

## Areas of concern

# Creating Alberta's first historic area in Fort Macleod

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Legal protection and enhancement of historic areas is a new area of activity for provincial governments in western Canada. Within the Province of Alberta the government, under the Alberta Historical Resources Act, has had the power to designate areas of provincial significance since 1978.<sup>1</sup> In almost all cases the Province, through its department Alberta Culture, has designated buildings and sites only with the consent of the owner of a building or site. The process is in practice a voluntary one that depends very highly on the cooperation of owners. Because of this system, a great many of the Province's important buildings are not protected and are constantly threatened with demolition. This situation is obviously quite different from those in many other countries where governments intervene to conserve their architectural heritage.

It is within this decision-making and evaluation setting that protection of historic areas takes place in Alberta. In addition to professional evaluation of an area and development of architecturally and historically appropriate guidelines and economically feasible development strategies, cooperation of all building owners must be obtained.<sup>2</sup> The complexity of the designation (protection) process is therefore increased by the need to obtain the cooperation of a wide number of individual decision-makers.

In order to test the provincial area designation procedure, the Historic Sites Service of Alberta Culture chose the Town of Fort Macleod as its first potential historic area. The Town has many advantages as a test case: one of the largest intact collections of architecturally and historically significant buildings in the Province; few significant development pressures; a seemingly stable but healthy economic climate; an active historical society; a high tourist visitation rate and a good location for further tourism development. From the department's perspective the Town of Fort Macleod represented an excellent opportunity both to assess the legislation and decide on implementation procedures.

<sup>1</sup> The Act is known as 'Historic Resources Act', Chapter H-8, Revised Statutes of Alberta 1980, and is available from the author.

<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to compare this system with the English system of protection and degree of intervention.

In order to develop a plan, the Province contracted with Gateway Planning Group to carry out all the necessary research, consultation, planning and design work. The author is a partner in Gateway and functioned as the project team leader. At various times the team consisted of a landscape architect, a lawyer, graphic artist, economist, urban management specialist, a local historian and several research assistants. With the assistance of provincial government employees, the team was responsible for all aspects of policy and design development.

**Fort Macleod**

Fort Macleod's history is closely connected with that of the North West Mounted Police (NWMP), the precursor of the present Royal Canadian Mounted Police, who set up a fort in 1874 on an island in the Oldman River. Later, when it became evident that flooding conditions were threatening the fort and the small town of Fort Macleod that had grown around it, the settlement moved two miles to a location well up on the river bank. The Town was incorporated in 1892, and by the turn of the century farming and ranching attracted large numbers of settlers to the area. A fire in 1906 destroyed many of the Town's wooden buildings and

they were replaced by stone and brick structures. As in many prairie towns, Fort Macleod experienced a boom period in the early 1910s; spurred in part by unwarranted optimism, this led the residents of Fort Macleod to install a municipal infrastructure out of scale for its small size. In fact, it had amenities that much larger settlements did not possess.

Fort Macleod's prosperity was short-lived. The main street built during the early part of the century is still largely intact. This cannot be attributed to a sensitivity for the past but rather to a lack of economic pressure for redevelopment. The town has grown with new subdivisions and shopping facilities; but this growth has been modest, largely due to its location within the hinterlands of both Cities of Calgary (pop. 600 000) and Lethbridge (pop. 50 000). Fort Macleod's present population is approximately 3000.

Physically as well as socially Fort Macleod is typical of many prairie towns. It has a main street with two rows of buildings of one to three storeys. Many of the buildings, especially those of sandstone, reflect the optimism of the time in which they were built and are, in fact, much grander than one would expect in such a town (*Figs 1-3*). The buildings were erected by skilled tradesmen from Great Britain and provide a sense of stability and stature to the Town. The main highway between Calgary



FIG. 1. Fort Macleod's Main Street.



FIG. 2. Fort Macleod's Main Street.



FIG. 3. Fort Macleod's Main Street.

and Lethbridge was once the main street; but this traffic has now been rerouted on either side of the downtown, allowing the street to regain the pace it had had before the advent of the motorcar.<sup>3</sup>

#### Team philosophy

The area under consideration for legal protection is the main street in the 'downtown' sector of the Town (Fig. 4). Due to the downtown's important function in the Town, the consultant was concerned with making best use of its historic resources while integrating them into the mainstream of Fort Macleod and its region. It was hoped the result would not be a museum piece but a living, social and commercial centre equipped to deal with the future.<sup>4</sup>

From the onset of the process we were concerned with a grouping of buildings, many insignificant in themselves but distinguished by a coherent feeling and image. The team's analysis and decision-making concentrated not only on the buildings but on the space around them. In addition to the obvious major concerns of evaluating and protecting the architectural and historical resources of Fort Macleod, the team recognized three ingredients essential to the success of any preservation

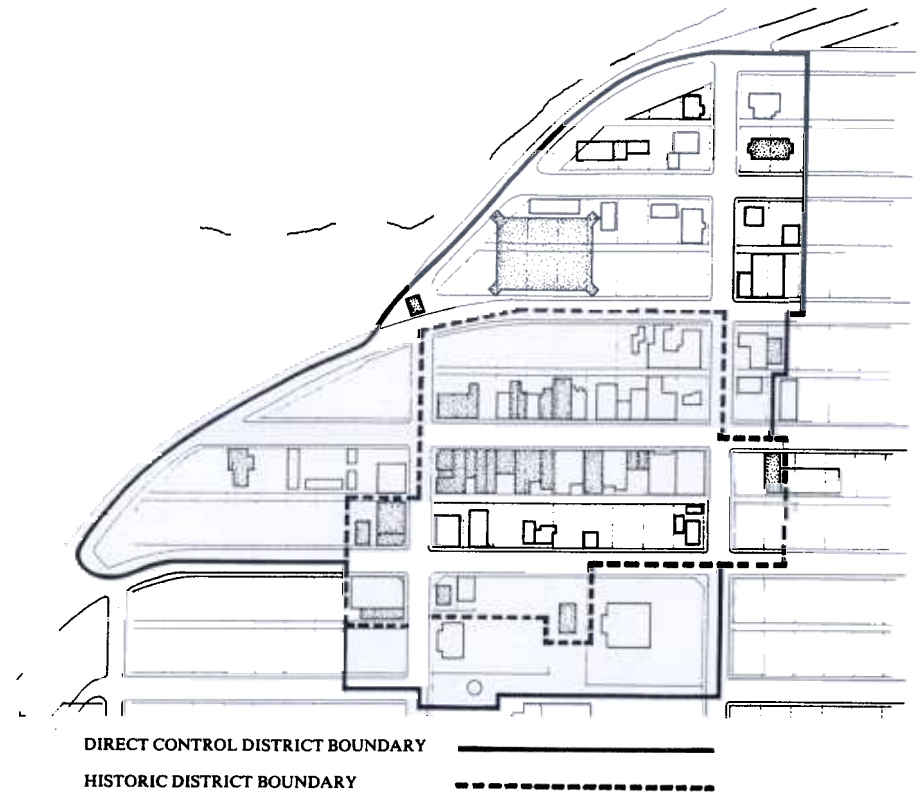


FIG. 4. Boundaries of historic district.

program: ensuring the economic viability of the downtown; strengthening the social role of this important central focus (i.e. the downtown); and improving the physical aspects of the area that support important human activities (parking, pedestrian movement, street patterns).

The intention was not to restore Fort Macleod back to a particular period but rather ensure it retained its essential character.<sup>5</sup> Many of the accretions of time play an important role in understanding a town's history and development; these should be retained. In Fort Macleod, after a period of research and extensive public consultation, it was decided to use the important boom period at the turn of the century as the focus for restoration and rehabilitation activity. Building owners were to be encouraged to use this period as a reference point in the design and redesign of their storefronts. There was to be no attempt to recreate the street as it was in 1915. This would be neither desirable nor possible since,

<sup>5</sup> Colonial Williamsburg has adopted a restoring back philosophy. It can be argued that in certain instances a Williamsburg approach is appropriate in an outdoor museum setting. It is not thought desirable or possible to accomplish this in a living setting.

<sup>3</sup> This brief history is based on research by Professor S. A. Donaldson and Ms S. Cameron who carried out much of the historical work. Their help is acknowledged.

<sup>4</sup> This philosophy is similar to that of the Main Street program in Canada and the United States.

for example, it would require ripping up the street and a return to wooden sidewalks and a dirt roadway. New buildings are to be built in a modern idiom that is sensitive to the historical setting of the Town. Design guidelines were developed that would make the recreation of a 'Disneyland effect' impossible.<sup>6</sup>

This approach developed by the team was supported by Alberta Culture and the residents of the Town. The process that will be described took place within this preservation context.

### The policy, planning and design process

It is not possible within this article to develop in any detail the process that was designed and implemented for the Province's first historic area. Only major events will be identified. There was a two-part process: the first was concerned with evaluating whether the historic resources of the Town were of provincial significance and the second, whether the Town and the building owners would accept a provincial designation. Using accepted research and evaluation techniques and a significant element of public consultation, the team determined that the downtown was of provincial significance and that there existed a high level of support within the Town for its preservation.

These two factors led the Province to commission a second study with the explicit purpose of preparing the 'order-in-council' (i.e. the legal document) necessary for the creation of the historic area. The most important factor in this program was the creation of the Fort Macleod Historic District Coordinating Committee that was a standing committee of the Town Council. It had the responsibility, in conjunction with Gateway Planning, to develop designs and a financing package for the historic area. The committee met frequently and was involved in all aspects of design and policy development. As problems and differences of opinion developed, they were immediately dealt with. The membership of the committee, which reflected a wide range of opinions, was often able to anticipate problems and provide viable solutions. The consultants hired a resident of Fort Macleod with strong historical interests to be its representative. She was able to provide invaluable insights into special characteristics of Fort Macleod and deal with day-to-day problems.

Considerable time was spent by small groups over coffee in local restaurants, and along with the larger group meetings these helped to ensure the smooth operation of the process. When the report was completed there was total support from the community since people felt they had been adequately involved and consulted. One major ingredient of success was the support of the mayor and key municipal councillors. The consultant also used public meetings and the press as a means of increasing general public awareness. When most of the pieces of the plan had been generated, a day long open house was organized. A concert,

storefront office, displays, coffee and balloons all helped to generate excitement and enthusiasm. Immediately after this event the Town Council voted unanimously to support the order-in-council and to request the government immediately to designate the area. The process was therefore a combination of professional evaluation and concept development and a large component of public participation. A number of key factors of the plan were developed, and these are of interest.

### Key factors in the plan

Since this was the first historic area to be created in Alberta, a number of management and financing alternatives (impossible to evaluate here) were developed. The final selection of a preferred direction was often the result of combining several different approaches after a significant element of compromise.

#### *Organization and management*

In the past, it has been expected that when government provides funding for a project, it usually maintained a significant presence in the ongoing operation of that activity. From the earliest discussions it was evident that the Town residents would not accept a high level of provincial government intervention.<sup>7</sup> Coincidentally, the provincial officials were not interested in creating a new bureaucracy to oversee the development of the historic area. Therefore, from the beginning of the planning process it was assumed that the area would be administered and controlled locally. This local control would take place within the guidelines established in the order-in-council. Since the coordinating committee model had functioned satisfactorily for two years it was decided that this approach would be continued.

The area is to be controlled by the Fort Macleod Historic Area Committee which will be a standing committee of the Town Council. The committee composition will be a mixture of elected officials, Council appointed members and representatives of various provincial government departments and organizations.<sup>8</sup> The committee will have two working subcommittees, a design review board and a revolving fund administered by a committee.

In theory, under the legislation the design review board will be advisory to the Minister of Culture. In practice the board, using a set of detailed design guidelines will evaluate and rule on all development in the area. Their decisions need not be approved by the Town Council and will be final unless they are reversed by the Assistant Deputy Minister for Culture.<sup>9</sup> Building owners who disagree with a decision may appeal to the province's Historic Sites Board. The Board will not be made up of experts but advised by a technical secretariat made up of architects, heritage consultants and financial experts. This approval process represents a

<sup>7</sup> This opposition to government intervention applies not only to historic preservation but to all areas of government activity. Many of Alberta's rural areas are conservative and tend to espouse a philosophy of self-reliance.

<sup>8</sup> The exact membership is not of particular interest in this instance and therefore will not be developed.

<sup>9</sup> The Minister of Culture, through her deputy, will hold the right to reverse a decision if it is felt to deviate seriously from the guidelines. The Minister's representative on the design review board will alert the deputy in the case of serious problems.

<sup>6</sup> The main street of Disneyland in California is often enlivened by members of the public in a preferred state. Disneyland may have its place in an amusement park but not in a living environment.

radical departure for the province since at the present time all changes to provincial historic resources have to be approved in a central location.<sup>10</sup>

#### *Financial consideration*

When Fort Macleod was initially assessed there were two possibilities for protecting the historic resources: creating an historic area or designating all the individual buildings that were of provincial significance. Under the second alternative, each building owner would be eligible for a matching grant of \$75 000 (Can.). Since there are over thirty significant buildings in Fort Macleod, the province's contribution could have been \$2 250 000 (Can.). As has been discussed, on planning and design grounds it was determined that an area approach was preferable.

The heritage legislation does not define how owners of buildings in historic areas are to be assisted with rehabilitation and restoration work. A system had to be developed that was equitable for all building owners, and it also had to provide an incentive to carry out the work required to give the area its proper image.

The financing technique that was finally adopted was based in large part on the revolving funds concept used extensively in the United States.<sup>11</sup> The province will contribute a certain amount to the fund, and through the policies and procedures developed by the consultant these funds will be disbursed by the revolving fund made up of government representatives, businessmen from the area and Council appointees. Every owner of a provincially significant site will be eligible for an outright grant of 40% of the cost of his rehabilitation work, a low interest loan of 20% and a conventional loan of 40%. A maximum price has been determined for each type of building. The loans will be made by banks and guaranteed and subsidized by the revolving fund. Owners of buildings that are not of provincial significance or developers of new buildings within the area are also eligible for grants of up to 20% of the cost of meeting the design guidelines, a low interest loan of 40% and a conventional loan of 40%. These grants and loans are designed to compensate owners of new buildings for the extra costs incurred in meeting the historic area design guidelines. The decisions of the revolving fund can be appealed to the Town Council.

Careful economic analysis projections were carried out to determine the size of the fund. It was assumed that it would take ten years to carry out most of the work. The fund will also be responsible for helping to carry out environmental improvements, paying the salary of the coordinator, helping pay for the cost of special events, and possibly buying and improving vacant buildings. The projections were based on these disbursements and that all buildings would be improved over the ten year period. It was determined that a fund of \$1 500 000 would be required.<sup>12</sup>

#### *Implementation tools*

The background work required by the committee and a great deal of the technical development are to be carried out by a full time Historic Area Coordinator, with duties similar to those who work in the Canadian and American Main Street programs. The coordinator will be able to work with building owners on the design of their buildings and organize events to help promote the downtown. He will also be responsible for the selection and operation of the professional secretariat that will advise both the Design Review Board and Revolving Fund. The secretariat is an important component in ensuring that the activities of the historic district committee are both professional and independent.

The other major implementation tool is a series of design guidelines developed to guide and control all new developments or changes to existing buildings. These are not overly restrictive and offer opportunities for creative solutions. The major thrust is to ensure that significant buildings are sensitively and economically rehabilitated and new buildings 'fit' into the main street. As has been noted, in both new and old work, there is no attempt to restore back to a particular period.

The package of tools described above has been designed to give the local community as much control as is possible while ensuring the provincial government is able to safeguard an important aspect of Alberta's heritage.

#### **Lessons learnt**

Based on this experience, plus a year long on-site evaluation of many other North American area designation and improvement schemes, the author would like to comment on a number of lessons that may be useful in other historic area situations.

1. Many of the earlier designation and revitalization attempts were very much concerned with beautification and design.<sup>13</sup> In Fort Macleod, as in other situations, the design aspects are fairly straightforward. Far more difficult are such activities as participation programs, economic analysis and forecasting, the development of strategies that will attract activities of both a social and business nature to an area, and the design of viable implementation packages. This realization should play a significant role in determining the nature of consultants working on the creation of historic areas. It is no longer sufficient to have only designers to undertake this work since it is multidisciplinary in nature. Consultants must be able to exhibit skills in many areas of planning and design practice.
2. Far too often, tourism is seen as the factor that will form the economic basis for an historic area. Preliminary economic analysis often will

<sup>13</sup> Gibbons, Christian, 'What it Take Compete', *Planning* (May 1982), 29, 9. i). 'Building Community Support', *Downtown Idea Exchange*

<sup>10</sup> The program has yet to begin and it is difficult therefore to determine its success but there exist examples of this means of development control in the United States.

<sup>11</sup> Two of the most successful revolving funds are in Pittsburgh and Savannah in the United States.

<sup>12</sup> It is interesting to note that this can be seen as a saving of \$750 000 for the Province. It may be that other organizations contribute to the fund.

demonstrate that tourism can be seen only as one aspect of a much larger economic development package. There are two major reasons for this: the negative impact of large scale tourism activity and its seasonal nature. For most smaller centres, tourism as a major economic factor is neither desirable nor in most cases feasible. If one accepts this fact, the evaluation of an area in terms of its suitability for designation could be far different since it could require competent economic base studies and future planning. Historic resource management has matured and it is no longer desirable always to identify tourism as a major economic generator. Sophisticated economic analysis is now necessary.

3. The Main Street programs in both the United States and Canada have clearly indicated that the modern shopping centre has a great deal to 'teach' us regarding the design and management of historic commercial areas. The shopping centre management techniques that appear to be directly applicable to the success of an older area are: promotion, maintenance and business development. A discussion of these factors could form an article in itself, but it is sufficient to note that one must be aware of these management techniques in both the planning and operation of an older area.
4. The major objectives of participation and consultation programs must be to achieve consensus. Even in situations where the political sector is prepared to intervene without local support, the continued success depends on the cooperation of most interest groups. Disgruntled merchants can have a serious negative impact on the success of any program. Achieving consensus requires facilitators who are experienced and have special skills and patience.
5. Time is an important ingredient in creating an historic area. On one hand, the planning and design process should be seen as a long-term one, especially if consensus is desired. On the other hand, the implementation program must be designed to be continuous in nature. Without a management structure and constant government vigilance projects will fail. There are too many areas where investments may be lost due to lack of interest or personnel changes. There must be mechanisms for constant design approval and by-law enforcement.<sup>14</sup> It is also important to ensure the standards adopted are of a high quality so that work will endure over a long period of time. High quality does not necessarily imply high costs.
6. The final lesson relates to the creative use of existing financial and legislative resources. It is quite clear from an assessment of selected North American and British examples that successful area preservation projects have used all available conventional and unconventional financing techniques.<sup>15</sup> The difficult economic times will force consultants and governments working in historic districts to be creative in their design of implementation packages. For many

planners and architects this is a new challenge at the development of skills in fund raising and grantsmanship.

### Conclusion

The creation of an historical area requires skills and knowledge to make professional assessments and protect important historic resources, and to design strategies that will allow these resources to become part of the present-day social, cultural and economic life of a community. To accomplish this requires a multidisciplinary approach to evaluation, design, planning and program development. It is no longer sufficient to entrust the task of retaining historic resources to unidisciplinary approaches. The implications of this new awareness will force new disciplines to emerge and new professional alliances to be found.<sup>16</sup>

It is also important to note that the legal protection of an area and its improvement must be seen as part of a larger process of continual change. One must accept that the area is part of an urban and/or regional system in which any action taken in one part of the regional/urban system will, in almost all situations, negatively or positively impact the rest of the elements within the system. This awareness requires that the creator of the district respect and care not only for the immediate historic resource but also the economic, cultural and social forces that operate within the larger system. To illustrate this very simply, it is clear that an economic development package that concentrates on the immediate historic area or its immediate environs is doomed to failure. The economic health of the region, the national financial future, consumer spending trends and commercial developments within the system, will all have a significant impact on the historic area.

### Résumé

La protection juridique et la revivification des zones historiques forment un domaine nouveau pour les gouvernements des provinces de l'Ouest du Canada. Afin de tester la procédure régionale de classification, le Service des Sites Historiques du Ministère de la Culture de l'Alberta a désigné le ville de Fort Macleod comme première ville historique. Ce choix en effet présente de nombreux avantages: il s'agit de l'un des plus importants ensembles de bâtiments à valeur architecturale et historique de la province; peu touché par une extension modeste; le climat économique est stable et apparemment sain; une association pour la connaissance de l'histoire de la ville fait preuve de grande activité; l'endroit est un haut lieu du tourisme avec des possibilités encore inexploitées. Toutes ces raisons font de Fort Macleod un excellent exemple où

appliquer les dispositions légales et décider des meilleurs moyens de leur application pratique.

L'auteur de cet article décrit brièvement la ville, son plan et son histoire et rend compte de la structure de la direction du projet, des modes de financement et des techniques employées pour sauvegarder le quartier historique. En conclusion, il commente les leçons à tirer de l'expérience.

Fort Macleod est matériellement et socialement une ville typique de la prairie; une grande rue avec deux rangées de bâtiments de un à trois étages dont plusieurs—surtout ceux de pierre calcaire qui ont été construits par des artisans britanniques—reflètent l'optimisme de leur époque et sont, contre toute attente, assez imposants. Ce sont eux qui donnent à la ville un sens de la durée et une stature certaine.

<sup>14</sup> The author has developed the theme of continual renewal in an article on 'A New Urban Renewal'.

<sup>15</sup> Bath in England, and Pittsburgh and Savannah in the United States are good examples of cities that have made excellent use of all existing resources and programs.

<sup>16</sup> The author has developed a training program for architects and planners that will be published in a forthcoming book on historic resource management.

Il fut décidé de ne pas restaurer Fort Macleod dans le style d'une période donnée, pas même de retrouver son état de 1915. En effet, cela n'aurait ni désirable ni même possible étant donné que cela aurait voulu dire par exemple arracher les revêtements des rues pour laisser apparaître le sol en terre battue et installer des trottoirs de bois.

De nouveaux bâtiments vont être construits selon des directives générales qui permettent un style moderne mais respectueux de l'environnement historique. La population fut largement consultée quant au plan et à l'architecture à adopter et sa participation continue est prévue dans l'administration de la zone historique.

La réalisation des décisions prises se fera avec l'aide d'un agent de liaison employé à plein temps et d'un secrétariat technique salarié. L'outil essentiel sera en fait la liste des normes qui ne sera pas trop rigide afin de permettre des solutions variées.

Plusieurs conclusions sont à tirer de cette tentative; d'abord la nécessité d'équipes pluridisciplinaires; puis le fait qu'il est dangereux de compter sur le tourisme comme source principale de revenus financiers; l'importance des techniques administratives et publicitaires comparables à celles utilisées pour un centre commercial; le rôle de l'opinion publique dans la prise de décisions est souligné ainsi que celui d'une planification à long terme; et, bien entendu, il est important d'utiliser toutes les ressources financières et législatives.

### Resumen

La protección legal y el embellecimiento de zonas históricas forma una nueva área de actividad de los gobiernos provinciales del Canadá Occidental. A fin de poner a prueba el sistema de designación de la zona provincial, et Servicio de Emplazamientos Históricos de Cultura de Alberta eligió la ciudad de Fuerte Macleod como primera zona histórica potencial. La ciudad posee muchas ventajas como centro experimental: una de las mayores colecciones intactas en la provincia de edificios significativos arquitectónica e históricamente; pocas presiones serias de desarrollo; clima económico aparentemente estable pero sano; una activa sociedad histórica; altas tasas de turismo y buen emplazamiento para mayor desarrollo turístico. Desde la perspectiva del departamento, la ciudad de

Fuerte Macleod representaba una excelente oportunidad de evaluar la legislación y decidir los modos de llevarla a la práctica.

Este artículo examina brevemente la ciudad, los procesos de planificación y diseño, y describe la estructura directiva y técnicas de financiación y puesta en práctica que se crearon para la zona histórica. Termina con el desarrollo de la experiencia adquirida a lo largo de proceso.

Física y socialmente, Fuerte Macleod es característica de muchas ciudades de la pradera. Tiene una calle principal con dos filas de edificios de una a tres plantas. Muchos de los edificios, especialmente los de piedra arenisca, reflejan el optimismo de la época en que fueron construidos y son, de hecho, mucho más grandiosos de lo que cabría esperar. Los erigieron hábiles comerciantes de la Gran Bretaña y proporcionan a la ciudad un sentido de estabilidad e importancia.

El enfoque adoptado fue el de no restaurar Fuerte Macleod de acuerdo con ningún período anterior. En realidad, no se intentaría recrear la calle según estaba en 1915. Esto no resultaría ni deseable ni posible ya que, por ejemplo, requeriría levantar las calles y volver a las aceras de madera y calzada polvorienta. Los nuevos edificios se construirán de acuerdo con un diseño orientado por líneas modernas que se muestren sensibles al marco histórico de la ciudad. El proceso de planificación y diseño incluyó la máxima participación de los residentes de la ciudad, e igualmente se hizo con la futura política administrativa de la zona histórica.

Los planes creados se llevarán a la práctica mediante los servicios de un coordinador con dedicación absoluta y un secretariado técnico profesional remunerado. La principal herramienta cultural de desarrollo será la orientación de diseños que no resulten excesivamente restrictivos, sino que ofrezcan la oportunidad de soluciones creadoras. Muchas lecciones pueden ser aprovechadas: la necesidad de equipos combinados para diseño y planificación; la dificultad de confiar en el turismo como fuente principal de flujos económicos; la necesidad de técnicas de dirección semejantes a las que se emplean en centros comerciales modernos; la intervención del consenso en la toma de decisiones; la importancia de la planificación a largo plazo; y la ventaja de emplear la mayor gama posible de los recursos financieros y legislativos.