

culture

Ditch the kitsch



John Leroux
the architect

Our resident architect questions many of the folk-based commercial undertakings throughout the Maritimes, saying they undermine the integrity of our culture and architecture

alike, its tapered form is familiar – a lighthouse with its wooden shingled exterior and bright red trim. As far back as the ancient Egyptians' flaming tower at Alexandria, these structures have guided mariners, saved lives and acted as bright beacons welcoming adventurers home from across the globe. While foreign visitors are busy snapping digital images of their kids standing proudly in front of Fredericton's version, most are scarcely aware of the established role it has diligently played since its construction: selling ice cream to tourists.

Celebrating New Brunswick culture on our provincial holiday ought to be effortless for those

A tall white structure stands at the busy riverside junction of Fredericton's Regent Street and St. Anne Point Drive. To locals and outsiders

structures dwarfed by what Fredericton now labels their Lighthouse Adventure Centre. With its steel fire escape hanging off the tower and a fisherman's rope railing enclosing a collection of plastic patio chairs, it speaks to a misguided perception of our region as a bunch of poor fishermen and quaint lighthouse keepers. I see this as a fundamental metaphor for our lack of progress and a fear of acknowledging our reasonably sophisticated past.

I have always questioned a number of the kitschy folk-based commercial undertakings throughout the Maritimes. This movement is short-sighted; it contradicts how the world should see us and it undermines the integrity of our culture and our architecture.

In a recent paper on modern architecture in Atlantic Canada, Halifax architect Steven Mannel spoke about such developments and the relatively recent adoption of an often subjective history that is unabashedly about marketing and tourism dollars.

"Beginning in the 1930s, the rise of the tourist industry in the Maritime provinces and Newfoundland was accompanied by the development of the notion of an Atlantic Canadian 'Folk.' The region's tourist image is a carefully constructed amalgam of unspoiled nature and pre-modern buildings and settlements. Ethnographic fieldwork has built a body of folk songs and stories, and of traditional crafts and folkways. Documentary evidence has been supplemented by a series of invented 'folk' elements, including heraldry, handicrafts and myths of origin, intended to create a seamless image of tradition and simplicity for consumption by visitors 'from away.'"

In the case of Fredericton's Lighthouse Adventure Centre, they have overlooked the potential of one of the greatest sites and vistas in the capital. This could have been a setting for a stylish and approachable building that embraces its sweeping water vistas as does the adjacent modern library with its glazed reading room. Instead, the Adventure Centre has a large front deck that doesn't properly fit the landscape or engage the walking trail right under its nose.

Across the river, the old railway walking bridge overpass in Fredericton's Devon neighbourhood was covered up several years ago with a pastiche of wood pickets in an attempt to evoke the nearby site of the 17th-century Fort Nashwaak. While it's not badly built, its construction language cheapens the very nature of the project it's meant to honour. Would a palisade of store-bought fence pickets be appropriate for a proposed rebuilding of the French fort that was once the capital of Acadia? Devon has a more recent and substantial railway heritage, an aspect of its past that is actively being used as a rebranding of the area through its street signs and other initiatives, so why not be proud of the bridge?

A recent example of a pseudo-traditional de-

velopment landlocked between the Trans-Canada highway and Moncton's Magnetic Hill is Wharf Village. Recently built beside an artificial pond, it consists of five theme gift shops under the guise of "a traditional Maritime fishing village setting." What is unsettling about such a place is not its theme-park commercialism, but its questionable attempt at recreating an environment that is so far removed from the very cultural context that inspired it. Our remaining authentic fishing villages exude real tradition. All levels of our government should be encouraging tourism and awareness of our communities in such places as Grand Manan and the Acadian peninsula. Moncton is not a fishing village nor should it be; let's celebrate it for the great bilingual and urbane New Brunswick metropolis it is.

A complicated instance of this approach is the proposed Moncton Casino, a massive \$90-million development that will sit across the highway from Wharf Village and Magnetic Hill. Reaction has been mixed to the project and its decision to cap its main entrance by a glazed imitation lighthouse tower that is miles from any coastline. The scheme will also include a connected hotel and multipurpose entertainment facility, both similarly wearing versions of a 19th-century red roof that the designers admitted was inspired by such iconic buildings as the Algonquin Hotel in St. Andrews.

While the president of the casino company told me that they were looking for "a design theme to contribute and integrate to the area" and that the lighthouse "spoke to the unique aspects of the province," I remain unconvinced.

There is little doubt that he is genuine in his admiration for our grand hotels and lighthouses and it will certainly be a solution that will be visible from afar. Nevertheless, I am disappointed that a non-coastal phony lighthouse offers little more than Vegas-style tokenism to the region. I applaud the owners for engaging a respected Canadian architectural firm to design the development, but their acknowledged skill over the past few decades has been in creating some of Canada's most modern and complex large-scale structures. So why are we reduced to getting a fake lighthouse? Can't a bright and soaring entrance that is attractive and welcoming be designed in eastern Canada without being mired in the predictable and tacky?

I fully champion architecture that is designed with integrity. Our province doesn't need development that tries to pull the wool over tourists' eyes to sell fish-themed trinkets.

For all those who enjoy exploring New Brunswick, who hope to move here, who love to show it off to tourists and dignitaries visiting from away, who relish in its architectural quality, and who care about our legacy, we have to demand thoughtful contemporary buildings that ditch the kitsch. **be**

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JOHN LEROUX PHOTO
"New Brunswick and its People" published by the provincial government's travel bureau in the 1950s; we still need to move beyond this archaic and romanticized view of the province.



COURTESY OF SONCO GAMING

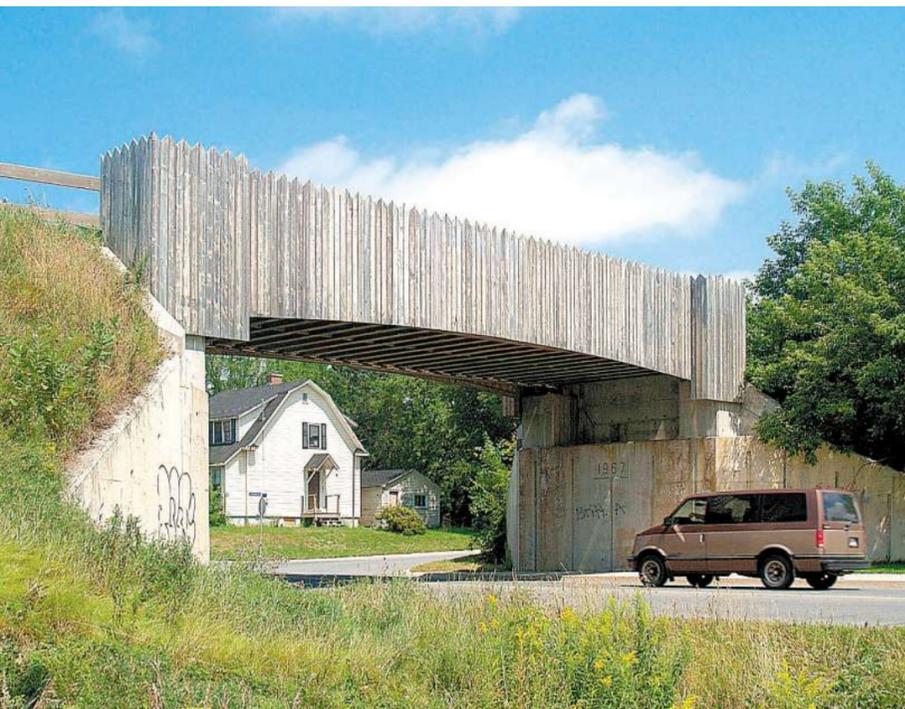
Architect's rendering of the proposed Moncton Casino, with its main entrance in the foreground capped by a glazed imitation lighthouse tower. In the background, from left to right, is the connected hotel and multipurpose entertainment facility.

of us lucky enough to live here. The people in charge are generally well-intentioned, but we have so much to be proud of that there should be no reason to mythologize who and what we are. Why should we feel the need to deceive through our buildings?

As a young architecture student in the early 1990s, the city of Fredericton hired me to compile a walking tour of the city's architecture. In the process, I got into an intense debate about their listing the aforementioned lighthouse in the new tourism literature as "a genuine St. John River lighthouse."

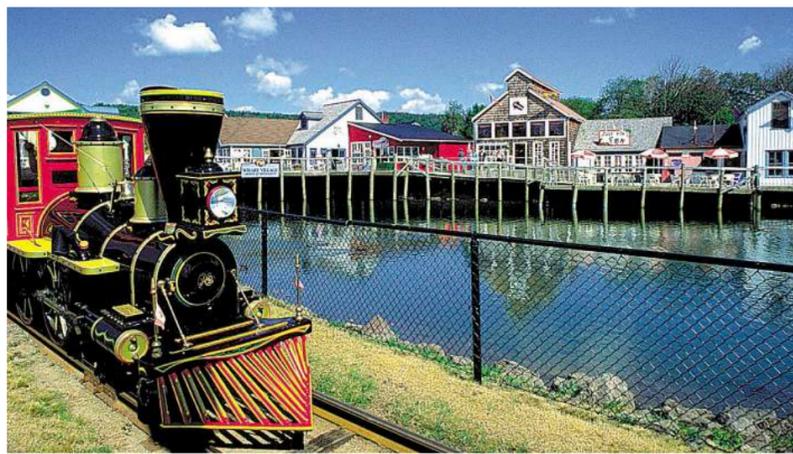
Beyond the fact that it was then only a few years old and was privately built as a huge billboard for the recent Pioneer Princess riverboat rides (which tried to look like Mississippi riverboats rather than the authentic St. John River type), it struck me as a quintessentially inappropriate representation of the city's heritage. We never had a lighthouse.

While the St. John River still possesses a number of lights down river, they are generally small



JOHN LEROUX PHOTO

Above: The steel railway bridge overpass in Fredericton's Devon neighbourhood was covered up several years ago with a pastiche of wood pickets in an attempt to evoke nearby Fort Nashwaak. Top right: Landlocked between the Trans-Canada highway and Magnetic Hill is Moncton's Wharf Village. Recently built beside an artificial pond, it consists of five gift shops with a "traditional Maritime fishing village setting" theme. Bottom right: Fredericton's Lighthouse Adventure Centre, built at the downtown bank of the St. John River in the early 1990s, is an out-of-place symbol of the city's heritage.



COURTESY OF TOURISM MONCTON



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