

A Strategy for Main Street

by John J. Stewart

For the first time in recent memory, census figures indicate that small cities and towns are no longer suffering from an outward migration of their population. The figures, in fact, indicate there is a shift in the nation's population towards smaller communities. Yet many of these communities are in trouble. The deterioration of their main streets has accelerated. A combination of factors have contributed to this deterioration, leaving many communities with a central commercial core which is abandoned or defaced beyond recognition.

The deterioration has been caused in large part by the centralization of building "authority" in the hands of relatively few organizations, particularly retail chains, banks, and government agencies. Another destructive factor has been the unabated spread of suburban and regional shopping malls, and their siphoning of vitality from town centres.

Local businesses have certainly not gone blameless during this process of deterioration. Although many still occupy space on main street, they have failed to maintain their buildings or have slip-covered them with layer after layer of once-trendy materials in the name of "modernization." Often these renovations have obscured or destroyed the beauty and integrity of the traditional designs. Equally harmful are signs . . . big, bold, and brassy banners that simply use the building as a backdrop.

Property owners, encouraged by zoning changes, have hurt themselves even more by allowing the upper floors of their buildings to become run-down and vacant. The loss of residents and office workers has drained a vital part of the lifeblood from main street, and has deprived storekeepers of a captive market. Another problem, one in which merchants have been victims of circumstances, has been the need for customer parking. Curbside parking allows only one or two spaces for every shop. To provide additional stalls, buildings are demolished to create parking lots.

Stronger downtown businesses often have departed for the shopping mall. Those which remain are often the weaker, the less attractive, and the least able to draw shoppers onto main street. Their merchandising and display techniques may be far behind the times, their stocks outdated.

Certainly the deterioration of the central core means the loss of not only attractive commercial buildings and vintage residential areas, but also the loss of one of the most stable and most important sources of employment and economic strength in the country — the small independent business.

All of these factors have left many Canadian towns and cities with main streets that are a poor reflection of their former successful and attractive selves. Drained of their economic and social activity as well as their archi-

tectural integrity, they limp along a path of self-destruction.

There is general agreement that the main street needs help. There are no clear-cut answers as to what form this help should take or who should provide it. In the last few years private organizations as well as provincial governments have tried to meet the need by instituting Main Street programmes, which give assistance to municipalities and merchants for the improvement of the commercial viability of the downtown core. Most offer some combination of grants, loans, design and technical assistance, and business development aid. Many are linked to the concept of creating a 'business improvement' area managed by local property owners and storekeepers. In the majority of cases, assistance for beautification, building rehabilitation, and business revitalization is fragmented rather than co-ordinated.

Storefront rehabilitation, new street furniture, better sidewalk design, improved parking, covered sidewalks, and downtown malls are all aimed at saving main street. Many of these techniques have been borrowed from its greater competitor, the peripheral shopping mall. Main street is fighting its commercial rival by imitation.

What shopkeepers have not always appreciated is that physical changes alone cannot compete fully with the co-ordinated retailing of the shopping centre. Economic initiatives, ranging from co-operation in merchandising to better display techniques, are essential to improve the *business* end of businesses. Economic problems must be faced squarely on their own terms.

Recognizing these dual requirements, the Heritage Canada Foundation has developed a comprehensive Main Street Programme that combines economic and architectural initiatives. For the past three years, the



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Foundation has sponsored a Main Street Programme aimed at instilling new life in Canadian downtowns. The goal is to combine preservation techniques with economic and social revitalization of a community's commercial centre through a gradual process of incremental change. The Foundation further hopes that its activities will help to stimulate the labour-intensive renovation industry and therefore assist in creating jobs.

The Programme aims to show main street merchants that preservation is good business and makes better sense for older commercial centres than other approaches to revitalization. By preservation, the Foundation means capitalizing on a community's history and character without becoming a "theme village." By strengthening main street's existing assets — including its architectural heritage, and its commercial and social diversity — downtown can be helped to thrive once again and to compete successfully with shopping centres. The ultimate goal is improving the quality of life on main street.

The premise by which the Programme operates is that the consistent advocacy and professional guidance of an on-site project co-ordinator results in greater participation by individuals, is far more cost-efficient, and requires only minimal infusions of public monies.

The key is community involvement and self-help. The Heritage Canada Foundation sends a project co-ordinator to live in a project community and to work closely with local leaders. The co-ordinator offers free assistance on all matters from design to advertising, but leaves the ultimate decisions to the merchants themselves. The programme co-ordinators do not go in and tell people what they should do. They help them recognize what in their buildings is worth preserving and enhancing. The same approach is taken with economic matters.

The Foundation developed these techniques after studying a number of existing programmes. Models in-

cluded Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation's Association Neighbourhood Improvement Program, which placed a local project manager into an advocacy role, and the Civic Trust's design work in Norwich, England. It learned the most from the U.S. National Trust's Main Street Project. Their structuring of activities in project communities into four distinct components including organization, downtown promotion, preservation, and economic restructuring has become a keystone of the HCF Main Street Programme.

Given the Foundation's philosophy that it is better to show by example rather than to tell people what to do, the Main Street Programme first directed its attention to the attractive town of Perth, Ont. (population 6,000). The results since November 1980 have been rewarding. In a period of recession and tight money, new businesses have opened in Perth and a number of property owners have taken advantage of the free design service available through the project. Over a two-year period the project in Perth has generated \$14 in private investment for every dollar spent in the community by the Heritage Canada Foundation.

Nelson, B.C. (population 10,000), was named as the second pilot community in July 1981. A regional service centre nestled in the scenic Kootenay Mountains, Nelson saw its central business district suffer a blow with the opening of the Chahko-Mika shopping mall close to downtown. Project co-ordinators Hans Honegger and Bob Inwood are working with merchants and local officials to revitalize the economic and architectural base of Baker Street, and other core thoroughfares. Encouraged by strong provincial support and funding, there have been extensive private renovations and public improvements over the past two years. The co-ordinators are still developing these organizational aspects to guarantee long-term success for the project.

There are now seven communities involved in demonstration projects. By providing a variety of models, these communities allow the Foundation to understand better the problems and restrictions confronting independent businesses and property owners. Demonstration communities participate in the Programme for a three-year period.

The communities were selected from across Canada through a Main Street Selection Process. The applicants were evaluated in four categories: architectural character, economic capacity, organization commitment, and administrative ability. The communities selected reflect the country's geographic diversity, architectural types, and a range of economic, social, and population conditions. As well as Perth and Nelson, the other communities involved at this stage are: Bridgetown and Windsor, N.S.; Cambridge, Ont.; Moose Jaw, Sask.; and Fort Macleod, Alta.

The experience to date with Main Street communities indicates that the Programme's approach provides an excellent means for private and local investment, and that the impact on small businesses is positive. In Bridgetown, for example, following extensive promotion a sur-



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vey conducted during a two-week period before Christmas, showed that merchants experienced gross sales increases which varied from 18 per cent to 61 per cent as compared with sales in 1981. Merchants attribute this to Main Street project activities.

The advantages of the Main Street approach are many: it requires little capital investment from businessmen, it is labour intensive, it creates employment using technical skills, and it can be phased in, as funds become available, without negative impact.

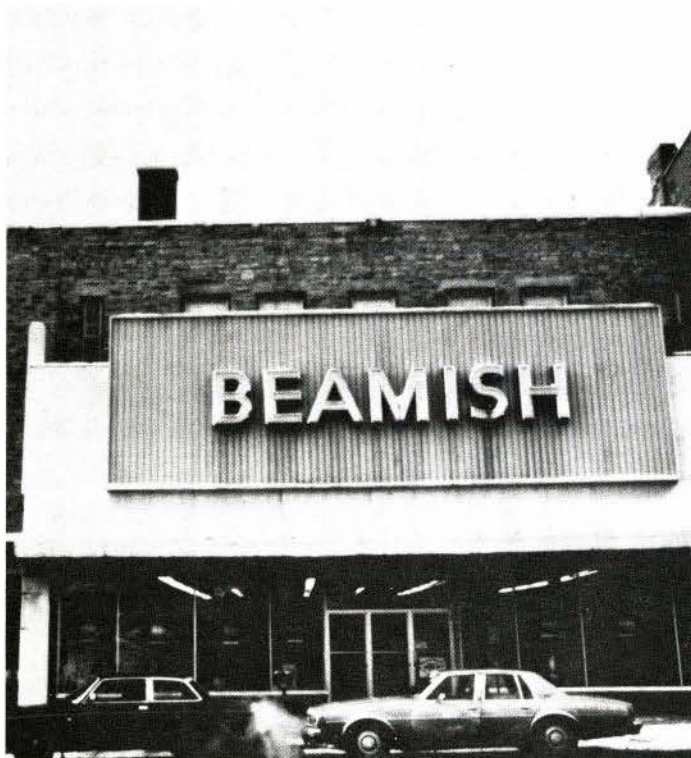
The enthusiasm these demonstration projects have generated has encouraged the Heritage Canada Foundation to start developing a second phase of the Programme. Over 200 enquiries have been received from communities across the country. A number of towns are prepared to finance main street projects on their own using the Foundation's approach, if the Foundation could train the co-ordinators, and provide guidance and technical support. It is around this suggestion that the second phase of the Programme is being developed and will be implemented if funds can be found.

Through CIPAST (Community Initiated Projects, Advisory Services and Training), the Foundation will use the experience gained in the seven demonstration communities to assist other communities. It could initiate projects in 30 to 60 new communities every year for a period of five years for an eventual total of 200 to 300 communities. Synthesizing the practical experience

gained from the demonstration projects, it could offer a full curriculum training course designed to train locally hired project co-ordinators. To provide resource material, a variety of tools will be prepared. These include a film, technical manuals, a variety of slide presentations, data collection, and a monitoring system.

To date, the programme has had an enormous cultural impact on the demonstration communities, as well as a social and economic impact in terms of job creation and local investment. Project communities can boast marked improvements in economic activity, increased sales, and positive physical changes.

It is the Foundation's experience that the survival — or, in some cases, the revival — of main street depends on an integrated approach. Physical improvements alone, even if enlightened in design and accomplished in execution, are hollow in substance and will wear out quickly unless accompanied by commercial revitalization. Conversely, economic strengthening without quality design guidance will more often than not bring about architectural changes that destroy the intrinsic character of the area, wasting an important resource. Improvements to businesses and buildings must proceed together, and must be guided by on-going and effective management. In this way, main street will once again become the true focus of our nation's communities for many generations to come.



Heritage Canada project co-ordinators live in the community and offer assistance on matters from design to advertising. Exemplified here is a design and colour scheme for a retail store in Perth, Ontario.

