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Learning from the Distillery District

Toronto's Distillery District is a successful marriage of new contemporary design and existing heritage structures.

By: Michael McClelland

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Contemporary architecture and heritage conservation are working hand in hand in Toronto's Distillery District. It's not always that way--it's no secret that contemporary architectural discourse frequently views heritage conservation as an obstacle to progressive ideas. At the larger urban scale there is the concern that Prince Charles and his followers will decree that nothing beats medieval town planning and that all modern interventions are nothing more than that--interventions imposing themselves unnecessarily into the public view. At the smaller scale of built form there is a concern that existing heritage structures will impose limits that are seen as constraining budgets and constricting functional planning and the free flow of design. And in this the free flow of design has an ineffable romantic quality for which architectural creativity must remain pure, ruggedly individual and unhampered by conditions or context.

And this romanticism runs deep. The ideal of the unfettered modernist is still strong and there is a continual concern that attention to heritage is a bowing down before a contextualism which will eventually lead to compromise. But the concern is real. We see manufactured heritage with every newly marketed subdivision.

The modernist position is opposed on the other side by deeply entrenched ideas about the role of conservation in our urban environments. Saving beautiful old buildings has immense public appeal, like apple pie and motherhood. Within the sphere of architectural discussion however, heritage conservation can quickly fall into a realm of rigidly applied values. For a large number of the general public, old buildings are important and new buildings simply aren't as important. Old buildings establish a sense of place and new buildings could be anywhere. Old buildings are unique and have character and new buildings don't. These tautologies in the end simply take the air out of the room and make discussion impossible.

At the Distillery District, the significant shift has been to suggest a more positive relationship between old and new which can reinitiate architectural discussion and enliven this important national historic site. The first step was to put forward a conceptual approach for the site which went beyond its evident heritage values and encompassed ideas of growth and renewal. The Distillery District would be a pedestrian-only arts and culture centre. The simplicity of this concept meant that it could be seen as a flexible method for implementing change. It could be introduced very gradually or in phases, and unlike the earlier former masterplan which had been developed for the site, this concept-based plan could be seen as a work in progress inviting interaction and diverse involvement. As a heritage district, the intent would not be to freeze the site through excessive design control, even though it is very thoroughly protected by exhaustive heritage easement agreements, but to determine appropriate change as it might occur over time and to encourage it.

To ensure the protection of the heritage of the site, one of the key principles of conservation would be minimal intervention--change to the actual fabric of the existing buildings would be as little as possible and only where needed--retaining their heritage character by adapting them modestly to safely and conveniently accommodate new uses. Elements such as patina and the rough industrial edges of the buildings which form so much a part of their character were kept wherever possible.

Another heritage conservation principle would be reversibility. Changes would be reversible, meaning that alterations on the site would be additive and not reductive. They would be another layer placed on the site and would be built without compromising the integrity of the older structures--all 13 acres with their buildings, courtyards, streets, and industrial machinery.

At the Distillery, rather than formally stating issues relating to restoration, the decision was made to implicitly incorporate heritage ideals into an overall design strategy. The approach is decidedly what William Morris would have called Anti-Scrape. The buildings would not be scrubbed clean nor would they be returned to an ideal representation of a 19th-century distillery. This is important as it demonstrates the conceptual intent not to live in the past but to retain things within the present--creating a place to be experienced as a current and living entity and part of our contemporary urban environment. Yes, there are interpretive tours which tell the history of the Distillery but there is no requirement that the site has to be seen as an invented historical tableau vivant with a pretence that one had stepped back in time.

The great advantage of this non-restoration approach is that new design elements need not be hidden or downplayed, and all elements, old and new, can be read as authentic. It opens the opportunity for the Distillery to continue to change over time, to make modifications and to adjust comfortably as its new life evolves. This approach allows for respect and protection of the historic resources of the site while also allowing for a balanced integration of new non-historicist designs.

Another important step at the Distillery was to make an invitation to the arts community for their involvement--to ensure that the district was inclusive of their initiatives. Artists are urban pioneers and they tend to drag their friends along. They were the first to move into the Distillery's older buildings and more than 50,000 square feet of space was rented to them at below-market long-term rates. Along with Balzac's Coffee, the artists--artists and coffee being a natural combination--were the first to form a nucleus for the retail component of the site, and with their help the milestones for the initial five-year lease plan was achieved in fewer than two years. No chain stores are permitted, and with these tenants, all part of Richard Florida's idea of the "creative class," came imaginative and entrepreneurial responses to the site and to design.

The new design initiatives have each approached the site differently, some more challenged than others by what they perceive to be either the constraints or the opportunities of working in close contact with heritage buildings, some puzzled and unfamiliar with ideas like minimal intervention and reversibility. In most of the designs the contemporary materials are placed in contrast to the aged surfaces of the site to provide a rich and evocative palette that neither new nor old could easily achieve on its own. Industrial artifacts, unusual spaces, and oversized beams, columns and walls all add a quirkiness to the spaces at the Distillery that would not necessarily emerge from a contemporary design brief.

In some cases like the Boiler House restaurant by Mackay|Wong Strategic Design, the materials of the site--like the wood cribbing which was originally used to store barrels--has been reused to create fixtures and furnishings for the new spaces. In the Corkin Gallery by Shim-Sutcliffe Architects, the piers of the old tank bases have become intimate places for viewing art.

The new designs offer clarity and careful conception and they breathe life into the site. It is the heritage buildings which bring a sense of otherness--in their texture, smell and feel. The original purposefulness of the malt houses, cooperages and fermenting cellars has faded into a palimpsest of ghost functions lying beneath the current operations of the site. The Distillery District now displays an important quality for any city district--it doesn't simply meet the functional demands of the day, but carries within it complex patterns of activity, both past and present.

The work at the Distillery has really just started and many of the major changes are still in their planning stages. A second five-year plan has now commenced along with planning for the full occupancy of the heritage buildings and for additional new construction. The ongoing life of this national historic site will continue to evolve and provide beneficial lessons about the need for collaboration, cooperation and a balanced approach for heritage and new design.

Michael McClelland is a Principal of ERA Architects in Toronto, a firm focused on the conservation, restoration and adaptive reuse of heritage properties.

Client: Cityscape Holdings Inc. and Dundee Realty Corporation**Coordinating Architects:** ERA Architects Inc. and James Goad, Cityscape

Architectural Team: Andrew Pruss, Curtis Murphy, David Dennis, Philip Evans, Marsha Kelmans, Veronica Madonna, Ian Panabaker, Michael McClelland, Lindsay Reid, Edwin Rowse

Tenant Architects: architectsAlliance, Antonio Bruno Architect, Fercon Architects, Kohn Shnier Architects, KPMB Architects, Quadrangle Architects Ltd., Shim- Sutcliffe Architects, Zeidler Partnership Architects

Tenant Designers: 11 x IV, Corktown Interior Design, Mackay|Wong Strategic Design, Rice Brydone, Simon Eager, 3rd UNCLE**Structural:** Read Jones Christoffersen

Mechanical Electrical: Merber Corporation, BK Consulting**Landscape:** Envision--the Hough Group**Site Services:** Totten Sims Hubicki Associates**Area:** approximately 13 acres**Budget:** n/a

Completion: Phase 1, May 2003; Phase 2 ongoing

Photos



[Larger photo & full caption](#)

File size: 71.4 KB (799px X 479px)

Caption: Exterior rendering of KPMB's proposed Young Centre for ...



[Larger photo & full caption](#)

File size: 67.4 KB (595px X 445px)

Caption: The fully modern interior of Lileo's "lifestyle" retail...



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File size: 39.4 KB (442px X 332px)

Caption: View down Distillery Lane. Source: Lenscape



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File size: 46.9 KB (491px X 294px)

Caption: Site plan



[Larger photo & full caption](#)

File size: 38.7 KB (375px X 326px)

Caption: Proposed interior café space of the Young Centre utiliz...



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File size: 37.6 KB (346px X 351px)

Caption: Cavernous interior of the elegant Boiler House restaura...



[Larger photo & full caption](#)

File size: 28.2 KB (259px X 352px)

Caption: Occupying the former maltings building, the glazed entr...

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File size: 23.7 KB (300px X 225px)

Caption: A well-populated Trinity Street, the main axis of the D...





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File size: 16.8 KB (306px X 171px)

Caption: The Stone Distillery building at the southern edge of t...

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