

**SOME QUÉBEC EXPERIENCES IN THE
REDEVELOPMENT OF URBAN WATERFRONTS**

WATER WORKS

A WORKSHOP ON GREAT LAKES WATERFRONT DEVELOPMENT

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SOME QUÉBEC EXPERIENCES IN THE REDEVELOPMENT OF URBAN WATERFRONTS

I was asked to say a few words about Québec experiences in urban waterfront redevelopment, and here I am, with some informations that I hope will prove useful, even in quite different urban contexts.

What has happened in Québec in recent years is quite interesting, if only for the mistakes that were made... or that we did not have the time or the money to make. In Canada, and in Québec, most of the talk about waterfronts centers around the so-called *Old Ports*, sectors where commercial shipping has diminished or left entirely.

In Canada such lands are most of the time Federal lands, since the ports themselves are owned and operated by the Federal government. What it means is that cities and Provinces have no real power to tell Ottawa what they would like to see on those lands. This is rather strange, since municipalities and urban affairs generally fall under Provincial jurisdiction. What happens is that, instead of being returned to the Provinces or municipalities as they normally should be, those more or less vacant waterfront properties are perceived as golden opportunities to build showcases of Federal government know-how in urban planning. The assumption being that the more you will impress the local folks, the more likely they are to vote for you next time around.

In Québec, we had two excellent examples of what happens when we choose : 1) One « *I-tell-you-from-above* » approach; 2) A consultative approach.

The first of these policies was applied in Québec City, where the Old Port, located between the historic City and the River, was paved and built-over in a rush of near-panic in the years 1982-1984, because we had all those tall ships coming in the summer of 1984 and the place had to be ready on time. The second of these policies is now being applied in Montréal, where a succession of setbacks provided enough time for citizens to get organized and catch up with more development-minded interests.

I will say only a few words about the Old Port redevelopment in Québec City. At the beginning, 42 millions dollars were slated for the project, which ended up costing well over 100 millions. Second, the original plan which emphasised public places and parks was discreetly discarded and gave way to more buildings and concrete and steel structures. Third, the whole place was built in a very futuristic fashion right besides *Place Royale*, which is rather 17th century looking.

A local newspaper could write after the fact that the Québec waterfront « is a disaster of urban planning, conceived in secrecy and executed in a hurry. A mix of Lego blocks and Meccano beams, the place runs contrary to the urban scene in the downtown and historic sector » (Le Soleil, Québec City, Feb. 4, 1986).

Here, I would not like to leave the impression that everything that was done with the old waterfront in Quebec City should be wiped out. I would rather say that it is much simpler to change your mind when your ideas are not already cast in concrete.

As for the Montréal waterfront, we came very close to get our own version of Toronto's *Harbourfront*. However, in Montréal, even if the first round of public hearings held in 1978 showed that most people wanted a low-key approach with lots of open spaces, about a dozen engineering and urban designers consulting firms were paid close to 30 millions dollars over the years to come up with development plans. All of those plans have eventually been shelved. According to Mark London, Executive Director of a citizen's group called « Heritage Montréal » : « They ignored everything the public had called for and put together grand schemes of condominiums, shopping centres and multi-million dollar complexes. And now we have come full circle. » (Montreal Gazette, Oct. 5, 1985).

In fact, the most recent consultative committee reported that it had received the best advice yet during the public hearings from ordinary citizens, for free. Montrealers had one loud and clear message : ***no grandiose mega-projects***. For example, local businessmen argued that the waterfront should remain a public space than enhances Old Montréal, not a commercial monstrosity that would swallow up neighboring merchants and shopkeepers. The final report of the Committee makes for very interesting reading for whoever is involved in the waterfront business. And, last but not the least, it has been endorsed at the political level in Ottawa and brought a consensus from practically all interests involved in Montréal.

Regional tourism promotion using waterfront attractions

I have to say that in Québec, we have not gone very far up to now to promote regionally our waterfronts or riverfronts as such. We are still at the inventory stage, but we know that if we add up everything that exists from Anticosti Island to the Ontario border, the result is quite impressive.

There is a renewed interest, however, to promote the St. Lawrence River as such, with emphasis on special attractions along its shores : waterfronts, historic villages, restaurants and so forth. Eventually cruises should come back on the River using the very attractions that I have talked about.

As far as inter-regional promotion of water-based tourism is concerned, you may be interested to know that quite soon we will get a map designed to illustrate the tourism potential along the entire length of the Great Lakes St. Lawrence System. Produced in the U.S., equally paid for by the Great Lakes States, Ontario and Québec, this map is the brainchild of the *Great Lakes St. Lawrence Maritime Forum*. We have here the seeds of cooperation between the U.S. Great Lakes States, Ontario and Québec, with a goal of promoting the asset that we all have in common : the waters of the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River.