

The world of conservation

An interview with Jacques Dalibard

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FIG. 1. European architectural influences can be found in the Gothic lines of the Chateau Frontenac Hotel, which dominates the skyline of Quebec City, the capital of the province of Quebec. (*Heritage Canada Foundation*)



FIG. 2. Jacques Dalibard.

‘The downtown merchants and their shops have more heritage significance than anything else in most Canadian communities’. Immediately Jacques Dalibard (*Fig. 2*) said that we knew we were going to hear a concept of conservation that was not just a copy of what had been evolved in Europe. It is a part of a North American interpretation of the heritage that is based on a belief in the importance of maintaining living traditions in a community rather than concentrating on monuments. Indeed, it is one that provides an explanation for the presence of the monuments.

The shopping area attracted people; and where people congregated you could be sure various other activities would follow. Institutions, for example, inevitably constructed their buildings on prime corners of main street. Houses of worship were built there and so were banks, post offices, fire halls, police stations, and town halls. Cultural centres were constructed. Libraries. Schools. Meeting halls. And, of course, houses were also built nearby. In short, main street communities became complex and multi-layered entities.

Mr Dalibard was enthusiastically describing the Main Street Programme he introduced into the Heritage Canada Foundation’s activities three years ago. And as he spoke we thought that here was a man with deep Canadian roots; but although he had family connections with that country he was born in France and educated at Versailles and Le Mans. Originally he had thought of a diplomatic career as one that would suit his character and his interest in different cultures; but during the 50s he spent some years in England where, for various reasons, his ideas began to change. After teaching French literature in a very progressive school in Letchworth, than which nothing could have contrasted more markedly with his own education in France, he attended the University of Bristol to study English, Drama and Philosophy. Versailles and Letchworth, we commented; they provided a piquant contrast. The one is the supreme expression of autocratic imposition, and the other is the prototype for the Garden City; and yet Mr Dalibard came to realize that each reflects what he considers an essentially European sensibility in the sense that each places the claims of the whole before those of its parts. At the same time as he was studying at Bristol, he was lecturing on French civilization to adult education groups; and he decided against a career in diplomacy in favour of one closer to real life. He considered the options open to him. ‘A combination of artistic and practical activities was what appealed to me’, he recalled ‘and so I settled for architecture and went to McGill University from which I graduated in 1964’.

By a curious chance, his first job as a student was one concerned with rehabilitation. This happened in his second year, when he was asked to design a restaurant in a greystone row house and decided to incorporate the existing facade in the interior decor. ‘It was’, he smiled apologetically, ‘one way to preserve, even though I might have second thoughts today about such a solution’. But, as he also recalled, at that time all buildings

were regarded as dispensable. Certainly, this early experience did not lead immediately to anything significant when he graduated. At that time his interests lay in futurist architecture, and his first mature employment was as an exhibition designer for the Federal Government in Ottawa. In this capacity he was closely involved in the design of the Canadian Pavilion for Expo ’67 (*Fig. 3*), and then came a six-months study of the exposition structures. Looking back, he feels that at that time he was looking for a key to the direction future architecture might take—a key that such buildings as the US geodesic dome and the Habitat building-blocks seemed capable of providing. At first he was struck by the extraordinary boldness of the designs he studied; but soon, for all their surface appeal, many of the exposition buildings began to ring hollow. ‘Just as Expo ’67’s two islands had been artificially created in the St. Lawrence river’, he reflected, ‘so many of the buildings upon them seemed unnatural, imposed, arbitrary. And I began to feel convinced that the key to satisfactory future design was not so much in space-age trendiness as in the forms of the past. What was needed was a sense of continuity’.

His career in conservation began with his appointment as the first official Restoration Architect in Canada, in the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs. ‘I saw an advertisement for the post, applied and got it

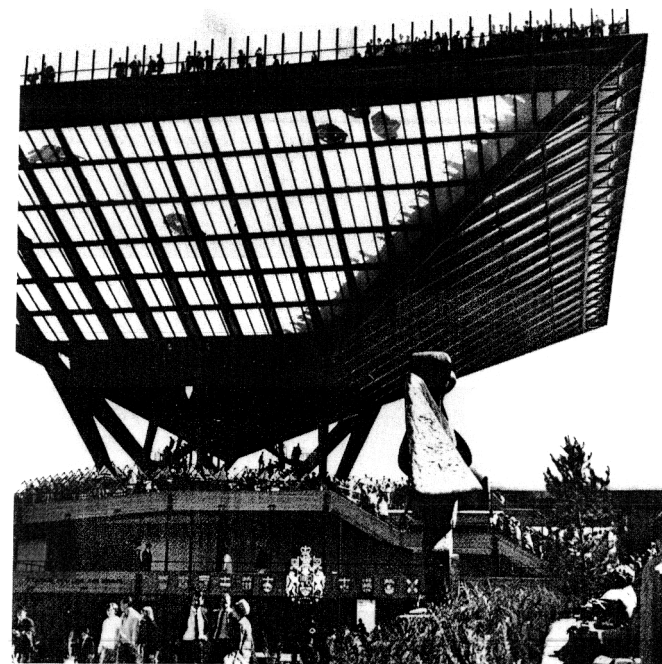


FIG. 3. The Canadian Pavilion, Expo '67.

largely, I think, on the strength of my maintained interest in architectural history'. Some of these buildings owned by the Government, of which he then found himself in charge, were, Mr Dalibard reminded us, old by North American standards and respectably aged even by European standards even if they lacked the sophistication of their contemporaries back home (*Fig. 4*). The stone buildings comprising the Fortress of Louisbourg, for instance, dated from the early eighteenth century. There was the house of the Commissaire Ordonnateur, completed in 1725, which the English gratefully described as a 'Stately Dwelling House' when they occupied it in the 1740s. It was surprisingly luxurious with handsome panelled rooms which we admired in the carefully detailed drawings for their restoration which he showed us (*Fig. 5*). Other buildings for which proposals were made were the Engineer's House, (*Fig. 6*), built in the 1730s, and Frederic Gate (*Fig. 7*). But in 1968 he felt the need to specialize in the field of architecture he had chosen and went to New York to improve his theoretical knowledge of historic preservation by taking the well-known course of studies at the Graduate School of Architecture and Planning in Columbia University.

FIG. 4. Reconstructed buildings at Louisbourg, Nova Scotia.

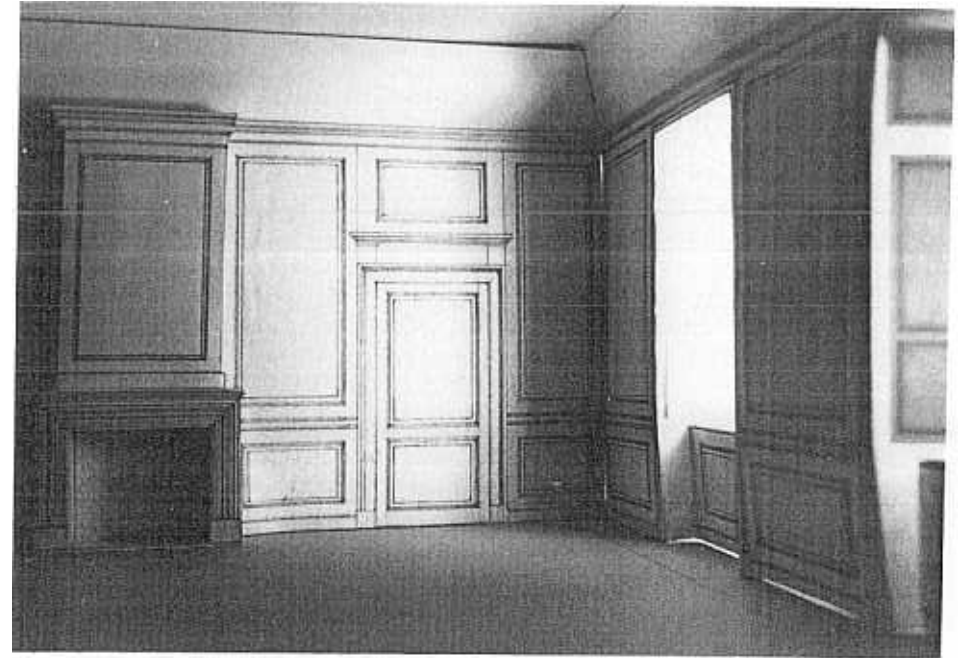
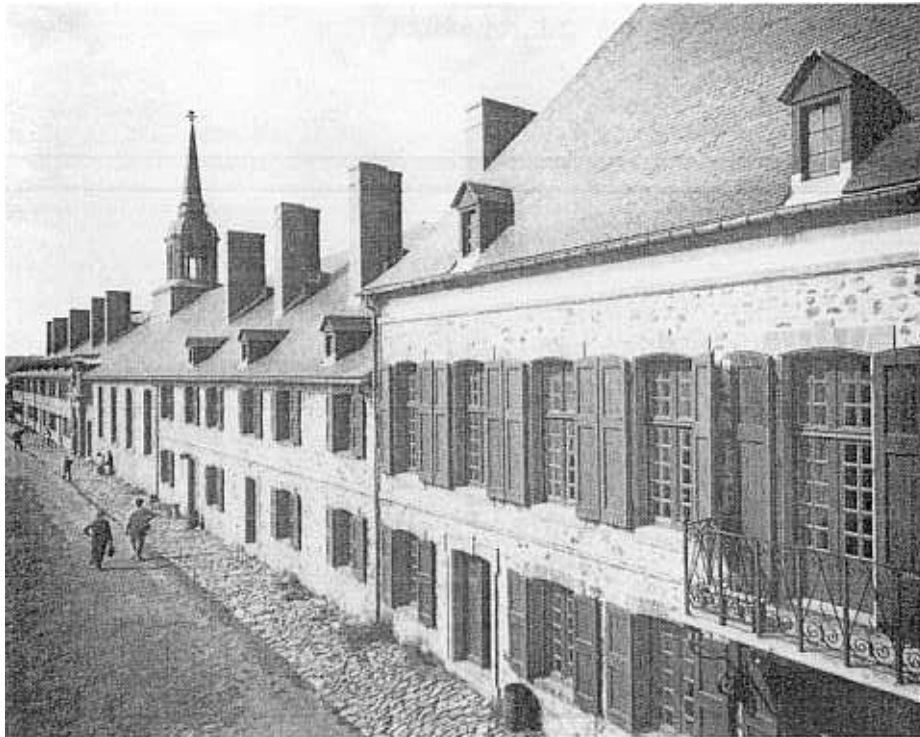


FIG. 5. A drawing of the proposed restoration of panelling in the home of the Commissaire Ordonnateur, Louisbourg, Nova Scotia.

He was the first Canadian architect to study and receive a Master's degree in this specialization in 1969, and in the New World he discovered a new attitude towards the environment. If the European tended to place emphasis upon the whole, his North American counterpart tended to place emphasis upon the individual. This romantic attitude, when applied to Canada's quickly changing built environment, set, he could sense, North American planning upon a collision course with its own past. 'There are', he said,

two kinds of environmental change. One is incremental, the other cataclysmic. Incremental change is a product of classical attitudes; it is carefully conceived; it springs organically from what went before, it is mindful of context, of temporal and spatial continuity. Cataclysmic change is the opposite; it is romantic in the sense that it is impulsive, individualistic, arbitrary; it pays little heed to the whole. This latter philosophy became, in the 60s and 70s, the prevailing North American attitude towards environmental planning.

Had Mr Dalibard expected Canadian cities to opt for cataclysmic change?

It was no surprise. The forces upon them had been enormous. In the 30s and 40s, Canada had been too preoccupied with a Depression and a war to turn attention to construction of domestic buildings. By the 50s, the already-tight housing situation had been exacerbated by the start of the baby boom and by burgeoning



FIG. 6. The Engineer's House, Louisbourg, Nova Scotia.

immigration numbers. Within a ten years' period, the country's population almost doubled while construction lagged far behind. The push, in the 50s and 60s, to create new buildings was therefore understandable. What was not so understandable was the near mindless attitude towards the already existing environment which accompanied it. Whether it was Montreal or Toronto, Calgary or Vancouver, the urban renewal projects which were launched revealed scant interest in the claims of history (Fig. 8). Wide swathes of old downtowns were swept away to make room for the image and likeness of a single generation. Often communities were cut off from their past, but the resulting sense of disconnection was not temporal only. Spatially, Canadian centres also suffered a kind of breakdown; communities which had developed with incremental care were destroyed overnight by the imposition of unsympathetic highways and high-rise buildings.

In 1967 Mr Dalibard joined Parks Canada, the Federal Government agency which, since 1885, had acted as custodian for the country's national parks and historic sites; and it was while he was there that his perception of the built environment and how to manage it, took a new turn.

At Parks Canada we were in the business of preserving the very rare site, what I call the *monton à cinq pattes*. Our approach to these nationally important sites, appropriately, was a pickle-jar approach. We insulated them in space and time, we protected them against the intrusion of a changing world. This encapsulating approach worked well at Parks Canada, but it could not be adapted to the management of the rest of the built environment.

By the early 70s, a reaction to wholesale demolition of neighbourhoods had spread across the country. Canadians were becoming increasingly aware that their architectural legacy extended far beyond historic sites to

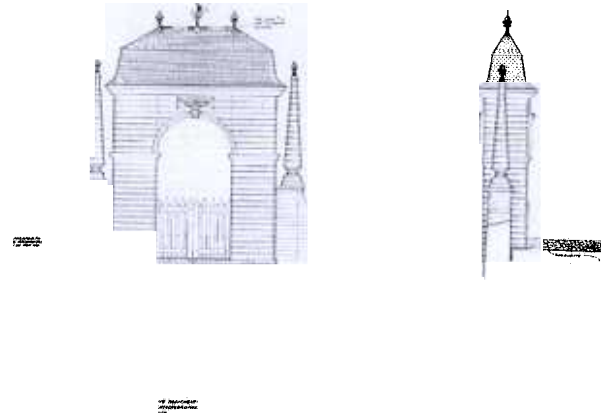


FIG. 7. The north elevation of Frederic Gate, Louisbourg, Nova Scotia.

include all the sheep with *four* legs, the great mass of vernacular buildings. That must have been a heartening reaction?

True; but what was not so heartening was the strategy preservationists used to fight widespread demolition. They committed the same sin planners and developers were committing; they tended to see our built environment in parts; they compartmentalized, they disconnected. Their approach was every bit as archival as was that of the specialists at Parks Canada. They insisted on pushing to save a particular endangered building here, a particular endangered bridge there. This kind of brush-fire, individualistic approach to preservation was probably necessary in its time, but it was not a strategy that held the promise of long-term success.

In 1977 there was a shift in Mr Dalibard's career when he was invited to return to New York and succeed James Marston Fitch as head of the Historic Preservation Program at Columbia. He took the opportunity to make revisions so as to provide a range of studies 'from macro to micro. The idea of preservation planning as a discipline just didn't exist', he explained; 'and so we established a project to collect information and look at all the possibilities of using *planning* as opposed to *legislation* for preservation. That represented the macro, while at the same time we strengthened the study of the bricks and mortar of the environment at the micro end of the range'. His planning approach stressed the importance of seeing the built environment as part of the real world.

What we have to realize is that our built environment, like our natural environment, is a living entity. It is constantly changing, constantly developing. Preservationists who address the planning process can no more hope to lock their

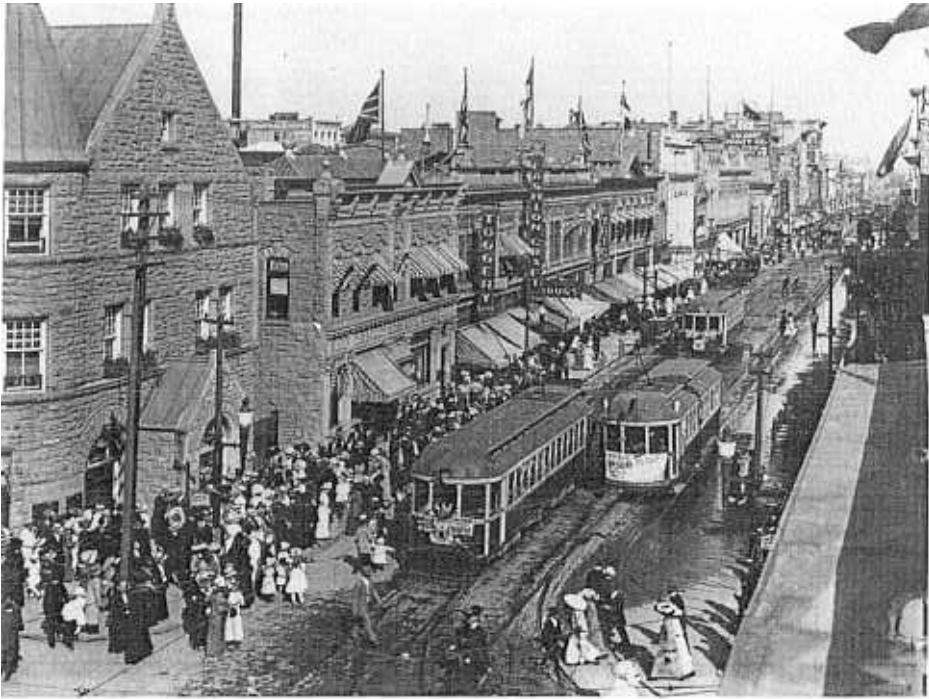


FIG. 8. An essential part of Canada's history is represented by this 1912 view of Calgary, Alberta, one of the towns created almost overnight by the expansion of the railway across Western Canada. (*Glenbow Archives, Calgary, Alberta*)

environment in a time capsule than they can hope to stop leaves falling off trees. In that sense, preservationists are not, primarily, in the business of saving this or that particular building; what they are really in the business of is preserving a situation, a climate, in which the traditional attitude towards managing the built environment—the incremental approach—can be fostered.

During the late 60s Mr Dalibard had been campaigning for the setting up of a Canadian heritage organization, and this came to fruition in 1973 when the Heritage Canada Foundation was founded. Modelled partly on the British Civic Trust and the British and US National Trusts, it is a national charitable organization with policies set by a board of governors who answer to fee-paying supporters. Its aim is to encourage the preservation of Canada's built environment, and in 1978 Mr Dalibard was invited to become its executive director. 'When I accepted and first arrived at the Foundation', he recalled,

I asked what my resources were; and I saw that we could accomplish only a modest amount alone. The staff numbered fewer than forty, the annual operating budget was less than \$2 million. If we were to fulfil our mandate of helping to create an environment in which preservation attitudes could flourish, then we

were going to be a catalyst for a movement much larger than ourselves, and we had to persuade others to join in.

How does he feel at the end of five years as the Foundation's director?

In creating a wide-flung network of preservationists, we have succeeded beyond even the most optimistic forecasts. Whether the arguments used were the traditional, emotional ones (the historic, social and aesthetic), or the newer, hard-nosed ones (money-saving, energy-conserving and job-creating), they have had the effect of bringing together groups of concerns that in the past had little difficulty keeping their enthusiasm for the architectural heritage in check. What is more, our Foundation's Corporate and Government Relations programme recently effected an important change in the federal income tax act. For a long time, the Act had actually encouraged the demolition of standing buildings; but by insisting that times have changed, that the pendulum has already swung from new construction to rehabilitation, the Foundation helped convince a one-time enemy of preservation to become a helpful ally.

We recalled that our first meeting had been in Philadelphia, USA in 1974 at the memorable symposium organized by Charles Peterson to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the Carpenters' Company. At that time Mr Dalibard was hopeful that a training course would be set up in Canada.¹ It has not yet materialized in the established sense he envisaged, preferably in a university; but the Foundation's Education and Technical Services programme has emphasized to schools of planning, architecture and the building trades that it is no longer enough to teach only new design techniques. As the economic climate shifts steadily in favour of rehabilitation, it becomes increasingly important that schools teach rehabilitation skills as well. To instruct the instructors, the Foundation has undertaken a series of rehabilitation workshops and lobbied to have restoration and renovation courses added to curricula in schools of architecture. It has launched its own extra-mural training programme, and is currently promoting an increase in data centres and preservation networking. The upshot has been the involvement of a great many people who previously had given little thought to conservation, although Mr Dalibard would like to see the government play a greater role. In what way?

Quite apart from taking a lead concerning its own vintage buildings, it should help provide facilities so that when rehabilitation work is carried out, it is done properly. Today, because of lack of expertise, many well-intentioned projects actually do more harm than good. For example, for years brick buildings have been sandblasted to destruction right across the country without any government agency informing the public.

And there were many cases that could be cited to illustrate how unnecessary expense and destruction of architectural and decorative quality could have been avoided if architects, contractors and tradesmen were trained to deal with existing buildings.

Such experiences are not unknown outside Canada too. On the credit

¹ Dalibard, J. and Weaver, M., 'Canada Prepares for a Great Program', *Building Early America* (ed. Peterson, C.E.), Radnor 1976, 353 ff.

side, Mr Dalibard was able to note that when Heritage Canada was founded in 1973, no province or city outside Quebec had heritage building protection. Today, although their strength varies from place to place, every province and city in the country has laws protecting its vintage architecture; but he is always promoting the broadest definition of architectural heritage.

It is a fishing village in Nova Scotia with its brightly painted clapboard buildings, seemingly located haphazardly but in fact well integrated in a landscape of earth, rocks and water, taking advantage of the accidents of the terrain and considering the prevailing winds (*Fig. 9*). It is a small town in Saskatchewan with its grain elevators next to the railway station (*Fig. 10*), the very wide main street with its boomtown front facades at right angles to the tracks. It is the warehouse districts of Vancouver, Winnipeg, Montreal or Halifax now hardly used as such but with a readily identifiable architecture and a unique architecture (*Figs 11, 12 and 13*). It is a town within a town like Old Strathcona in Edmonton or Maisonneuve in Montreal with its institutional buildings, its main street and its residential district almost intact and easily recognizable, giving a sense of scale, security and identity to urban complexes that are often too chaotic and too big to make its average citizens comfortable. There are thousands of such cultural landscapes, that constitute our 'built heritage',

At the heart of most of these cultural landscapes is the main street, the focus of Jacques Dalibard's present programme for Heritage Canada. 'It may be a long way from what many people think of as conservation', he observed,

but we decided to forget about preservation, rehabilitation etc for the time being and concentrate on a healthy down town. We have seven demonstration projects, and in each we have what we call a main street coordinator who is roughly the equivalent of a shopping mall manager. He or she promotes the economic and physical improvement of the commercial centres of communities through various marketing and preservation techniques.

Who are these coordinators? What is their background?

They are people with an affinity both for the type of communities and for the part of the country in which they are working. We have staff who can offer complementary skills; one has a design background, another organizational, merchandizing, real estate, and so on. We are now training between twenty and thirty a year for three months, and over the next ten years we aim to have brought two hundred towns into the project; and that will have a great impact on the country. But the important principle in this programme is one of consolidation; our plan is to reinforce what we already have, to build on what is already there and to identify what we like to call the heart of a community.

A well-balanced community is very much like a wheel; you have a hub, you have spokes, you have a rim. You can lose a few spokes along the way, but you cannot lose the hub. For the heart of a community—its main street—is more than just a collection of buildings, more than a physical entity; at the heart of a real community operates something intangible—the social, economic and cultural elements that make up what we call civilization.

Jacques Dalibard's horizon is not limited by the confines of the main street, and he has been a proponent of forging strong international links.

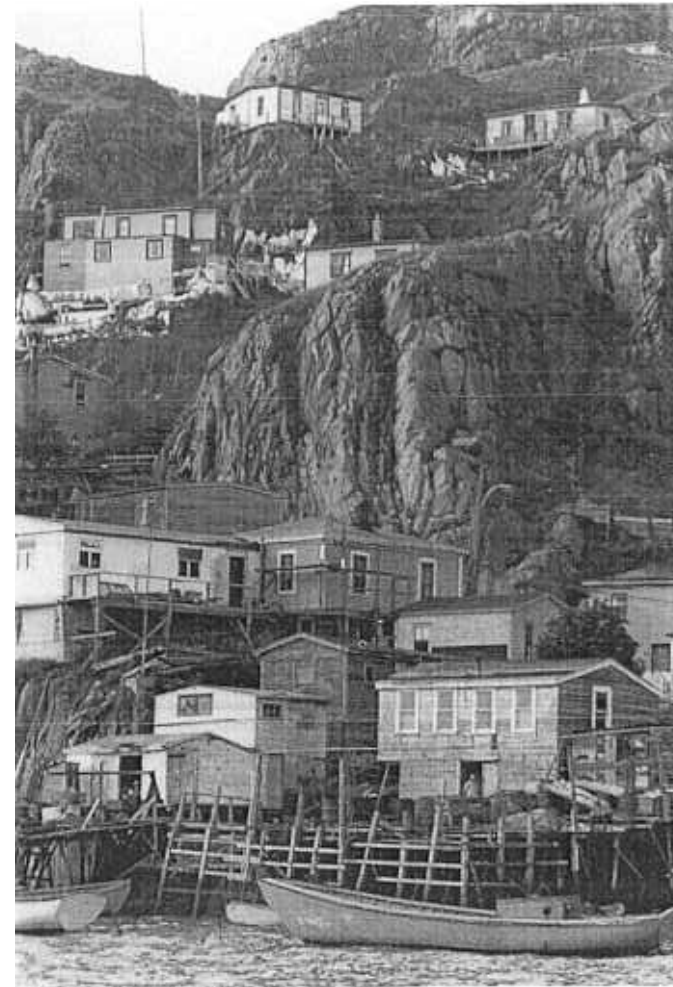


FIG. 9. Along the rock-ribbed coast of Newfoundland, Canada's easternmost province, can be found the Outports. Fishing, boating and cod-jigging are the centuries-old activities of Outporters. (*Canadian Department of Regional Industrial Expansion*)

In 1968 he founded the Association for Preservation Technology (APT), the North America-based international organization which acts as an information centre for technical and scientific aspects of architectural conservation. He was the first editor of the *APT Bulletin* and the third president of the Association. He has undertaken missions for Unesco, among which is his three years' work as an adviser on the cultural preservation of Cyprus. He is currently involved in preservation work in

FIG. 10. Grain elevators such as these in Saskatchewan typically stand in a row along a railway line, silhouetted against a big prairie sky. They are Western Canada's most ubiquitous and easily recognized form of architecture. (*Canadian Department of Regional Industrial Expansion*)

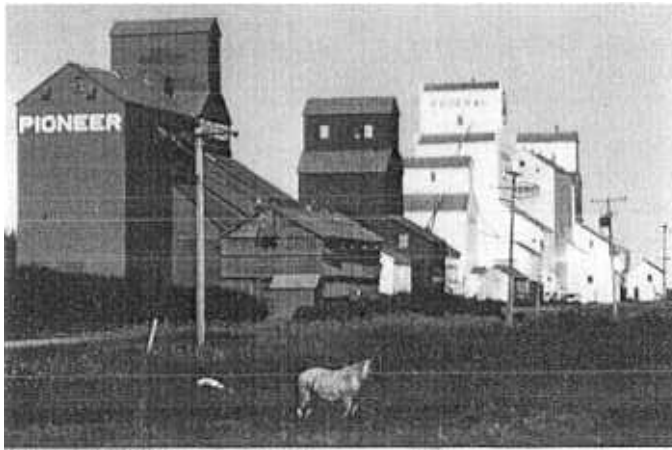


FIG. 11. Gastown is the original warehouse district in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada's largest West Coast city. For many years Gastown was a slum but now, thanks to a decade of preservation, it has been returned to its former charm and popularity. (*Canadian Department of Regional Industrial Expansion*)

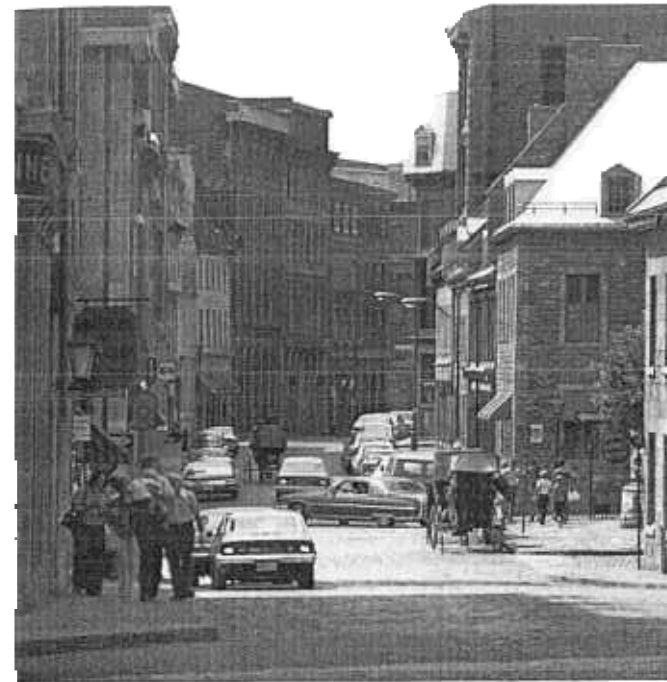


FIG. 12. Vieux Montreal, the original heart of Montreal, languished for many years as an all-but-abandoned warehouse district. Today it is a rejuvenated centre, popular with residents, merchants and tourists. (*Canadian Department of Regional Industrial Expansion*)

Cairo. In 1972 he became a member of the Icomos executive, and he is currently the Treasurer-General. Over the years he has argued for two developments in the organization's work. One concerns the Venice Charter, which he views as a landmark document that no longer takes into account the current, larger sense of conservation. He has, therefore, pushed for the development of a new charter. On another level, he has also argued that Icomos, while not forgetting its European base, should adopt an approach that takes into account activities and problems both in the Third World and in some non-European industrial centres. 'Icomos is a hugely important force which must set the standard for reaching out, for making all the conservation connections it can. But all the temporal, spatial and political connections would be meaningless', he insists,

if it were not for another. There is a tendency to spend our days making intellectual points—arguing for the economic benefits of this project, the energy-saving elements of that, the job-making virtues of a third. In the end, however, the reason we are in the business of pushing for the careful management of the built environment does not have very much to do with the intellect at all. What an environment that sensitively mixes its old and new architecture can give

FIG. 13. A decorative roof line in Montreal.



us is something much greater than the sum of its parts. The appeal can hardly be measured, because it is of the heart. A properly managed environment connects us to our historical roots, to our physical surroundings, and finally (however soft-headed this might sound) to the very centre of our humanness.

And when we were talking to him we felt strongly that at present his heart is in those Canadian main streets which he describes so eloquently. 'Bringing life to main street and saving its character is', he insists, 'preserving our Canadian identity'.

Résumé

Lorsque Jacques Dalibard se mit à parler de l'importance pour le patrimoine canadien des commerçants et de leurs boutiques dans les centres des villes anciennes, nous savions que nous allions avoir affaire à une conception nord-américaine de la conservation. Il décrivait en effet le Programme de la Grand'Rue qu'il avait introduit dans les activités de la Fondation Canadienne du Patrimoine il y a trois ans. En 1978 il fut nommé directeur de la Fondation; il lui semble avoir 'réussi au-delà des prévisions les plus optimistes' à créer un large réseau de conservateurs. Le programme actuel est centré sur la 'grand'rue' aussi, au cours de cet interview, M. Dalibard a-t-il évoqué les ambitions et les succès de la Fondation dans ce domaine.

Né et éduqué en France, il passa plusieurs années en Angleterre dans les années cinquante au cours desquelles il étudia et enseigna à Bristol avant de rentrer au Canada où il fit des études d'architecture à l'Université de McGill. Diplômé en 1964, il participa à l'élaboration du Pavillon Canadien pour l'Exposition de 1967, une expérience qui le convainquit que la clé du design du futur n'était pas tellement dans la vogue de l'âge de l'espace que dans les formes du passé. 'Ce qu'il fallait', dit-il, 'c'était donner un sens de continuité.' Sa première expérience de la conservation date de son emploi dans le Département des Affaires Indiennes et du Nord; en 1968 il ressentit le besoin de se spécialiser et il suivit un cours à la faculté d'architecture et d'urbanisme de l'Université de Columbia à New York.

Neuf ans plus tard il fut invité à revenir à Columbia où il devint le directeur du Programme de Conservation des Monuments Historiques, programme auquel il apporta d'importantes innovations. Mais on lui offrit le poste de directeur de la Fondation Canadienne du Patrimoine, poste qu'il ne put refuser d'autant plus qu'il avait fait campagne pour la création d'une organisation de ce genre depuis la fin des années soixante. Parmi d'autres activités, il créa plusieurs ateliers de conservation et demanda que des cours de restauration et de rénovation soient inclus dans le curriculum des écoles d'architecture. La Fondation a également organisé un programme de formation extra muros et travaille actuellement à augmenter le nombre des centres d'information sur la conservation et à élargir le réseau des conservateurs.

L'intérêt que M. Dalibard porte aujourd'hui à la grand'rue ne l'empêche pas d'avoir un large horizon: il est partisan depuis plusieurs années de créer des liens internationaux forts. Dans cet esprit il a créé en 1968 l'Association de la Technologie de Préservation

(APT) dont il fut le troisième président. Il a entrepris des missions pour l'Unesco en particulier une mission de trois ans en tant que conseiller pour la sauvegarde culturelle de Chypre et il est actuellement engagé dans les travaux de sauvegarde du Caire. En 1972 il fit partie du Comité Exécutif d'Icomos dont il est aujourd'hui Trésorier Général. Il défend depuis plusieurs années l'élargissement des activités de l'organisation sur deux points. L'un est la Charte de Venise qu'il considère comme un document essentiel mais qui est dépassé par la signification donnée aujourd'hui à la conservation. L'autre, à un niveau différent, concerne l'activité d'Icomos qui, tout en ne reniant pas ses bases européennes, devrait être concernée d'avantage par les actions et les problèmes du tiers-monde et de certains centres industriels non-européens.

Resumen

Cuando Jacques Dalibard empezó a hablar del sentido del legado cultural de los comerciantes y sus tiendas en los centros de las comunidades canadienses, comprendimos que íbamos a oír una versión norteamericana de la conservación. Describía el programa para la calle mayor que introdujo hace tres años en las actividades de la Fundación del Legado del Canadá. En 1978 se convirtió en director ejecutivo de la Fundación, y cree ahora que 'hemos ido más allá de las previsiones más optimistas' para la creación de una amplia red de conservadores. El programa actual se centra en 'la calle mayor', y, durante la entrevista, Sr. Dalibard comentó las ambiciones y los éxitos de la Fundación a este respecto.

Nacido y formado en Francia, pasó algunos años en Inglaterra en la década de los 50, estudiando y dando clases en Bristol antes de estudiar arquitectura en el Canadá, en la Universidad McGill. Después de su licenciatura en 1964, participó estrechamente en el diseño del Pabellón canadiense para la Expo '67, experiencia que acabó de convencerle de que la clave del diseño satisfactorio en el futuro no estaría en modas de la era espacial, sino en las formas del pasado. 'Lo que se requería', según sus creencias, 'era un sentido de continuidad'. Su primera experiencia práctica de la conservación tuvo lugar en el Departamento de Asuntos Indios y del Norte, pero en 1968 sintió la necesidad de especializarse y se matriculó en el curso de la Escuela de Estudios Posgraduados de Arquitectura y Planificación, en la Universidad de Columbia, Nueva York.

Nueve años más tarde fue invitado a regresar a

Columbia para ponerse al frente del Programa de Conservación Histórica, al cual contribuyó importantes alteraciones durante su cargo. Pero entonces le ofrecieron la plaza de director ejecutivo de la Fundación del Legado del Canada, la cual no podía rehusar dado que era el tipo de organización por el que había luchado desde fines de los años 60. Como parte de sus actividades, ha establecido una serie de talleres de rehabilitación y se ha esforzado en conseguir que se añadan cursos de restauración y renovación a los planes de estudios de las escuelas de arquitectura. La Fundación ha instituido también su propio programa de formación externa, y actualmente está fomentando el aumento de centros de datos y de los circuitos de conservación.

Pero, a pesar de su gran interés actual, los horizontes de Mr Dalibard no se limitan a la calle mayor, y desea promover la creación de fuertes vínculos inter-

nacionales. En 1968 fundó la Association for Preservation Technology (APT), de la que se convirtió en tercer Presidente. Ha llevado a cabo misiones de la Unesco, entre las que se cuentan sus tres años de trabajo como consejero de la conservación cultural de Chipre. En estos momentos participa en los trabajos de conservación del Cairo. En 1972 fue nombrado miembro del ejecutivo de Icomos, del que es ahora Tesorero General. A través de los años, ha querido ver dos líneas de acción en el trabajo de la organización. Una de ellas se refiere a la Carta de Venecia, que considera como un hito documental que ya no tiene en cuenta el actual y más amplio sentido de la conservación. En otro plano, ha insistido también en que Icomos, sin olvidar su base europea, debe adoptar una actitud que tenga en cuenta las actividades y los problemas del Tercer Mundo así como de algunos centros industriales no europeos.