

**QUÉBEC CITY: DECISION-MAKING  
ON THE WATERFRONT**

**ANTWERP**

**THE CITY AND THE RIVER**

**Léonce NAUD, Geographer**

**St. Lawrence Development Secretariat**

**Government of Québec**

Department of Harbour Technique and Department of Urban  
Planning in cooperation with the King Boudewijn Foundation,  
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In the United States and in Canada, as in Europe, interest both private and public is growing for the control and public access to shorelines, especially urban ones. Precisely those areas that our American colleagues call *waterfronts*.

I do not find much appropriate the use of the word *waterfront* to designate that kind of soft frontier between a city and a body of water. It induces a way of thinking that more or less assumes that the only worthwhile point of view is one that is city-centered. We assume that we are city people who look towards the water. It's the ordinary point of view of architects, urban planners, shopping mall builders...and of most mayors. I suggest that we also give some thought to another viewpoint, the one of the fishing ship captain, of the cruise operator, of the port manager. Then what you have is not so much a *waterfront* as a *cityfront*, with wharves, basins and piers that are more or less suited for your needs.

Since our focus is on new forms of collaboration between various partners, such as local residents associations, projects developers, municipalities and governments, I will try to synthesize in a few words more than fifteen years of decisions and counter-decisions with the so-called *Old Port* of Québec, a capital city that occupies a strategic location on a mighty river, the St. Lawrence. I said so-called Old Port because the historic maritime section, more or less used for maritime operations at the time our urban experiments started, is now being reclaimed by normal port operations, cruise ships, that is. Thence the present clash between urban plans and the needs of cruise operators and other water-based activities.

### **A look at who owns the land**

In Canada, the main ports are for the most part under the ownership and jurisdiction of the central government, whose capital is located in Ottawa. In the early Seventies, that government realized that it had an image problem, if not an economic: more and more underused or derelict port lands adjacent to the core of many important Canadian cities, like Halifax, Québec, Montréal, Toronto and Vancouver.

At the time, a new Federal Ministry of Urban Affairs – not quite constitutional – saw in those vacant lands a means to assume a leadership role in urban planning in Canada, a field of jurisdiction that is under Provincial control. The lasting interest and heavy financial involvement of the Canadian government in the development of some urban shores in Canada goes back to that period.

That explains why most of the planning and building that went on at the Québec, Montréal and Toronto waterfronts, for example, was the work of Federal government

corporations, created for that purpose that had few built-in incentives to respond to the wishes of local mayors, associations, provincial governments, commercial ports directly involved, not to mention the general public.

Quite often they became addicted to some grandiose scheme of a local planner or architect. They planned and built pretty much as they saw fit. On the one hand this governmental takeover protected waterfront lands from local projects and appetites, which is not a mean feat. On the other hand, their mandate reflected the wisdom of the early Seventies, and led to the outright urbanization of the place, the maritime side of the equation then being put on the back-burner.

The result was – and still is – a general philosophy of planning that cannot understand that people like to have some space close to the water, they want to be able to touch the water, to have physical access to it and do something with it, and not just stare at it from above a huge pier, behind a big fence that separates them from the water, their backs to the wall of some building or office tower.

Over the years, the very same pattern of events emerged in the three cities of Québec, Montréal and Toronto: the population became so upset by some plans or projects that the holding of public hearings became inevitable. These hearings resulted almost invariably in the discarding of the plans that had been pushed forward by reputed urban planners and other specialists. In most cases, the general public strenuously opposed any kind of privatization of the waterfront: like any water hole in a jungle, the waterfront seems to naturally belong to all. People really wanted to be able to approach the water, to use it wherever possible for fishing, swimming, sailing, boarding cruise boats, etc., and to be able to enjoy some green space close to it. There was not much demand for boutiques and shops, but rather for snacks and pops. Tall buildings close to the water were widely condemned unless they really had some business there.

### **Successive approaches**

I will just say a few words about Quebec City. In the last thirty years, four general approaches have permeated our regional planning wisdom as far as the relationship between city and water is concerned.

The first approach dates back to the early Sixties, and it goes like this: « *There is this urbanized territory over here, there is the River over there. Let's build one of those new highways of which we are so proud right at the water's edge, between the urban fabric and the River.* » For miles upstream and downstream of the Old City of Québec, the highway geniuses have had their way and, as a result, the population is now neatly cut-off from a magnificent river. In Montréal, about at the same period, there was some serious talk of replacing the historic waterfront street – the Rue de la Commune – by a highway. In Toronto, they actually built one parallel to Lake Ontario. It was the spirit of the times...

The second approach (early Seventies): « *There is that piece of derelict real estate between the historic city, the port and the river. Let's add some landfill and let's build a New Age city in front of the old one. Let's make it as futuristic as possible, basically all aluminium and glass. Its elegance and cleanliness will show the way of the future to those late-day troglodytes, suffocating in the dusty quarters of the Old Town. By the way, let's hope that the industrial port activity, and those unsightly grain elevators, will eventually fade into the distance, thanks to the lawsuits that will arise from those new resident yuppies...and damn the industrial development.* »

The third approach (early Eighties): « *Let's imitate the Americans by building one of those festival marketplaces where the yuppie generation will crowd trendy boutiques, drink in ferns bars and buy a kite for Junior, before going home to a condominium overlooking the marina to watch the evening news.* »

In the case of Québec, these different approaches have all come and gone. They left traces on the urban landscape and holes in the public budgets. Tens of millions of dollars of Canadian taxpayer's money were spent with the most recent fad, the *Festival marketplace*. On top of that, when in 1986 the Federal government wanted out of the waterfront business, some land was sold to a private entrepreneur and a huge aluminum building went up between the historic quarter and the water. It now sits right in the middle of one of the most beautiful urban panoramas in the world.

People started asking questions. Eventually, a Coalition for the Preservation of the Old Port was born, representing about 75 citizen's organisations, and the Government was asked to stop any further development pending a set of public hearings. Plans for more hotels and condominiums at the water's edge were stopped in their tracks.

### **The Federal Consultative Committee for the Future of Pointe-à-Carcy**

The Canadian Federal authorities then put together a Consultative Committee for the Future of Pointe-à-Carcy (the *Pointe* is the strategic centre of the Old Port). The Committee held public hearings, listened to what everyone had to say and then came out with an excellent, landmark report.

The Committee came close to put forward a fourth approach: caution is now the key word. To quote the members: « *What should be done? Nothing, may be the first reply that comes to mind, given the cost of past mistakes and all the risks inherent in almost all the projects submitted. In any case, it should be nothing that interfere with port activities, restrict public access or detract from the site's heritage buildings* ».

Some of the Report's guiding principles are worth mentioning here:

- The Old Port should remain a public area;
- The Pointe-à-Carcy is a seaport and this function should predominate;

- An unobstructed view from the River to the city and from the city to the river must be maintained;
- The economic profitability of the Old Port depends on a collection of factors that cannot be reduced simply to its market value or tax yield ».

That gives you an idea of what is increasingly perceived, by many in Québec, as common sense. In the case of the Montréal waterfront, the general outlook is not that different. We also follow closely the excellent work being done in the City of Toronto, in the Canadian Province of Ontario, by a very good team put together by the Hon. David Crombie, Commissioner of a *Royal Commission on the Future of Toronto Waterfront*. The documents which they put out – a real gold mine as far as relationships between City, Water and Port are concerned – are available in English and in French.

The very latest development on the Quebec City waterfront is a proposal by the Canadian Ministry of Defense to establish a school for military recruits right in the sector that has become a public park, literally on the wharf, by the water's edge. This project is generating much public debate, especially since nobody has given any thoughts to the present and future needs of our growing cruise industry, or even knows how much money could be generated by the commercial use of the wharf in question. The army proposal is quite strange since there is across the street plenty of good floor space available in historic buildings. My personal view is that when the economics of our overnight and day-cruise industry become better known, more attention will be given to fostering its growth, eventually by re-arranging the wharves to make them more suitable for passenger traffic, and maybe even recreating a much-needed basin right in front of the Old City.

### **City and port: can we improve?**

In Québec, an important port city, some urban planning presently going on seems to have as a goal to get rid of the port functions. Over the years, there was never a high level of coordination between port, waterfront and city officials: the three organisations kept quite separate, with predictable results. That's why we welcome the ideas and outlook promoted by the French *International Association of Cities and Ports*.

New ideas, and new ways to make people talk to each other, at least in the same city, must be found if we don't want to repeat the mistakes of the past.

Léonce Naud

Geographer

Québec, Canada