

Hot time in the 'Old Town' tonight

If it were a warm free-wheeling summer evening and you were in Montreal, just slightly broke, where would you go to have a guaranteed good-time? to watch people, listen to street musicians and play art critic? To Old Montreal, of course. Now put yourself in the same position, but in Halifax and in 1975. With the completion of an innovative "redevelopment" scheme now in progress on the waterfront, Haligonians will have a similar "streetscape" — Old Halifax. Phase II of the Durham Leaseholds Project, a scheme comprising historic restoration and commercial enterprise will preserve a significant part of our heritage: the architecture and character of the thriving 19th C. port that Halifax once was.

Historic Properties Ltd., a private firm, is financing and carrying out the project. It involves two phases of restoration/construction. Phase I deals with the restoration of buildings on Granville St. north of Duke St., as well as segments of Hollis and Upper Water Sts. Problems have arisen over several buildings of historical significance which are owned by Halifax Developments Ltd. Three have recently been torn down to pave the way for two hi-rise towers. This will contrast greatly with the "feel" of the surrounding three blocks which will be restored and revitalized by Historic Properties Ltd. The Granville St. area itself has an interesting history — it was the seat of Halifax's first commercial shopping district. Elaborate storefronts, imported iron plating and intricate interior plaster work all attest to the Victorian nature of the architecture. Most of the stores were constructed after the 1859 fire that razed several downtown blocks.

Phase II of the project involves the waterfront buildings north of the Law courts. When completed it will include a thirty room inn and apartment complex, at least one pub and several "period dining establishments. A 19th C. courtyard will encompass boutiques and will serve as the new home for several private firms and businesses. It will cost \$3 million dollars for this phase of the project and will be shared in part by the Dept. of Indian Northern Affairs and Northern Developments., who are making their new headquarters in one of the restored buildings. Altogether, seven buildings dating from the early 1800's will undergo restoration. Progress on the site has been slow but it should be completed in about two years.

Attention was initially brought to the historic site by the Heritage Trust, who, with the Halifax Landmarks Commission, urged City Hall to take steps in preserving the Upper Water St. Buildings. Certain segments of Hollis and Granville Sts. were also earmarked as valuable to the city's architectural heritage. In addition, the Metropolitan Area Planning Commission (MAPC) made strong recommendations to the same effect in May 1973. "Three cities, Halifax, Montreal and Quebec City contain the majority of Canada's historically significant buildings."

Halifax is the last of these three cities to revitalize its not-quite-so-dead past through viable and attractive

commercial ventures.

The Privateers Warehouse, of early 19th Century vintage has perhaps seen more of the old raucous past than any other building on the waterfront. It was here that goods pirated from American shipping lines by Ecos' Collins' ex-slave ship The Liverpool Packet were auctioned. The merchant mariner reaped such huge profits from this wartime (1812) activity that he not only set himself up financially for life, but founded Halifax's first Bank, which is still standing today. His business and its influence flourished around a shipping trade that reached as far as Russia. And, just around the corner from the Bank, Annie Bell's House of Entertainment had a good time of it too...

Each of the buildings has its own fascinating history; the Sail Loft, the Pickford has its own fascinating history; the Sail Loft, the Pickford and Black Warehouse. The Wooden Storehouse, located closest to the harbour and behind the Privateers Warehouse (presumably to protect the granite — faced building from ocean spray) has a unique north-south orientation. One story has it that this was the result of its being built in Dartmouth and floated across the harbour. Coins, cannonballs and even an anchor unearthed near the foundations of the old buildings can lead imagination to unravel even further:

19th Century construction has a story of its own as well. Fire, the most prevalent and most dreaded of urban enemies resulted in significant structure alterations. Skilled craftsmen; carpenters, stonemasons and bricklayers, were employed in marked development that was previously unseen in our city. It reflected the prosperity of a port and promised a bright future for Halifax.

David Forsyth is the supervising architect on the waterfront site for Duffus, Romans, Kundzins and Roufsefell who have undertaken the work for Phase II of the project. He has seen the architectural remnants of the Collins era and is both awed and amazed with the excellent condition of the foundations. Of all the buildings, his favourite is the Privateers Warehouse, both from an architectural and a personal standpoint. (A Scot, Mr. Forsyth was raised by the sea.) While standing under carpenters and workmen busily working above him on the new roof for that building he discussed certain problems encountered on the site.

"Construction is concentrated on restoring the interior structures. Unfortunately we have no scale drawings or blueprints from which to work — only old sketches and drawings and what we can derive from the ruins you see here. This of course makes the going slow and frustration is sometimes expressed by the craftsmen and construction crews. But, "he concluded, "this is a unique project and so are the conditions that mark its progress..."

The architectural firm employs several specialists who supervise and control the quality of the restoration work. Fred Schmidt, a stonemason who learned his trade in Germany, is



one of these foremen. In discussing the peculiar skills and materials necessary for 19th c. masonry (now improved with cement and silicon spray) he wistfully expressed the need for a blacksmith. "There are specific tools for this type of rock work and imported chisels are expensive."

Salvaged materials from the site, including stones, wooden beams, and bricks account for 60-70% of the materials needed for the restoration work. The remainder of ironstone and sandstone is brought mainly from N.B. and some from N.S. This is a far cry from the 1800's when the stone was quarried near Halifax by the inmates of the old Armdale prison!

The only other great expense is labour costs. Mr. Schmidt elaborated. "Skilled and experience masons are hard to find. Many are from Quebec.. We work together though, that is the nature of our work. The older masons instruct the younger men. They can work faster than us, they have more energy, but we maintain the quality of the masonry."

What has emerged is impressive. The old Simon's Warehouse, which will house the Inn and apartment complex has a fresh solid look—opulence a la Maritimes, while the other refurbished buildings have taken on similar airs.

The N.S. College of Art and Design which in 1973 made Granville St. its home has redesigned several rooms in the Upper floors of its buildings on the east side of the street. The new classrooms have a definite "old Halifax" feel to them, simple rustic, and quite functionally attractive. In addition, the Bluenose, the Lunenburg schooner of Atlantic fame will grace the newly constructed Privateers wharf with her presence. The remainder of the 30,000 square feet of retail and office space will be leased to private business interests. (between the courthouse and the historic buildings.)

Historic Halifax has a nice ring to it. Unfortunately that atmosphere will be marred by the presence of two (or more) hi-rise office towers in the Phase I, of the project. Halifax's entire waterfront area is now on the drawing board of many a developer, and it will be up to City Hall to determine the best course of development. Phase II of the Leaseholds Project is a necessary precedent then in illustrating how the ambitions of commercial business and those of historic preservation groups can be combined ingeniously and successfully. In this way only Halifax can profit both economically and culturally.

by J. Trapnell