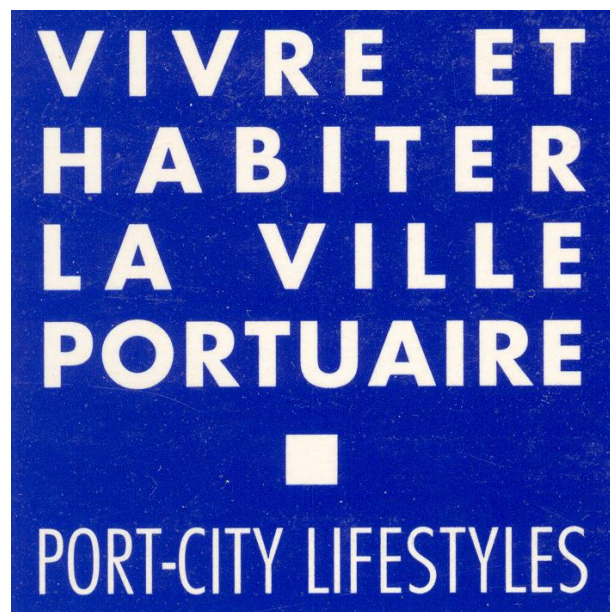


**QUEBEC: URBAN REDEVELOPMENT,  
HISTORICAL CITY CENTRE AND  
MARITIME POTENTIAL**



**Léonce NAUD, Geographer**

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Charles Dickens in 1852

*"The impression made upon the visitor by this Gibraltar of America – its giddy heights; its citadel suspended, as it were, in the air; its picturesque steep streets and frowning gateways; and the splendid views which burst upon the eye at every turn – is at once unique and lasting. It is a place not to be forgotten or mixed up in the mind with other places. It is mainly in the prospect from the site of the Old Government House, and from the Citadel, that it's surpassing beauty lies."*

Charles Dickens  
*American Notes for General Circulation*  
Piccadilly, England, MDCCCL

## QUEBEC, PORT CITY (1608-1970)

*"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."*

Jean Cimon

Quebec, fortified port city, whose strategic position used to command access to North-East America, was founded on a narrowing stretch of the Saint Lawrence River almost four hundred years ago by a French geographer, Samuel de Champlain (1567-1635), a native of Brouages in the Charente-Maritime region of France. In the beginning, Quebec was simply a fortified colonial outpost situated right on the waterfront. At that time, the river bank followed the contours of an imposing cliff, Diamond Cape, at the top of which a citadel is now perched. As was the case elsewhere, this type of architecture attracted invasion. Up until the present time, our ramparts have successfully withstood only the assaults of tourists.

The extension of *terra firma* in front of Old Quebec is the result, therefore, of successive land reclamation projects and seawalls built over the course of the last four hundred years, with the aim of enlarging the land base of the Lower Town as well as increasing the capacity of its port facilities. There were geographical and commercial reasons, of course, but also military ones: the first quays were used as platforms for cannons (Royal and Dauphine batteries).

In 1760, Quebec changed its corporate banner: England's conquest of the city marked its sovereignty over the New World. Relieved of the French threat, the Anglo-American settlers, hitherto discontented, became insurrectionary: 1776 marked the birth of the Republic under the Star-Spangled Banner. The Duke of Choiseul, showing more astuteness than His Majesty's ministers, had predicted this outcome exactly. From that moment on, Quebec's architectural evolution – and that of her port – was to share the fortunes and setbacks of the British Empire.

During the nineteenth century, the port and quays of Quebec expanded considerably... thanks to Napoleon. In fact, England, deprived by the Continental System of its habitual sources of carpentry wood from the Baltic, turned towards Canada which subsequently became the country's biggest supplier. In 1830, the port of Quebec was the third most important in North America: the Empire had some good! During the navigation season, the city lived in the tumult usual in port cities... and the quays expanded in all directions. In fact, port activities spread into the River and the Saint Charles estuary with urban development close on its heels.

In about 1875, while the port was undergoing the initial throes of a protracted commercial decline, the Harbour Commission nevertheless carried out some enormous construction projects for the building of infrastructures: docks, quays, locks and warehouses. Princess Louise of England inaugurated these new constructions in 1881 and gave her name to a new basin which became over the years the Louise Basin.

During the first half of the twentieth century, the export of cereals from Canada maintained a measure of activity on the waterfront of Old Quebec. This did not prevent general transshipment activities from gradually shifting downstream and upstream from the Old City.



**Quebec in the Thirties**

At the beginning of the present century, there were some who seriously entertained the notion of tearing down the Place Royale – today an important tourist attraction and architectural monument – to replace it with a railway yard, then they considered expropriating and demolishing the district of Cap-Blanc, a "*village a mile and a half long by thirty-five feet wide*" to allow railway access to the central part of the port. However, it was eventually decided that this site was a bit too narrow...

In fact, in the city centre, Quebec does not have wide stretches of open land or the flat surfaces necessary for modern port activities. The site is certainly attractive looking but almost completely built up and unsuitable for wholesale storage depots or transshipment activities and it represents, furthermore, a cul-de-sac for road transport. During the Fifties, the traditional sector of the port became, therefore, an almost deserted area: old railway lines and disused warehouses, buildings abandoned and in disrepair, the Louise Basin more than half filled in. The area, hardly ever frequented, was to all intents and purposes almost abandoned.

## DREAMS AND REALITY (1970-1990)

*"Another example, that of the Old Port: this is a city neighbourhood and no one had anything to say about it. It was left to outsiders to decide what was going to happen in a neighbourhood of the city. There was no rhyme or reason to it."*

Jean Pelletier, Mayor of Quebec (1985)

Briefly, the contemporary history of the port sector in front of Old Quebec can be summed up as an attempt to convert port lands into an urban area, punctuated with studies and projects, most of which were never followed up, while others regularly led their promoters into bankruptcy. Much money and effort was invested and this had beneficial effects. Nevertheless, we now must examine the fundamental philosophy and methods adopted for these projects.

In Canada, real estate management in the main ports is the responsibility of the national (or Federal) government and not of the Provinces, the municipalities or the private sector. This is the case in Quebec. At the beginning of the Seventies, in a programme that in retrospect looks extremely *avant-garde*, the Canadian Government – coming to grips with abandoned waterside areas and/or derelict port sites – undertook ambitious projects for urban development in several cities throughout the country, in particular in Toronto, Montreal and Quebec. A new Federal Ministry for Urban Affairs, now defunct, made known its intention to assume from that time on the leadership in matters of urban redevelopment, a domain of jurisdiction which had hitherto been the responsibility of the Provinces. The Government of Quebec, the City, the Port authorities, the maritime interests and the general public were to all intents and purposes excluded from the fundamental planning and subsequently from the reconstruction of the historical port sector of Quebec.

How did this come about? In 1981, in order to attain its objectives, the Canadian government created a new type of state organization in charge of local management, a *Corporation for Urban Development*. Thirty-three hectares of derelict port lands were removed from the Port's jurisdiction and handed over to the new organization which, in Quebec, took the name of "*Canada Lands Corporation – Old Port of Quebec*". Suddenly declared *old*, in the sense of outdated or obsolete, the historical port sector was in for an interesting urban experience.

### Just like England

As an eloquent testimony to the quality of cooperation between England and Canada, the mandate of the Land Corporation set up in Quebec was similar to that of the same organizations created contemporaneously in Great Britain by the Thatcher Government, they themselves being inspired by former American experiences. The

similarity of behaviour and of the results obtained is startling to anyone familiar with the recent history of the redevelopment of Quebec's old port. I am taking my lead here from the excellent portrait of the situation provided by Emmanuelle Patte in an article about the lessons to be learned from the redevelopment of the Docklands in Great Britain.

"In order to carry out their mission effectively, these urban development corporations were conceived as single-minded organizations, striving towards a single goal, that of regenerating these problematical urban areas, abandoned port sites and disused industrial zones.

"Priority was given to the physical revamping of the sites, with a view to augmenting their commercial value, and to the building of those infrastructures necessary to accommodate a change in function, rather than to social criteria. These measures were aimed at attracting investors and developers to the sites. The conservative government decided to forge ahead bravely, and even to accelerate the change of function on the sites, brooking no procrastination due to nostalgic scruples.

"The main aim of the corporations was to revitalize desolate neighbourhoods, to resuscitate the economy there, but also to prove the validity of the Conservative Party's ideals and of the nascent 'Thatcherism': free enterprise and 'organic' growth linked to a market economy. (...)

"There was no question of delaying work to consult the local authorities or the inhabitants – why else would the corporation have been formed? The way in which this was done was indeed questionable – the lack of consideration for the local community, for social and environmental problems, for city planning or the function of the port – but done it was, nevertheless."

The author notes that, in the case of London, disposing of £ 1.3bn of subsidies, "*no new building of any importance with a social or civic function was built*". This philosophy of intervention so correctly described by Emmanuelle Patte to have been the case in British port cities, describes exactly what happened, in appropriate perspective, to the historic waterfront of Quebec. 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, just as there had been in London. In a "*purified modernism tinted with history*", one could see "*beyond the vacant lots and the few historical landmarks, a site ready for construction*." Real estate development of the old section of Quebec's port became nothing less than "*the guarantor of all architectural philosophy in the twilight of the twentieth century*", according to an official document issued by the Canadian government itself.

However, ten years later, the same site evoked for the visitor an *"abandoned launching pad... futuristic delirium of inter block addicts... a landing runway for real estate developers... luxury condominiums which only lack the plastic plants and palms"*, in fact, *"Daytona Beach right next door to a World Heritage site"* (Bourque). In the meantime, tens of millions of dollars had vanished into thin air in projects such as a *Festival Market* which met with the same fate as many other similar ventures in North America: a resounding bankruptcy.

François Grether, in *Fluvial Ports and Urban Transformation*, remarks that *"positioned at the junction of two essential collective possessions, urban shores cannot be built up, and therefore privatized, as was done in London or in the same way as the marinas, without alienating them from the use of the general public"* (Cities and Ports Conference, Le Havre, 1988).

This type of real estate development was carried out on a site situated between the Old City and the River, rather as if, in Dubrovnik, it had been decided to enclose the old fortified city by an esplanade supporting high-tech buildings between the ancient citadel and the Adriatic. Cities often extend their built-up areas at the expense of their adjacent waters. Quebec, a historical city recognized as such by UNESCO, has been doing this for centuries. However, one wonders whether erecting a curtain of international style buildings between the historic city and the River is desirable nowadays, even from the point of view of economic advantage in the short term. The present geography of the area, in fact, allows for the docking of modern cruise ships of ever more imposing dimensions not seventy-five metres from the urban area, and Old Quebec is the main attraction of the cruise circuit between New York and Montreal.

In 1970, an important study, the *"General Concept in the Redevelopment of Old Quebec"*, established that *"the charm of the city comes above all from its proximity with the waterfront that, since time immemorial, has made of the lower city a maritime neighbourhood. (...) It is essential to re-establish physical contact with the river."* (Article 4.2)

### **Two distinct schools of thought: American and European**

The historian André Duval, in his work *"Québec romantique"*, analysed with perspicacity the evolution of urban development in Quebec in this latter half of the twentieth century. His remarks are important for anyone wishing to understand the philosophical and ethical foundations that have underlain the evolution of Quebec's waterfront:

*"Quebec is a city different from all others. Or, rather, let us say that it was a city different from all others. Because, at the end of the twentieth century, circumstances moving in the direction of standardization are leading willy-nilly not only towards a form of urban development that takes its cue from the rest of America regarding its expansion, but also towards a type of urban*

*personality that makes its previous one feel definitely archaic. In the year 2000, these traces of a European character will no longer be in evidence in the city... It will have completely abandoned Europe and will have definitely passed over to the American camp."*

Have we foisted a standardized American-style waterfront onto the old French city on the banks of the St. Lawrence over the last twenty years?

The answer may well be found in the following analysis from the President of the Autonomous Port of Genoa, Mr. Rinaldo Enea Magnani, who distinguishes two distinct schools of thought in worldwide projects for waterfronts rejuvenation:

*"The case of London and of Marseilles well illustrates two extremes of urban-economic concepts of the work to be done when confronted with a similar problem. We can almost say that these two European cases (which are not the only ones, and are only used as examples here) allow us to identify two schools of thought: the Anglo-Saxon and the Continental-European.*

*The Anglo-Saxon school calls any aquatic bank – river, lake or sea – a waterfront and, considering the scanty urban and architectural heritage they usually have to protect (this is particularly true in the United States and in Canada), tends to propose solutions for the regeneration of the waterfronts that are almost exclusively based on real estate development (...)."*

*"It is certain that the pragmatic-economic approach of the Anglo-Saxons, coupled with a stronger sense of individualism and of a business world partly estranged from the world of Latin origin, plays an important role here.*

*"With the exception of certain cases where the ports have retained some vestiges of their historical background, the North American solutions only propose built-up areas for residential purposes, office premises, restaurants, yachting marina, etc.(...)*

***An American solution cannot be applied in a European context; the historical port only exists in Europe."* (Emphasis added)**

Did a historical port exist in Quebec up until the beginning of the Eighties? The answer is yes, unequivocally.

In 1978, according to the Canadian government itself: *"The sector of the Old Port, an artificial extension of the lower city, is creeping over the historical neighbourhood of Old Quebec. It envelopes part of it, in fact... This particularity confers on the sector of the Old Port an important role of protection and cooperation, subordinating its rehabilitation to historical norms."* (Parks Canada, *Le Vieux-Port de Québec*, 1978)



Before UNESCO declared the historical neighbourhood of Quebec a World Heritage Site (30th December, 1985), the international organization ICOMOS had stated that *"the historical neighbourhood of Quebec, a coherent urban conglomeration including the Citadel, the Upper City defended by a bastioned enclosure, the Lower City, its port and its ancient neighbourhoods, offers an outstanding example – easily the most complete in North America – of a fortified colonial city."*

Was it conceivable to protect as such the port facilities that had made the exploitation and utilization of the maritime milieu possible in the past? Their state of disrepair carried the germ of their disappearance. Furthermore, it is startling to note that, fifteen years after having been reconstructed identically, certain quays now in disuse around the Louise Basin have become a barrier that prevents the public from gaining access to the water for purposes such as swimming or the renting of modest craft for pleasure boating.

Although the *Commission des biens culturels* – a Quebec Government body – noted in 1983 that *"in the case of the restoration and enhancement of certain ports by the Government... it seems that no organization has shown any respect for maritime heritage during the carrying out of these operations"*, I suggest that the heritage that should have been preserved was not primarily the wood or stone as such, but the maritime and port character of the site. Real estate remains foreign to the ceaselessly changing and mobile character of a port, where everything and everyone are in a state of constant evolution.

### **A return to the original character of the site (1990-1994)**

*"The Port of Quebec was at the origin of this urban sector, it contributed to its development and intends to remain a privileged party in its future development"*.

Port of Quebec (1991)

In around 1988, the whole future of the waterfront bordering Old Quebec seemed to have already been cast in concrete: privatization of the site, construction of condominiums of the quays, restriction of public access reduced to the only right of being able to stroll along the quays under the balconies of flats – in fact, a total estrangement from the typical character and purposes of a port. In 1989, after repeated public demands mainly through a *Coalition for the protection of the Old Port* comprising some seventy-five groups or organizations, the Canadian government set up an Advisory Committee charged with assessing the future possibilities of the area and making its findings public.

### **A landmark Report**

The Report of the Advisory Committee took exactly the opposite view to the basic philosophy hitherto imposed in Quebec by the Federal Land Corporation. It matched the public sentiment admirably as was consistent as well with the point of view of several independent experts.

Six directing principles were retained:

- 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 and enhance its architectural heritage.
- 4- The freedom of visual field in the direction of the river and of the city must be protected.
- 5- Any new building project must harmonize with the pre-existing natural and urban environment.
- 6- The economic profitability of the site relies on a number of factors that cannot always be simply reduced to its market or tax value."

The Committee expressly recommended not doing anything that could obstruct or interfere with the port's activities, render the site less accessible to the public or detract from the site's heritage buildings. Above all, it was necessary to avoid obstructing the unique panorama that casual strollers could enjoy.

In a fundamental remark, the Committee deplored the fact that in Quebec, on the waterfront, **"it is as if the real estate lobby has hijacked the very notion of development and no other concepts of land use exist."** It is only gradually – and at the price of constant efforts on the part of groups of citizens and natural regional leaders – that these concepts are influencing decisions concerning the waterfront. A very tangible reality, however, provokes reflection: the return of maritime commerce right in front of the Old City.

### **Return of maritime operations in front of the city**

Speaking at the Third International Conference on Cities and Ports that took place in Genoa in 1991, Professor Jacques Charlier, from the University of Louvain-la-Neuve, developed an interesting theory:

*"The thesis I am going to develop runs counter to the most widespread current thinking that envisages the old docks of past centuries, or in fact of the beginning of this century, as a new urban frontier. I wish to stress that the decline in these port facilities, inherited from an often prestigious past, is not necessarily ineluctable and that, before adopting the extreme and irreversible measure of turning them into Fishneylands or dockominiums, it should be considered whether it would not be possible to give them a new breath of port air. The urban requalification of an ancient port infrastructure should only intervene after all possibilities of regenerating the maritime function have been exhausted".*

Otherwise, adds Professor Charlier, “*port interests are sacrificed to those of the city, which only too often is translated to mean that private interests prevail over those of the collectivity.*”

In Quebec, after an urban interval of about twenty years, we are now witnessing a return of the maritime character to the historical city centre. The waterfront of the old city, having been submitted prematurely to an effort at urban requalification during the Seventies, is today on the road towards a gradual *re-maritimization*. Port functions that were believed to have disappeared forever are being rejuvenated. The site is no longer an *old* port (meaning a *dead* port) but a normal, living port.

Already, more than a million passengers from micro-cruises (river crossings), excursions or international cruises embark or disembark annually in front of Old Quebec, in that exiguous space that extends between the Place Royale and the Louise Basin. Several Quebec ship owners are looking at a new tourist product: excursion cruises whose economic importance is still relatively unknown but which probably already surpasses that of the international cruises.

The North American cruise industry is tripling in volume every three years. In Quebec, there is also a regional fluvial tourism that is increasing rapidly, thanks to the enterprising spirit of our ship owners and of the quality of a panorama internationally recognized and appreciated. The long-lasting as well as phenomenal flourishing of the cruise industry in North America, the beauty of the fluvial landscape, the European cachet of Quebec and the renewal of interest in fishing cruises to add to the others already offered, makes the exploitation of a new and important tourist niche possible, provided that the port infrastructures are adapted to the new needs of this industry and that the urban development of the city gives priority to the maritime users of the port.

In essence if not by definition, maritime ports are part of those human activities subjected to a strong constraint of place. It is the permanence of the *transport function* (maritime or fluvial), or more generally of the port's vocation, that should constitute the fundamental criterion of management. Utilization and redevelopment of port lands must be subordinated to this criterion if we intend to preserve their full utilizable value for the collectivity. The very existence of the ports, whose installation can only be effected at great expense in suitably propitious sites that exist in limited number, presupposes that they have been sufficiently protected by their nature against investments of circumstance. (Giraud)

Quebec is proof that it is presumptuous to expect, after only a few years of observation, to make a definitive judgement on the uselessness of some or other port space. Already, in front of the Old City, a number of port or fluvial operations are short of space or will certainly be prevented from developing, handicapped as they are by the lack of port lands too hastily dismissed as being superfluous.

### **The quays are not what they used to be**

When we look closely at the changes that were brought to the quays of Old Quebec over the last hundred years, we can see that small and medium sized vessels have gradually but inexorably lost their docking facilities in front of the historic city. Recently, a vast esplanade was built in front of Old Quebec with the purpose of building condominiums, offices and the like. All of these developments shared a common denominator, that of not having any port or maritime function. The only maritime basin existing on the site, the *Custom's Wharf*, was filled in.

The local ship owners who own vessels of modest size find no advantages in the new quays which were designed more for providing a platform for an urban neighbourhood than for the docking of small-sized or regional passenger carriers. In spite of the fact that these infrastructures were not conceived or designed for this type of maritime commerce and are, in fact, rather an obstacle to its development, the regional cruise and boat excursion industry is already generating millions of dollars of annual turnover directly or indirectly. The increase of this source of revenue must be favoured by more appropriate port installations and an aggressive marketing strategy.

### **Any redevelopment plan for Quebec's waterfront should first examine some issues of importance**

- Are the present quays well suited to the present and future needs of a local and regional cruise industry in constant expansion?
- . What about road and pedestrian access to the quays, traffic fluidity and parking facilities, bearing in mind the constant increase in passenger traffic?
- . At the critical moment of arrival in Quebec after a long time at sea, do the visitors have visual and physical access to historic Old Quebec?
- . Are our cruise boats – that are themselves their own best advertising billboards – hidden from the view of potential clients by buildings without any port function, quays that are too high or the absence of floating pontoons of adequate dimensions?
- . What would be the economics if a large maritime basin was to come into being right in front of the Old City?
- . Do the vehicles that transport passengers or merchandises to cruise ships have easy access to the quays?
- . Would our ship owners appreciate having their operations in full view of the public, in a large basin accessible on all sides by efficient means of transportation

as well as by the population in general? *Let's remember that the number one rule in advertising is to show the product.*

. Taking the example of Great Lakes port cities, should we prepare for the advent of fishing cruises on the River...and appropriate docking facilities?

. Is the shape of the quays attractive to the crowds that frequent the place, in particular from the aesthetic point of view, but also from that of security, access and use of the River: inclined planes, low tide quays, steps, physical use of the waters?

. Are there services for the general public on the site: shelters, toilets, tables, benches, light snacks and refreshments?

. Should we consider lighting of the quays and of some port infrastructures, for example the walls of the citadel?

Everything points to the fact that it is in our best interests to ask ourselves whether the quays as they are today favours or inhibits the new maritime commerce that is taking hold in front of the city, in order to prepare for the necessary evolution of our port facilities to respond to the constant growth of local and regional maritime tourism, both fluvial and oceanic.

This question should be debated *before* considering any other project whatsoever, in order to avoid the repetition of an error such as the building of the Naval Reserve School, where a commercial quay is removed from service – which was that of the loading or unloading of merchandise or passengers – to be given over to pedagogical ends.

## **Conclusion**

Since a generation, the old European city founded four hundred years ago by the Frenchman Samuel de Champlain has seen its urban seaboard evolve in a sense that finds its philosophical and ethical source in certain North American examples of rather questionable, and often questioned, waterfronts. However, America is large and other examples – this time admirable – could have served as inspiration.

For more than a hundred years, the State of Illinois has jealously protected the urban shores of Chicago, a city that does not lack private entrepreneurs capable of exploiting for private use the vast waterfront areas which the population is now able to enjoy. Also, the extraordinary effort expended in Toronto, Canada, to improve the city's coastal areas, safeguarding them for the public's use and enjoyment, could act as inspiration for Quebec, capital city of a neighbouring province.

Strangely, the Canadian government is applying in Montreal, in the same province of Quebec, principles diametrically opposed to those it apparently finds suitable for Old Quebec's waterfront, of which it is practically the sole owner and manager.

What about the future? The history of Quebec abounds in curious twists. A little more than a hundred years ago, Quebec underwent a first "*progress crisis*" (Duval). The gates that gave access to the fortified city were dismantled, some ancient city walls were demolished, Krupp cannons being able of reducing all that mineral architecture, including its residents, to smithereens by then. A breath of fresh air finally penetrated the Old City!

Such gestures, however, conjured up resolute opponents. When public opinion, initially astonished, then mollified, changed its tack and disowned the theory of pure and hard commercial progress, the Middle Ages invaded the city: diagonal ribs, crenelations, machicolations, barbicanes, and a whole range of hardware that had never existed before in Quebec, now appeared. The writer Faucher de Saint-Maurice protested: "*In passing along these ramparts, one no longer dreams of the Count of Frontenac and of General Montcalm. One dreams of Bayard and Du Guesclin!*"

If the past can suggest to us ideas for the future, it is difficult not to agree with the French philosopher Jacques Derrida in "Génération d'une ville":

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

