

SAINT JOHN SMILES



Photographs Courtesy of Heather McBriarty

Four Centuries of Confusion

On St. Jean Baptist's Day 1604, Samuel de Champlain discovered the mouth of a mighty river, named it after the prophet, and thus sowed centuries of confusion amongst travellers intent on arriving at Saint John, NB ... or St. John's, NL. The St. John River is born in Maine and raised in New Brunswick. Already a sturdy stripling when it crosses the border at Edmundston, it gains girth as it travels southwards through the province on its 673 kilometre search for the sea. Finally, its quest in sight, it tumbles down a gorge in the heart of the city that bears its name, into the welcoming embrace of the Bay of Fundy. Well, not that welcoming ... twice a day Fundy's tides rise 28 ft. and push the river back again, reversing its flow over rapids in the gorge, to create the City's famous Reversing Falls. The City of Saint John is an entrepôt centre; it owes its existence to the meeting of river with ocean. In the beginning its raison d'être was the fur trade. Charles de Saint-Étienne de la Tour, appointed by the French King as Governor of Acadia, established a fort and storehouses on the banks of Saint John harbour. Moose, beaver and otter skins were carried by fleets of canoes down the St. John river. Charles La Tour died in 1666 and his fort, then a British possession, was renamed Fort Frederick in 1758. Twenty or so years later it was destroyed in the American Revolutionary War and a replacement, Fort Howe, was erected nearby to assuage the concerns of newly arriving Loyalist refugees. The two adjacent communities were amalgamated by royal charter in 1785 to become the City of Saint John, the first incorporated city in what would become Canada. In common with much of Atlantic Canada the city prospered during the 1800s: trade through the port, shipbuilding, brewing, and break bulk activities underpinned the economy. The Canadian Pacific Railway connected Saint John to Montreal and the rest of the continent in 1889. Even the great fire of 1877 which destroyed a large part of the central business district was but a temporary setback. Most of it was rebuilt in three years and today provides the city with a twenty (20) block treasure trove, the Trinity Royal heritage preservation area. The 1900s were a period of decline, stemmed in part by two world wars and the dynamic growth of the Irving empire which is still centred in the city. During the 1970s Saint John, adopting the religion of that era, embarked on an orgy of road construction and slum clearance, resulting in an unhappy melange of buildings isolated by vacant lots, and neighbourhoods divorced by highways. Much of the central business district however, retained its character and human scale, assisted in no small part by the designation of Trinity Royal as a heritage preservation area in 1982, and the opening of the \$100 million Market Square complex in 1983. The latter incorporates the facades of the three storey Victorian warehouses fronting Market Slip and is a multi-level shopping centre boasting an eclectic mix of stores, restaurants, pubs, the New Brunswick museum and the public library. It also anchors one end of the Inside Connection, the city's internal pedway system.

The population of Saint John has declined steadily over the past 35 years: the city has promised more than it can deliver. It is hard however not to be impressed with the city's spirit, vitality and optimism. There are signs that finally its time might have come. Despite the disappointment over the shelving this year of Irving Oil's second refinery, their Canaport LNG terminal project, jointly owned with Repsol, is now operational. Completed too is Emera's pipeline which carries natural gas from Canaport 145 km across the province to interconnect with the Maritime and Northeast Pipeline near St. Stephen on the Canada/U.S. border. In this article we review other signs of Saint John's revival: real estate developments on the western side of the central peninsula, the Uptown downtown.

Uptown Downtown



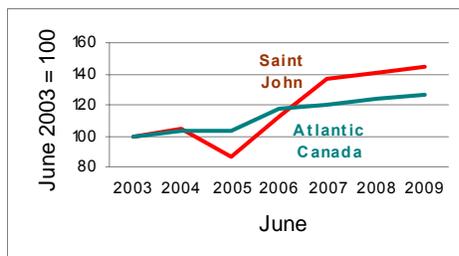
Saint John refers to its downtown as Uptown: an appropriate appellation from a city whose glass is always half full. In 2002, alarmed by the loss of its youth to greener pastures elsewhere Saint John took stock, identified the inner harbour and the Uptown waterfront as its key assets for creating employment and a unique urban environment, and commissioned a visionary land use plan. The Saint

John Inner Harbour Land Use Plan and Implementation Strategy identified sites that were ripe for redevelopment on the western side of the Central Peninsula including the Uptown downtown and its environs, and articulated a fifteen year vision for its resuscitation. Perhaps it was born out of desperation, a community that loses its youth has no future, but it was undeniably a brave decision. Six years have passed ... enough time to determine whether the Plan was really a vision, or simply a dream. Our aerial photograph shows the commercial area that was the principle focus of the Plan, together with the Trinity Royal heritage preservation area. Technically the latter fell outside the Plan boundary; however, recognising that it was a key component of any revival, the planner took the liberty of including it. In addition the Plan addressed the residential potential at the south end of Central Peninsula at Lower Cove and the former Lantic Sugar site. This area lies to the south of the aerial photograph.

Strategy

The Plan's strategy was to anchor the city's heart to its historical roots, Fort LaTour and the Trinity Royal preservation area; and to its natural attributes such as the Reversing Falls; whilst capitalising on the benefits (commerce, aesthetics, interest) of its working harbour. The waterfront was to be accessible to the public via a trail network called Harbour Passage, which threaded together a system of parks, heritage sites and recreational spaces. Key sites were to be redeveloped along the waterfront at Long Wharf, Smythe Street, Coast Guard, Cruise Ship Terminal (Pugsley Park and Pugsley Wharf), Lower Cove, Round Reef Marine Park/Lantic Sugar Precinct and the South Peninsula Urban Village Precinct. Behind the waterfront, redevelopment opportunities were identified along Water Street and within the Trinity Royal heritage preservation area.

Economic Analysis



The Saint John Inner Harbour Land Use Plan and Implementation Strategy was published in November 2003. To some degree the local economy is buffeted by external factors over which it has little control and it is difficult to disentangle the two. However it is instructive to look at the economic performance of the area covered by the Plan after it was implemented. Our Economic Intelligence Unit gathers information on office demand and supply every six months in

each of the six major urban centres in Atlantic Canada including Saint John. We can therefore assess Saint John's performance by benchmarking it against the entire region (excluding Saint John). Our survey is extensive; we collect information on every office building with a rentable area $\geq 10,000$ ft.², that is available for rent. In aggregate our survey covers 468 buildings with a total rentable area of 19 million ft.². In Saint John we survey 52 buildings with a total rentable area of 2 million ft.². Property managers are very co-operative, almost 100% of them complete our survey instrument. We have graphed office demand for Saint John against the remainder of Atlantic Canada (HRM, Charlottetown, Moncton, Fredericton, St. John's) using June 2003 as our baseline 100 index. (The indices prior to June 2006 are based on a similar, but smaller survey conducted by Cushman and Wakefield, LePage. We have attempted to correct for the discrepancy in the survey size by using an algorithm, but counsel caution when comparing post June 2005 figures with the earlier data). As is evident from the graph, Saint John office demand has moved strongly ahead of the rest of the Atlantic Region since June 2006.

Development Activity

One of the strongest suits in Saint John's favour is the Irving family. Their various branches still locate their respective head offices in the City, a benefit not only in terms of employment, but also because of their real estate activities. One of the Irving companies, Commercial Properties Limited, started to restore a city block of Victorian era buildings located in Trinity Royal in 2002, before the Plan was conceived. That development, named after its anchor tenant CenterBeam, an American IT company, was substantially completed in 2008. **CenterBeam Place** comprises 100,000 ft.² of office and retail space. The restoration is of exceptional quality and sensitivity. The property is fully leased. **Long Wharf** is also being developed by an Irving company, Fort Reliance, the parent of Irving Oil. It is to be the site of their \$30 million four storey head office which will house 1,000 employees. The Federal Government is leasing them the land for 99 years. The pre-construction phase, driving 300 piles into the bedrock below the site, is now underway. The Saint John Port Authority is retaining ownership of the water frontage for use as a secondary cruise ship terminal. The balance of the site will be developed for public use: it is on the Harbour Passage trail and adjoins Fort LaTour. Eventually the entire Long Wharf site will have a pedestrian bridge connecting it to the central business district.

The Red Rose Tea Building restoration was completed in 2001, well before the Plan. Restoration of this iconic building began two years earlier with the support of the City's Preservation Board. The five storey, 26,000 ft.² former factory was erected in 1903 and used for blending and packing tea. It has been beautifully restored for office use by its owners Red Rose Developments. It is fully leased.

Market Square's owners, The Hardman Group are currently building a three storey, 40,000 ft.² office addition to accommodate the expansion of Genesys Telecommunications Laboratories, an American software company who already lease space in the complex.

The Coast Guard site redevelopment proposal call was won by The Hardman Group though we understand that the sale has not yet been finalised. Their proposal envisages a \$75 million mixed use project incorporating an hotel, condominiums, office and retail space.

The Marco Polo Cruise Terminal, built at a cost of \$12 million, was officially christened this year. The 16,000 ft.², two storey brick building also accommodates the Saint John Port Authority's executive offices. Its architecture blends in with the adjacent Victorian Trinity Royal heritage preservation area and has Palladian style windows. The 5,900 ft.² Great Hall and contiguous 4,300 ft.² Assembly Hall have 35 ft. and 20 ft. ceilings respectively and large windows overlooking the harbour, Water Street and Harbour Passage. They can be rented for receptions and trade shows.

The Water Street reconstruction commenced in 2005: Saint John Port Authority demolished the Pugsley Sheds (now the site of the Marco Polo terminal), and the City started their \$3.5 million revitalisation. The work was completed a year later and Water Street is now incorporated into the Trinity Royal heritage preservation area. The revitalisation is spurring new construction. This year the Ellerdale Group started construction on **Harbourfront Residences at Three Sisters**, a 139 unit condominium development on the periphery of Trinity Royal overlooking the Cruise Ship terminal. Phase 1 (78 units) will be completed in June 2011 and Phase 2 (61 units) in December 2011.

Peel Plaza - this project lies outside the Plan boundaries. It will cover six city blocks and accommodate a new police headquarters, a Department of Justice building and a 500 space car parking facility. A joint project of the

City, the Provincial Department of Justice and the parking commission it is unique in that it retains the historic street grid and incorporates open spaces between buildings to invite the public into the complex and create a sense of ownership. This project is being approved in stages but construction has not yet started. Some City Councillors have recently voiced their opposition to the \$28 million police station suggesting that it be located elsewhere and the site be developed for residential use instead.

Harbour Passage was officially designated as part of the Trans-Canada Trail on 17th May 2008. It now runs northwards from Lower Cove along the western side of Central Peninsula, through the central business district to Long Wharf, Fort LaTour and the Reversing Falls.