

ICOMOS Interview: Meet François LeBlanc
August 1983

François LeBlanc, formerly Director of the ICOMOS Secretariat in Paris, recently returned to Canada to assume a new position at the Heritage Canada Foundation. Under his direction, ICOMOS grew substantially as an international organization and is today the leading preservation organization at the international level. For this newsletter, we have asked François LeBlanc to briefly describe his work at ICOMOS, to explain the organization's structure and its relationship to national committees.

In response, here are François LeBlanc's observations made during his four year stay in Paris.

1. SHORT BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF
FRANCOIS LEBLANC

After eight years of hard work within Parks Canada's Restoration Services, from documenting historic buildings and establishing a specialized data center, to directing Project Managers, I arrived in Paris as a trained conservation architect to take up the post of Director of the ICOMOS International Secretariat.

The position was offered to me after an international competition was held. Parks Canada decided to support me financially as a gesture of active participation to the international movement for the preservation of monuments and sites. That support lasted four years, from 1979 to 1983.

A typical day as Director of ICOMOS could look something like this:

9.00 a.m.: Arrival at the office on rue du Temple. Quick look at the

water pressure of the furnace to see if the level is normal, and check if anything had happened to the building during the night.

One or two quick telephone calls to Executive Board Members or consultants under contract in countries having a major time difference with France such as Australia, Sri Lanka or Japan. We have to catch them before their work day is over.

10.00 a.m.: Review all the mail which has arrived in the morning, and dispatch to appropriate staff for action. A few telephone calls are then made to Unesco personnel with whom we are in daily contact as we have close to half a million dollars worth of contracts to coordinate or execute for them.

11.00 a.m.: Coffee break with the staff; passing-through visitors would often join us.

11.30 a.m.: One scheduled meeting with an Ambassador or an Antiquities Director of a foreign country to discuss the development of a project or a policy issue. One unscheduled meeting could also take place with an ICOMOS member passing through Paris and wishing to share information with the International Secretariat on how everything is going wrong in his country.

1.00 p.m.: Business lunch with a consultant, a colleague, the President of ICOMOS (a French man, Mr. Michel Parent, living in Paris), or someone passing through.

2.30 p.m.: Review the mail which has arrived in the afternoon: in France, mail is distributed twice a day. Discuss a few issues with the staff, give general instructions and write a few letters.

3.30 p.m.: Review material sent in by consultants, prepare modifications to contracts, review budgets. Review material for Monumentum, our Journal or for international meetings coming up.

4.30 p.m.: Phone calls to Executive Board Members or consultants in countries with major time differences with France like Canada, the United States, Argentina or Brazil. I have to catch them before my working day is over, as theirs is just beginning.

6.30 p.m.: The working day is over. Night life begins in Paris.

2. ICOMOS IN GENERAL

ICOMOS is a non-governmental organization created by Unesco in 1965 basically to act as its principal adviser on the conservation of historic buildings and sites.

It gathers the professionals in that field; a little more than 3000 members have registered so far. We expect a major breakthrough soon; we have allowed the Eastern Countries to pay part of their annual fee in their own non-convertible money. Russia for example might sign up more than 1000 members because of this new possibility.

ICOMOS works with a structure of National Committees; 72 had been created by 1983.

ICOMOS has 10 International Committees dealing with special topics. For instance Stone conservation. An International Committee gathers specialists in a specific field regardless of their nationality. ICOMOS would have more International Committees if more money could be raised.

The ICOMOS annual budget runs around one million dollars. Most of that money comes from contracts or grants given by various governments.

The staff comprises eight: the Director, Chief of the Documentation Center and Assistant, a World Heritage Convention Assistant, Accountant Clerk, two Secretaries and one Cleaning Lady.

3. ROLE OF ICOMOS NATIONAL COMMITTEES

The essential role of National Committees is to "make" or build up the opinion of the conservation professionals of a country on any conservation issue of importance to them and to make sure that it is properly expressed to the rest of the world through the ICOMOS international platform.

The European Committees have been doing this fairly well over the last decade. We have yet to formulate a "Canadian Opinion" on many issues. But then, all Committees are not progressing at the same speed. Many feel that they have little or nothing to say and come to ICOMOS meetings to listen and learn. I still think that they should make an effort to tell the others about their own specific problems: what they lack, what are the obstacles facing them, what sort of help or support would be useful to them.

The ICOMOS Canada National Committee is therefore the voice of the Canadian Conservation Specialists abroad.

Another important role of National Committees is to promote the professionals of their country.

Many poor, less advanced countries or countries which do not yet have conservation specialists but have money and a will to preserve their heritage turn to ICOMOS and Unesco for advice and expertise. These requests are most of the time very precise, for example: can you recommend us a young conservation architect, aged between 30 and 35, English speaking, from a communist country and ready to come to work in our country for a full year.

ICOMOS can be thought of as a retail window for such advice. When someone is shopping for it, if he sees what he is looking for in the window, he might go for it. If Canadian expertise is well presented, it stands a good chance of being called upon for important tasks; but, if it is stored away in the warehouse, it does not stand a chance at all. Therefore, National Committees should make an effort to really get to know who's who in their country and find ways of making these people and their work known outside their borders.

National Committees have many other roles and responsibilities which are well described in the ICOMOS Statutes.

4. ICOMOS ACTIVITIES

ICOMOS basically has four major activities: Research and Doctrine; Professional Services and Expertise; Administration and Management; Information and Documentation.

a) Research and Doctrine

Through international meetings organized by National and International Committees, ICOMOS shapes and formulates the Doctrine of conservation which is taught throughout the world.

The recent Historic Gardens Charter, better known as the Charter of Florence, and many international meetings, especially those organized by the International Committees on Wood, Rock Art, Vernacular Architecture and Photogrammetry have contributed to this activity.

At the next General Assembly to be held in Rostock, G.D.R., in May 1984, an important declaration will be prepared on the contribution of Historic Monuments and Sites to the Definition of Cultural Identity. It is definitely an important issue of our times when you consider cases like the Palestinians, the Armenians, the Cypriots, the new African countries or closer the North American Indians or Inuits.

Canadians are expected to say something in Rostock about the role played by Monuments and Sites in the Definition of the "Canadian cultural identity".

b) Professional Services and Expertise

ICOMOS has contracts going on in many countries including Sri Lanka, North and South Yemen, Egypt and Lebanon to name a few. One is usually informed of the content and progress of the various contracts through the ICOMOS Newsletter. Mr. Denis St-Louis, an architect from Quebec City is presently executing such a contract in Egypt on behalf of ICOMOS.

ICOMOS advises Unesco almost daily on various issues: this is one of the main reasons why ICOMOS was created in the first place.

c) Administration and Management

The Organization needs to function as any other does. The Secretariat takes care of the normal day to day work: letters, membership, budgets, organizing meetings, preparing reports etc.

d) Information and Documentation

ICOMOS is responsible for maintaining an International Documentation Center in its particular field of interest. It is hooked up to the Unesco computerized Documentation Center. Should you need information on any subject and you wish to have an overall view of what is available throughout the world, please write to them. Always have a precise question.

Never ask for something too general like: "can you send us information on the conservation of cities? The material would fill a whole plane. Be precise, and specify the scope and objective of your research.

CONCLUSION

In concluding, I would like to say that ICOMOS is an international platform for exchange, and exchange is something that goes both ways and is dynamic in essence.

When colleagues used to ask me: what do I get if I join ICOMOS? My answer was: Nothing. You don't get anything from a platform; it is there, and you can make use of it, you can step on it to express your concerns or ideas. You can listen to others, but finally you are rewarded according to the sincere efforts that you have made to exchange with other professional colleagues sharing the same interest.



Kaskawulsh Glacier, Kluane National Park, Yukon