Québec : Urban Redevelopment, Maritime Potential and Historical City Centre

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by Léonce Naud [1]

> *"A maritime city founded on a wide estuary and a safe promontory. An ocean city: when the seas are high and the water smashes furiously against the quays of Lower Town the saline breeze coming from the distant ocean can sometimes be felt, like a call from ancestral Brittany."*
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> Jean Cimon

Time allows for only a brief résumé of the recent urban evolution of Québec City's maritime waterfront over the last generation or so. However, this particular case of urban planning has relevance for other waterfront cities, especially historic centres with local character. The sector that I will be talking about extends from the Naval Reserve School on the Louise Basin (Wharf No. 19) to the urban shoreline in front of Place Royale, right below the Chateau Frontenac.

This is – or rather was – the old historic waterfront of Québec, one of the most history-laden urban/maritime interface in North America. Part of it was included with the rest of the Old Quarter when UNESCO drew a line around the walled City and declared it to be an official World Heritage Site (1985). This international recognition was not without consequences on local urban planning, since it gradually changed the perception that the inhabitants of Québec have of the Old City.

Inspired by *Daytona Beach*...within a World Heritage Site of UNESCO

About fifty years ago, most commercial ships grew so much in size that in hundreds of cities around the world, traditional port areas became more or less obsolete and devoid of maritime activity. This was the case in front of Old Québec: disused warehouses, buildings in disrepair, old railway lines, etc. Suddenly declared *old* in the sense of *dead*, the historical port sector was in for an interesting urban experience.

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Briefly, the contemporary history of this area can be summed up as an attempt at converting it into a purely urban area, the River then serving only as a faire-valoir for real estate developers. In short, we foisted a standardized modern-style waterfront onto this old French city on the banks of the Saint Lawrence. In the process, real estate interests took over precious port space that should have been jealously kept for unimpeded use by ships of all sizes and people of all persuasion.

This is presently succeeded by a trend in the opposite direction, which brings back commercial maritime commerce – cruise operations of all sorts, that is – in front of the Old City, all this while the local citizenry and the tourists discover the charm of having some kind of access and use of their city's waterfront.

At the beginning of the Seventies, the Canadian federal government, coming to grips with the problem of abandoned port areas, undertook ambitious projects for urban development in several cities throughout the country, in particular in Toronto, Montréal and Québec. A new Ministry of Urban Affairs (now long dead), made known its intention to assume from that time on leadership in matters of urban planning, a domaine which had been until then the exclusive responsibility of cities and provinces.

Action soon followed through a new type of state organization in charge of local management, a *Corporation for Urban Development*. The mandate of that Land Corporation was very similar to that of the very same type of organizations being created for the same purposes at the same time in Great Britain by the Thatcher administration. The similarity of philosophy and behaviour and of the results obtained is startling to anyone familiar with the recent history of Québec City's waterfront. This is certainly an interesting case of post-colonial influence.

In the beginning, there was much excitement and a feeling of adventure over the space and power suddenly entrusted to the new team. Real estate development right on the water was said to be a "*guarantee of all architectural philosophy in the twilight of the twentieth century*", according to an official document of the Canadian government. After a while, it became clear for all to see that the master plan got more inspiration from *Daytona Beach* than from anywhere in France or in Québec, which was rather odd within a World Heritage Site of UNESCO.

Québec and Dubrovnik

Urbanistically speaking, Old Québec can be rightly compared to the old fortified city of Dubrovnik in former Yugoslavia on the Adriatic sea: an fortress city commanding a water route. Then the fundamental question: should real estate developers be allowed to build an esplanade meant to support high-tech or high-rise modern buildings between the ancient quarter and the sea...or the river? It is common that cities extend their built-up areas at the expense of their adjacent waters. Québec has been doing this for centuries.

However, one wonders whether erecting a wall of so-called *international style* buildings between the Old City and the River is desirable nowadays, even from the point of view of short term economic development. The present geography of the area, in fact, allows for the docking of modern cruise ships less than one hundred meters from the old stone houses, and the city is by far the main attraction on the cruise circuit between New York and Montréal.

Could we have maintained in front of the Old Québec the same type of wharves and port facilities that had made the exploitation of the maritime milieu possible in the past decades? I suggest that the heritage that should have been preserved and given a new life was not made of wood or stone, but was in fact the maritime and port character of the site. Real estate as such remains foreign to the ever-changing and mobile character of a port, where everything and everyone are in a state of constant evolution (in a living port, that is... but not in a *dead* or *old* port).

A return to the original vocation of the site

In around 1988, the future of the waterfront bordering Old Québec seemed to have already been cast in concrete: privatization of the site, hundreds of condominiums to be built right on the quays, restriction of access for the public at large, in fact a total turnabout from the normal character and purposes of a port. In 1989, after repeated public demands, the Federal government set up an *Advisory Committee* with the mandate of assessing the whole situation.

The Recommendations of the Committee cleanly wiped out the real estate first philosophy that had been guiding the Land Corporation for a decade. Six most important guidelines were laid up:

1.   The area must remain accessible to the public.

2.   The area is a maritime port and this function must prevail.

3.   Any restoration work must respect the historical character of the site.

4.   Views to and from the City must be preserved.

5.   Any new project must harmonize with the natural and urban environment.

6.   The economic profitability of the site relies on a number of factors that cannot always be reduced to its market or tax value.

Since that time we in Québec have been witnessing a gradual but steady return of the maritime character right in front of the Old Quarter. The waterfront is today slowly rediscovering its normal port functions, precisely those activities which were supposed to have disappeared forever in front of Old Québec. Every year, hundreds of thousands of

passengers from local or international cruise operations embark or disembark from that small area. The site is no longer an *old* port (meaning a *dead* port), but a normal, living port.

The future ?

Since a generation, the old European city founded almost four hundreds years ago by the French geographer Samuel de Champlain has seen its urban/water or city/port interface evolve in a sense that finds its philosophical and ethical source in certain questionable (and often questioned) so-called American-style waterfronts. We are now slowly recovering our senses and having second thoughts about the wisdom of building condominiums, hotels and the like right on the wharves, while common sense would say that urban development has to give priority to the maritime users and clients of the port and to the public at large, this for the best collective benefits.

The history of Québec abounds in curious twists. A little more than a hundred years ago, Québec underwent a first *progress crisis* (Duval). The gates that gave access to the inner city were pulled down, old walls were demolished, since modern artillery could reduce all this mineral architecture including its residents to smittherens by then. A breath of fresh air finally rejuvenated the Old City! Such developments, however, gave a raison d'être to resolute opponents.

When public opinion, initially astonished, then mollified, changed its outlook and finally sided against that so-called commercial progress, the Middle Ages invaded the place: diagonal ribs, barbacanes, machicolations, and a whole range of hardware that had never existed before in Québec now appeared. One writer – Faucher de Saint-Maurice – protested: "*In passing along these ramparts, one no longer dreams of the Count of Frontenac or of General Montcalm. One will think of Chevalier Bayard and Du Guesclin!*"

Let us conclude with French sociologist Jacques Derrida in Generations of a City:

"*The catastrophe for a city plan is to want to resolve all the problems in the span of one generation without allowing time or space to future generations, precisely because architects and urban planners believe they possess advance knowledge of how tomorrow should be...*"