

# Closing Remarks to Atlantic Canada Institute Colloquium on Interiors

George Kapelos

As commentator, I have the onerous task of trying to draw together and synthesize the events and comments of the past few days. In doing so, I am reminded of the problems which must have confronted the recently concluded hearings of the Federal Cultural Policy Review Committee or the Applebaum-Hébert Commission as it is commonly known, and their attempts to assemble and understand all the pieces that constitute our Canadian culture.

Like the Applebaum-Hébert Commission, the conference of the past few days has been an attempt to weave together some of the threads of our culture. The best analogy I can make for culture is a tapestry woven of many fibres. In some cases, culture is pure and its origins easily traced. Like a cloth that is 100 per cent cotton or wool, we know its constituent parts, can understand and easily appreciate it. But for those cultures that are a mix of many things, such as we have in Atlantic Canada, culture is a cloth made of many fibres labelled 100 per cent unknown. It is more difficult to identify its components, to understand them, and to appreciate the cloth as a whole.

Still, the fabric of our Atlantic Canada culture is rich and varied. It is a mixture of English and Scottish, French and German, Irish, American, and others, all of which have been woven together to produce a cloth of remarkable substance, quality, and beauty. Many of the parts of this culture have been presented to us.

I have some difficulty in addressing such a symposium as this because of my own perspective. Being a city planner with an interest in architecture and heritage and the way that cities and landscapes "work," I come to this conference representing in essence the layman's point of view. Also being an outsider, from Ontario, I may be prone to look at things with a slightly different perspective. Therefore allow me to present the observations of the lay outsider. I will not comment on the facts presented, but rather make some observations on their implications and the significance of this Atlantic Canada Institute symposium.

We have had presented before us a broad range of papers reflecting many things - ongoing research and analysis by people who have a passion to learn, explore, and understand, a breadth of scholarship from folklorists, geographers, and people who are involved with museums and

galleries. I would like to congratulate all the participants and the organizers for their good work. It has been an interesting and rewarding few days allowing us to experience many aspects of the Atlantic Canada culture.

First, we have learned that this is a region of Canada which is rich in history and material culture. I would suggest it is one of the richest in Canada. Secondly, we have been delighted visually by the fine furniture of people like Mark Butcher and Thomas Nisbet, by the not so fine but equally important work of anonymous craftsmen working in the outports of Newfoundland and in Colchester and Lunenburg counties in Nova Scotia and by the delights of painted and decorated rooms in Nova Scotia.

Thirdly we have been educated on the ways to approach the study and interpretation of space by studying the roles played by women in the family, by researching military and civilian historical records in Halifax and Louisbourg, by examining seminal family events such as "times" and funerals in the Newfoundland outport community, and by looking at the way space is decorated, furnished and serviced. All these have given us added insights into the use of space.

Fourthly, we have also been allowed to see an accurate and unsentimental representation of an outport interior, that being the exhibition on "Traditional Outport Furniture," organized by the Newfoundland Museum. This show is remarkable in showing traditional furniture in an everyday setting. The organizers and instigators of this exhibition are to be congratulated. Fifthly, and finally, we have experienced firsthand the continuation of tradition, that being the excellent fish dinner provided for us last night by the St. Luke's Women's Auxiliary in Hibb's Cove, Port-de-Grave.

While the conference has been a success with participation by many groups, to my consternation there is a notable absence on the programme of any reference to the French fact in Atlantic Canada. It is unfortunate that the session planned on the Acadians did not materialize. I would encourage those working on Franco-Atlantic culture to continue their work and make their findings known at similar events in the future. It is an essential fibre in the cloth.

I also regret the lack of participation by what I would term, for lack of any better word, cultural bureaucrats. These are people working in government, who must interpret culture for the politicians who administer legislation encouraging its protection. It is essential that researchers make their findings known to these people to assist them in their work to conserve those elements of Atlantic Canada's culture that still remain. Attendance by this group would, I believe, have given them a greater insight into the value of elements of this culture.

But what underlies our deliberations here? I believe there are two fundamental issues: determining the value of objects and elements of our culture, and addressing the problem of loss of the objects themselves. Value has been alluded to several times throughout this conference. It was addressed directly by the panel on Friday in their discussion of the role to be played by the collector, the curator, and the dealer. The Newfoundland Museum also makes a profound statement on value in the exhibition of traditional furniture by showing objects in their present setting.

Value has two constituent parts. These are *intrinsic* and *contextual*; an object has value not only for what it is, but also for what it represents. To look only at the intrinsic value places undue emphasis on this part of value and leads us to view the exceptional and unusual as being the only objects with any value. While we obviously must continue to research and examine elements of our material culture, we must also continue to study this culture itself and understand it, in order to appreciate better the relationship of the object to the culture and as a consequence to understand better its value in place and time.

The second issue, which follows from this, relates to the loss of the objects themselves. This loss is a result of many things: neglect and vandalism at home or exportation outside the Atlantic region, be it to Ontario, Quebec, Alberta, or the United States. Loss is an important issue, which has been addressed on numerous occasions here, but which has yet to be resolved. Underlying the issue of loss of the object itself is a loss of the tradition and lack of understanding of the importance of maintaining the context of the objects. It is no small irony that our meeting has been punctuated by the sound of jackhammers and bulldozers at work on the construction of the new Newfoundland hotel next door, which represents the new oil-rich Newfoundland.

The impact of the discovery of oil and the concomitant city and outport development cannot be underestimated in

contributing to the erosion of this culture and precipitating further the loss of objects and supporting context. Many papers have addressed the question of value, determining it and assessing it, and many have lamented the loss or the apparent lack of value these objects have or the lack of appreciation of that value. Value and loss have therefore, both been themes running beneath the current of discussions of the past few days. How then can we deal with these two issues?

If anything, at the simplest level this conference must give each of us a clearer idea of how we individually can handle these problems. First we must clearly define our roles and acknowledge and accept our responsibilities. There is a great deal of research and study that needs to be done. Research lays the foundation for all subsequent decisions and must continue. At the same time, we must take our knowledge and share it, as we have at symposiums such as this one.

We must continue to talk to each other and understand the value and importance of the skills brought by each respective discipline. The folklorist and the geographer, the historian and the archivist, the museologist and the archaeologist, all must work hand in hand. We must also continue to widen our circle, drawing in other people who may share our interests and add to our own field of vision and understanding. We must continue to develop linkages with our colleagues studying in other places on the Atlantic, both in the United States and in Europe, and with those in government and business who may help us in our work. We must acknowledge the importance of working on the political front to make our concerns about the loss of our material culture known. We must lobby for better heritage legislation, argue for more support to our institutions and advocate improvements to our school curricula on the subject of material culture.

Our objective must be to synthesize our knowledge and to move from the individual to the collective. We must stop looking at objects in isolation. We should move to an understanding of the relationship of objects to their room, rooms to their house, houses to their community and the communities to their society. We must bridge discipline as well as connect objects to space and place.

This is the challenge those of us working in material culture face. We must acknowledge the past and understand its importance for the present. In this way we will be in a better position to deal with the challenges that lie ahead.