The Importance of Remembering Anniversaries

We all know the importance of remembering the birthday of a significant relative or friend, or our wedding anniversaries. Although we appreciate our friends and relatives every day of the year, an anniversary provides a sense of focus and occasion that makes the celebration even more meaningful. The same can be said for historical anniversaries associated with a community. A centennial, sesquicentennial, or other significant anniversary of a major event—such as the founding of a community, a birth date of a significant historical citizen or the anniversary of a major happening in the history of the community (such as an historical battle in the War of 1812)—can provide an occasion to highlight and commemorate the history of a community.

Canada-wide Commemorations

With the Queen's Diamond Jubilee and Bicentennial of the start of the War of 1812, 2012 was a bumper year for anniversaries. Both of these events provided the excuse to highlight their history. Festivals and conferences were held, exhibits mounted, plaques installed, books written, and medals awarded to commemorate these once-in-a-lifetime occasions. Each left a legacy in its own way. Nationally significant anniversaries like these often come with an added bonus—funding (in this case, from the federal government, which supported events and activities across the country and provided promotional materials free of charge, such as flags, pins, and banners).

Of those communities that were most successful in planning and achieving funding for national anniversary-related projects and activities, the most successful were those that saw the anniversary on the calendar—up to a decade before the event took place. Grimsby, for example, was planning for years for the Bicentennial of a battle on the town's waterfront known as the Engagement at the Forty, which took place on June 8, 1813. Extensive advance planning, promotion, and fundraising made this a successful event.

While many of these events strike a positive tone, 1812 brings attention to the fact that not all events in history were happy and glorious but still worth commemorating to provide an important sense of our history. The War of 1812 is therefore commemorated, not “celebrated,” since although the outcome led indirectly to Canadian independence from the U.S., the death and hardship associated with a war make “commemoration” rather than “celebration” more appropriate. Perhaps the stories are tough and difficult, but there’s no reason why, under such circumstances, a community couldn’t pause to reflect and “commemorate” an event in local history that defined a community.

2014 also marks two much more sombre anniversaries, the centennial of the beginning of the First World War and the 75th anniversary of the Second World War. With more than 110,000 Canadians and Newfoundlanders losing their lives during these great international conflicts, neither are events where the word “celebration” comes to mind. However, their importance to world history, and the inspiring valour and sacrifice of those who served and died in the service of our country, make them events that must be remembered and commemorated. The federal government, through the department of veterans affairs, has been working with counterparts from 22 countries around the world to develop a coordinated approach to these anniversaries and to provide Canadians with the opportunity to reflect on our country’s long and proud military history.

Other Anniversaries

There are other anniversaries (such as the date at which a municipality was founded) that communities can celebrate—perhaps the anniversary of the founding as a village, town, or city. Some communities, like Brampton, are able to celebrate all three (1853, 1873, and 1974). And, why not? Each provides a benchmark to look back on and compare—to see how far the community has come, evaluate its progress, and reflect on how they became what they are today. By doing this, communities are reinforcing their sense of history, which contributes to a stronger sense of place, continuity, and community.

There are many types of events that can be commemorated—the birth of a leading citizen of the past, or perhaps of...
a time when a leading citizen was active in the community. In the early 1990s, Halifax, for example, celebrated the bicentennial of the era in which His Royal Highness Prince Edward resided in the city. The father of Queen Victoria, Prince Edward, was responsible for shaping the city and many of its landmarks during his time there. Commemoration of this era in books and tours was a highlight of tourism activities during this period. Halifax recently "commemorated" another major event in the history of the city – the sinking of the Titanic (Halifax being a centre of recovery efforts for the victims of the lost unsinkable liner). Walking tours were conducted, books were published, and events were held to mark this occasion – reinforcing a sense of history, but mindful of the solemnity of the event that resulted in significant loss of life. No doubt, similar "commemoration" efforts will take place in 2017, on the Centennial of the Halifax Explosion.

Anniversaries are usually useful when it comes to heritage matters, and help in the marshalling the resources to undertake those major projects. Think of the major initiatives undertaken in 1967 to commemorate the Centennial, or in 2000 to commemorate the new Millennium. Anniversaries help to move projects along in a timeline quicker than they might have done otherwise.

Planning for the Future

As part of long range planning activities for a community, it’s important then to maintain a list of significant anniversaries of local, provincial, and national significance. 2012 was certainly a banner year for anniversaries, but there are more just around the corner. 2014 marks the sesquicentennial of the Charlottetown Conference, the first in a series of meetings that ultimately led to the founding of Canada. Prince Edward Island is celebrating this historical event in a big way with plans for major concerts, theatre festivals, eco-tours, culinary events, sailing regattas, and the establishment of a Celebration Zone in Charlottetown featuring entertainment every day in the summer. And, it’s not just public events that are inspired by anniversaries; with the events of 150 years ago in mind, the Heritage Canada Foundation chose to host its 2014 annual conference in Charlottetown from October 2 to 4, 2014.

What of the future? Preliminary plans are underway for celebration of the Queen’s Platinum Jubilee in 2022, for example; but, most significant of them all will be a true celebration – the sesquicentennial of Confederation and the Centennial battle of Vimy Ridge coming in 2017, just three short years away. The Sesquicentennial is certainly to be the most significant anniversary in many of our lifetimes around the history of Canada. Look for similar events, activities ... and funding opportunities that were seen in the celebration of Canada’s Centennial in 1967 and for Canada 125 in 1992. Municipalities should not forget to mark these dates and others on the calendar. There is no time like the present to start planning for these and other significant milestones of the past to commemorate and celebrate in the future. MW
The Heritage Advantage

Dress codes, photo-radar speed traps, suspicious Canada Custom border guards, humourless Revenue Canada auditors; most people readily agree that the concept of regulation – if not the reality – is necessary and even laudable in a modern and progressive society ... just as long as these realities don’t affect them personally.

But, if a particular person gets taken off to the side, audited, or refused entrance, the understanding attitude usually changes very quickly. The abstract concept of regulation has now become personal, and the individual affected often baulks.

It’s the same with the “heritage” designation.

Benefits – But Also Responsibilities

The benefits to the greater community are many: the sense of history, enhanced tourism, preservation of existing density and streetscapes, the cost benefits of “recycling” old structures, and so on.

When asked, most people are enchanted with the concept of preserving their community’s stately old homes and fine heritage buildings ... assuming that someone else carries the cost of maintaining the old dowagers, as well as accepting the restrictions inherent in the “heritage” designation.

But, on the individual level, relatively few people want to be that “someone” – and for what they see as good reasons: heritage ownership can be problematic.

In British Columbia and other provinces, once a property is registered as “heritage” by the local government, the designation “travels with the title” and can’t be changed when the property is resold. In return for various tax and financial benefits and the pride of ownership, current and future owners who wish to alter the exterior, renovate, or replace, or demolish the structure face a long and uncertain review process.

Typically, the authorities can delay such actions, impose penalties for noncompliance or “illegal” work or, in some jurisdictions, simply and unequivocally deny the request.

Even if the place happens to catch fire and burn down to charcoal and splintered rock, some jurisdictions will demand that whatever follows on the lot must be an exact replica of the vanished structure. Today’s labour and material costs make any such “handmade” rebuild prohibitively costly.

Faced with such restrictions and deterrents, it’s small wonder that many who own “heritage worthy” properties are loath to seek official designation.

However, if they looked at the deeper and longer-term real estate data, they might reconsider.

Case Study – New Westminster, B.C.

Perhaps it’s the relative rarity, exclusiveness, cachet, or the type of owners and buyers it attracts, but within what’s arguably Canada’s most high-powered real estate market – Metro Vancouver – long-term sales trends in the small City of New Westminster underscore the value of heritage.

Set on the Fraser River and to the southeast of Vancouver, “New West” (a.k.a. the “Royal City”) has an eclectic mix of commercial and residential, much of it circa the 1880s when the city was founded and became (briefly) the capital of the new British colony, which in turn became the Province of British Columbia.

In good times and even in bad markets, heritage-designated single-family dwellings (SFD) in New West have consistently outperformed average homes. Even when compared to equally venerable properties in similar neighbourhoods – but which lack the distinctive curled wooden placards denoting their status – “true” heritage enjoys a hefty double-digit premium.

The B.C. Assessment Authority currently has 7,180 SFD titles listed in New Westminster (at time of writing). In turn, the city’s Heritage Register website says it has 193 titles, but lists only 189 of which 121 are SFD or 1.68 percent of the overall SFD pool. Of these 121 heritage SFDs, the register doesn’t provide exact addresses for 28 titles, leaving 93 titles clustered in five neighbourhoods:

- Queen’s Park: 37 titles, 53 to 124 years old. Average age: 102 years.
- West End: 29 titles, 71 to 122 years. Average age: 100 years.

...
the results are interesting. Over the last Westminster clearly shows its age, with a housing construction boom in the "beaten the street" in terms of value and attractiveness.

Of older "non-heritage" SFD (Table 2), a sales volume and values of "other" SFD, specifically the city's stock of all ages (Table 1) and the city's stock of heritage SFD. But, the owners haven't asked; so although they're aged, these SFD aren't in the Heritage Register.

Interestingly, after peaking in 2002 to almost 200 sales and then hovering around the 150 mark, the 2008/09 recession saw year-over-year sales volume fall by more than a third, values by more than 10 percent. This submarket rebounded, but only to a point. In the last two years, values remain strong; but, volume appears to be on the decline, either through erosion of inventory and/or "natural causes," where the unprotected old and inefficient is finally replaced by new construction.

Vis-à-vis "older" yet non-heritage SFD, the "official" heritage SFD consistently posted higher average values, as shown in Table 3. (The sole exception was in 2001/02 when average year-over-year values stumbled from $312,300 on five sales to $213,875 on six sales, or off by more than 30 percent but soon recovered.)

During the 2008/09 global recession, and where other residential product classes suffered, heritage SFD defied the norm and, after a precipitately dip in 2007/08, jumped in value by 14.2 percent over the 2007 comparable, and on increased volume. It slipped back, but rebounded strongly.

In general, heritage SFD average sales values and appreciation has matched or outperformed all non-heritage SFD, be it middle age or comparatively senior. For example, in 2013, the average heritage sales value hit $822,417 versus $701,914 for "filtered" non-heritage sales and a mere $683,974 for general SFD sales for a "heritage premium" of 14.6 and 16.8 percent respectively.

Still Little Interest from Owners

In March 2013, the New Westminster city council considered setting up four initial "heritage conservation areas" within the Queen's Park, Brow of the Hill, Uptown, and Queensborough neighbourhoods. If approved, council would have the authority to veto demolition of 99 selected properties within these older, historically, and architecturally rich areas. In turn, the city's stock of heritage SFD would more than double.

But, as the New Westminster News Leader later reported, support among the affected owners was "limited": a mere 11 approved, six were undecided, 50 didn't respond to the survey, and 32 were adamantly opposed.

One written response strongly advised council to focus on the developers who blithely demolish old housing stock and not "pick on us homeowners" who have already demonstrated a commitment to history by purchasing and maintaining old homes, and who don't want a new set of bureaucratic restrictions placed on them.

The proposal was dropped, the curly placards stayed put, and if there was a "heritage premium" to be had, the opportunity wasn't realized. MW