for creative work and art galleries have been established just down the hill in the vicinity of Plank Road and Brine Street. If



Fig. 42.

part of the mission of the arts is to subvert the order of things, to get us to pause in our daily routines and challenge us with a different point of view, then working in a creative atmosphere that is not sanitized, protected, and regimented is important. I think of not-yet overly gentrified and preciously restored neighbourhoods in St. John's as potentially subversive spaces in the sense that the values they express are opposed to our society's shift to suburban order and privacy. Visual artists prefer to create and exhibit their work in a quotidian environment that still has some rough edges. Decades ago a similar preference was apparent in St. John's in the theatre arts: the shift from the formal and suburban Arts and Culture Centre to the downtown L.S.P.U. (Longshoremen's Protective Union) Hall on Victoria Street. Photographs taken in the area around Brine Street show how some misbehaved houses (figs. 25-28) still defy municipal plan regulations and encroach on the space of the street, enlivening the urban character of this part of town.

Leaving the West End and walking east towards City Hall, we enter a less-than-congenial realm (figs. 29 and 30) that commemorates mile one on the Transcanada Highway. Here, the traditional street pattern of old St. John's has been replaced by wide, curving roads (fig. 31), and large buildings have been placed in huge, unsightly excavations (figs. 32-33), fighting the topography and ignoring design in section as a necessary



Fig. 45.



Fig. 52.



Fig. 46.



Fig. 53.



Fig. 47.



Fig. 54.



Fig. 48.



Fig. 55.



Fig. 49.



Fig. 56.



Fig. 58.



Fig. 59.



Fig. 61.



Fig. 57.



Fig. 60.

counterpart to design in plan. Positive and negative space, figure, and ground have never been considered in the distribution and arrangement of new, freestanding buildings in the area. Historic old neighbourhoods around Brazil Square were long ago demolished to make room for these structures. The designers of the new buildings did not know how to handle the spaces between buildings, resulting in unintended landscape features (witness the propane tank enclosure in fig. 34). As shown in fig. 35, there is no visual connection (scale, detailing) between the new, mirrored glass high rises and the low scale of buildings in the existing neighbourhood, and no attempt was made to provide visual interest and engaging detail along the sidewalk behind the building (fig. 36). In a fairly recent and regrettable phase of modern architecture when architects sometimes needed to enhance parts of their designs, if all else failed they could always add a planter (fig. 37). That forlorn gesture near the automobile entrance to the hotel is outdone only by the banal detailing on the side elevation of the office building across the street (fig. 38).

Moving on with little regret, we find ourselves in need of refreshment on top of the hill at the new Tim Horton's (fig. 39)

close to *The Rooms* on Military Road. Tim's, with its highway-scale signage, substantial setback, and front-of-store parking area, would be more at home on a suburban arterial road than in a heritage conservation area. If minimal, common sense urban design guidelines had been in place when the development application was submitted for this project, a design may have resulted that enhanced the area without any extra cost and without reducing the volume of trade. All that had to be done was to build to the street, with parking screened from view behind the building. Fig. 40 shows the view of the narrows that would have resulted from the interior seating space in this arrangement, and fig. 41 shows the present view from this space. In some municipal jurisdictions elsewhere in Canada, Tim Horton's has had to modify their standard

freestanding highway-oriented designs to fit the requirements for development in or near historic districts. In St. John's, Tim Horton's knew City Council's first priority was to be open to business, to collect new development tax dollars. The planning approval process in St. John's was not much more difficult than "rolling up the rim," unfortunately with typically unpredictable results for city residents.

A bit further east, just in front of the Basilica, we can start to make our way down interconnecting pedestrian laneways that thread through blocks of houses (fig. 42). Here, we find ourselves in a neighbourhood where the spaces between buildings are perhaps more interesting than the buildings themselves. The houses create wind-protected courtyards, and there is an atmosphere of discovery and surprise when walking down these lanes



Fig. 62.



Fig. 63.



Fig. 64.



Fig. 65.



Fig. 66.

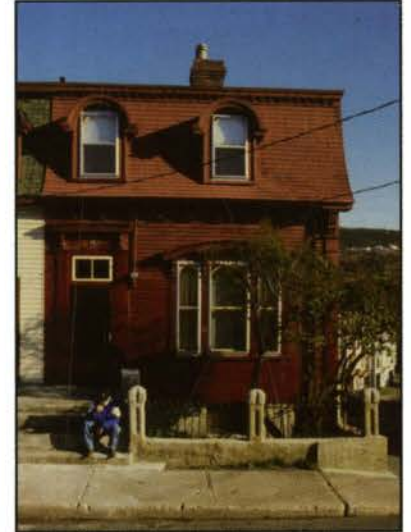


Fig. 67.

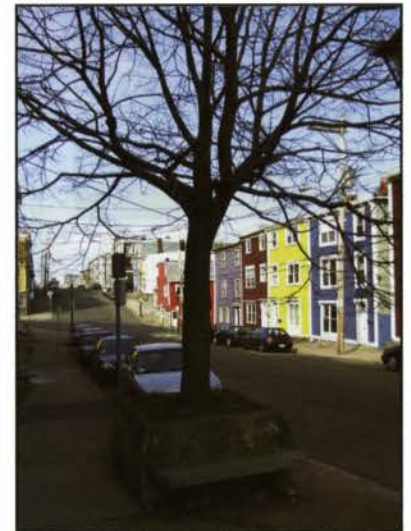


Fig. 68.



Fig. 69.

through the courtyards. There are sequences of open and closed spaces, informal collages of house additions, outbuildings, and fences, and one has the feeling of an authentic connection with the past. For me, the informal laneways found in the West End, the East End, and The Battery portray urban St. John's at its best.

In the photographs of houses on Gower Street (figs. 43-45), some of the earliest heritage conservation work done in the East End can be seen. The restoration work done at that time was exemplary, and the original, authentic historic detailing on the exteriors of the houses was well researched. Architect Phillip Pratt was one of the first Newfoundland architects to restore a house in this range of dwellings (the yellow house in fig. 43), which coincided with his research collaboration with architect Beaton Sheppard on the establishment of a heritage conservation area in St. John's. Another architect, Joe Carter, in collaboration with Peter Pope, Peter Munroe, and Ron Schwartz, with their company called "Affinities," worked on the Masonic Terrace houses (figs. 46-48) in the centre of the courtyard behind the Gower Street houses in the mid-1970s. They proceeded with caution, first gathering information on the history of the houses, then producing measured drawings and a photographic record. This was followed by painstaking restoration work that preserved the original features.

The photographs in figs. 49-51 show the contrast between the hard surface character of the streetscape (fig. 43-45) and the verdant and less formal courtyards behind the houses on Gower Street. There are interesting views of the harbour from this courtyard, but the best viewplane out to the narrows was blocked by the construction of the Duffett Building at the corner of Prescott Street and Duckworth Street in the 1980s.

This East End area still has many fine blocks (figs. 52-54) that show how larger urban compositions were formed with the design of individually detailed but attached buildings. Care was taken with the massing of the buildings, especially at corner locations. In the late 1890s when that part of town was rebuilt after the great fire, rather than following a formal, written urban design regulation, there was an unspoken, intuitive agreement that the collective was more important than the individual. The syntax of detailing has broken down in recent years, as in this new infill development (fig. 55) that would obviously have been better off with painted clapboards instead of brick. Brick has its

place on Water Street and Duckworth Street, if it is carefully detailed and if new architectural elements and window proportions relate to the scale of the existing buildings, but where it has been used on infill housing elsewhere in the city, it always feels clumsy and foreign.

Today it is rare to see original materials and architectural details preserved on renovated houses downtown. There are only a few examples left of original trim and ornamental detail, as shown in a plain doorway in the East End (fig. 56) and in a more ornate but locally crafted and authentic door trim in the West End (fig. 57). Original details like these are usually the first thing to go in a so-called "restoration" because it is too much trouble to make the required repairs. Overly precious, standardized "heritage" moulding profiles tend to be used on almost every renovation, as seen on a Prescott Street house (fig. 58).



Fig. 70.



Fig. 72.



Fig. 74.



Fig. 75.



Fig. 71.



Fig. 73.

From a distance, it appears that history is being preserved in the neighbourhood, but upon close inspection it is clear that the particular character of individual buildings is being erased by trim and ornament that appear to come from the templates and specifications of just one or two designers (figs. 59 and 60). The

main priority is reaching the upscale market for heritage dwellings, and researching and preserving the history of the architecture is no longer part of the "restoration" process. Soon it will be difficult to find any of the plain and reticent detailing that once characterized many of the working class houses in the area. Preservation architects would never think of applying inappropriately ornate mouldings and details to historic Shaker village or Amish farm architecture, but this is what is happening to old houses in St. John's. Beyond exterior trim, window details, and moulding profiles, the occasional letterbox, dalmation (fig. 61), ornamental fountain (fig. 62), and antique streetlamp help to create a heritage fantasy, in this case as part of a mini-park (fig. 63: "Prescott Park"). Small curbside parks and planters (fig. 64) seem out of character in the East End, and they are usually constructed with pressure treated wood (fig. 65) and Allan block (fig. 66), a material I have come to think of as the "vinyl siding" of landscape architecture. There are many other houses that feature those nasty little planters, which owners may not realize will eventually decay the base of the exterior wall. People have forgotten that where there were originally small yards created by small setbacks, more formal and permanent details were used in the past, such as the concrete posts and wrought iron as seen on Atlantic Avenue (fig. 67). Landscaping features in the East End installed by the City of St. John's have not helped matters, as in the military bunker style concrete planters with rather uncomfortable seating (figs. 68 and 69).

The original industrial character of buildings in St. John's has nearly been erased. Fig. 70 shows one of the last existing fragments of an earlier industrial era, the exterior of A. Lilly & Company Ltd.'s premises on Bond Street. It reminds me of the authentic historical character of the Gooderham and Worts distillery presently being restored near downtown Toronto (when I visited the distillery, the developers had managed to retain original paint colours, materials, signage, fenestration, and architectural elements). Next door to the Lilly premises is the Imperial Tobacco Company condominium (figs. 71 and 72) a project that saved the factory building but also erased much of its character by the application of a post-modern painting scheme with new plaster mouldings and false quoining. There is an urgent need to preserve the last few remnants of the industrial architecture of St. John's without feeling that its character has to be changed or that it has to be dressed-up to make it look palatable. One of my favourite infill developments in the East End of St. John's is Phillip Pratt's housing project at Rawlin's Cross (figs. 73 and 74). The courtyard behind the houses was handled with restraint, using a robust but plain palette of materials, some of which have an industrial character that corresponds with work-spaces once found in some courtyards.

Finally, although this article on heritage conservation and urban design issues focused on buildings, we should not ignore the demographic changes taking place in heritage areas. To my knowledge, infill dwellings for people with lower income levels are not being constructed in St. John's today, and most of the present day infill houses are being built for the high-end residential market. It would be well to remember the generosity of an earlier era that tolerated the construction of very small, affordable houses (fig. 75: Bannerman Street), some of those with extremely narrow and economical lot proportions. We should also ensure that existing residents who would like to remain in their neighbourhoods receive grants and proper advice for required restoration work, and that property taxes remain reasonable for residents in areas with rising property values.