

The Kitchener Industrial Artifacts Project

Let me start by showing some pictures of the massive industrial demolitions that took place here starting in 1993 and continuing for several years. The simultaneous demolition of the Seagram Distillery and Labatts Brewery complexes in the core of Waterloo not only removed a major portion of the city's industrial infrastructure, but also quite literally opened up a new horizon, creating an effect that was quite startling, especially for those who had lived in the city for some length of time.

There is an inherent violence to any kind of demolition process that makes it at the least unsettling, and more often, disturbing and this was the over riding emotion that I felt during the summer and early fall of 1993. A sense not only of loss, but also unease that something fundamental to our way of life had been irrevocably altered. The newly visible horizon hinted that we were now in the midst of a dramatic and possibly unprecedented transformation; one that became increasingly apparent as the demolitions continued with what seemed like an unrelenting pace.

After Labatt's and Seagrams came Sunar, and then Canbar – all in Waterloo, and all proximate to one another. In Kitchener, the old B. F. Goodrich plant came down, along with the Kitchener Button factory, to be followed a few years later by the willful destruction of the Forsyth shirt factory. The Kaufman Footwear plant and Cluett Peabody Inc. also closed, although thankfully both of these factories, whose architecture is of significant historical interest, have been reprieved and are now in the process of being converted into condominiums.

During all of these demolitions, and particularly the ones in Waterloo, I was struck by what appeared to be the total apathy and lack of interest shown by the public at large – are we so wrapped up in our own cell phone and iPod guided lives these days that we remain oblivious to our surroundings, even when they are being pulled down in a wholesale fashion?

What we were witnessing during this period at the end of the twentieth century and early beginning of the new one, was the end of industrial culture; certainly the one so many of us had been born into and grown up with, becoming its servants and customers in the process. I mentioned the violence of demolition – I should also mention the ruthlessness with which human lives are disrupted and destroyed by the forces and processes of such a culture.

Many, and perhaps most, of the people who were laid off when these plants closed would have had great difficulty in finding employment again,

certainly employment comparable to what they once had. These people suddenly became surplus value and could no longer find a role to play in the society in which they lived. The machinery itself was still of value, however, and I was able to see some of it being removed from the Goodrich plant in the winter of 1996 via a large hole that had been knocked in the wall. That which was useful found its way to what was then referred to as the Third World, where labour costs were low and benefits usually non-existent. For a brief time we were treated to the vision of lesser beings doing all our heavy industrial work while we enjoyed the riches of the new Information Age – high-paying jobs in clean offices with lots of perks thrown in for good measure.

The shift from industrial to information based economies has not only been swift, but also disconcerting and sometimes brutal. The speed with which events occur and decisions are made are often beyond the ability of mere individuals to cope – it could take months and sometimes years for an industrial operation to be moved to another country, whereas now an information based operation can be moved literally overnight –but the human dislocation and cost remains the same.

It was concern over the rapid shift in technology and the effect it would have on people, particularly those who had lost jobs or had their lives affected, that led me to found the Kitchener Industrial Artifacts Project in the summer of 1996, with the project being dedicated to working men and women in Waterloo region.

The primary goal of the project was to preserve some of the machinery used by local industry and place these artifacts on public display at selected locations in the community. In some cases we have been able to site a machine on, or adjacent to, its former location. In addition to the usual curatorial difficulties encountered in such an operation there were the perhaps unique problems of retrieving the various pieces of machinery to be displayed; virtually all the artifacts currently on outdoor exhibition were destined for the scrap yard, so that in addition to a lack of funding we often had very little time in which to move a very heavy piece of machinery.

Another unusual problem was the absence of historical time; “history” seems to require an interval of perhaps thirty or forty years before it begins in a formal sense, whereas in 1996, and for several years thereafter, we still had a manufacturing economy, with the result that the retrieved artifacts were often still contemporary and were considered to have no historical value – they were, as mentioned, primarily scrap material. It is perhaps indicative of the speed of the information based economy that these artifacts

have already started to acquire the patina of history, and as their siblings are destroyed elsewhere their cultural and historic value can only increase.

I have often felt that there is something iconic about these machines, especially when stripped of extraneous wiring and guards and mounted on a pedestal; taking them out of their natural milieu allows them to be seen in a new light, and to be contemplated at leisure. In doing so we may become aware of things previously unnoticed, such as the artistry that is so often apparent in their design and manufacture.

There are currently about fifteen artifacts on display at both outdoor and indoor locations, and it is possible to do a walking tour of them, passing by some of the factories that once housed them in the process. This tour is a map of our recent past, one that tells a people's story and which will remind future generations of what we once were and how large a part industry played in the development of our three cities.

The artifacts also give a voice to a working community, and it was with this in mind that an oral history project was initiated in 2001 to interview working men and women and gather their stories. The machinery provides a skeleton to the project, but the collected stories help give it a form and presence. Along with the stories came a wealth of archival material that was not foreseen. Since the Artifacts Project does not have the means to process such material, a decision was made to donate these items to local museums and libraries, including Doon Heritage Crossroads Museum, the University of Waterloo Library, the Waterloo Historical society and both Kitchener and Waterloo Public libraries. Significant material from Kaufman Footwear, Cluett Peabody Canada Inc. (Arrow Shirts), and Globe Furniture are included in these collections.

In addition to machinery and the people who operated it, it is important to consider the factories themselves; regrettably, neither Kitchener or Waterloo have been blessed with very much in the way of good architecture, and there has also been a depressing tradition of tearing down that which might be considered good or noteworthy. Our best architecture strikes me as being industrial, and although it is well beyond the project's scope to try and preserve buildings, we have documented the major demolitions and photographed those structures that are still extant.

Of foremost significance among these is the Kaufman Footwear plant on King Street in downtown Kitchener, built in several stages beginning circa 1907-08 and designed by the famous American industrial architect Albert Kahn, one of whose plans for the building is now in the possession of the Artifacts Project.

Kahn was also Henry Ford's chief architect, and responsible for the design of Ford's large Model T factory in Highland Hills, Michigan circa 1910. An examination of pictures of this building and the Kaufman plant reveals, not surprisingly, a great similarity. Kahn's brother was a structural engineer who designed a patented reinforcing system that was likely to have been used in both structures. Kahn may also have designed the large Dominion Rubber/Uniroyal plant on Strange Street in Kitchener, which along with the Vogelsang button factory at the corner of Queen and Courtland Streets in Kitchener and the Waterloo button factory on Regina Street in Waterloo, are the most significant of the remaining works of industrial architecture in these cities.

In Cambridge the foremost industrial structure that I am aware of is the old Goldie-McCulloch Southworks plant, one that has been preserved as a retail outlet mall and which includes some excellent examples of industrial machinery located both outside and in. In keeping with the strong Scottish tradition of building with stone, this is a handsome limestone building that also retains the original foundry in an inner courtyard. This foundry has a connection to the Artifacts Project as it is almost certainly where the large Goldie-Corliss stationary steam engine was fabricated circa 1906 for use in the Kaufman Footwear plant where it was still in excellent working order at the time of the plant's closure in 2000.

After a somewhat convoluted and painful process, we were able to acquire this engine for the collection, although sadly it is now in pieces in a less than perfect storage environment. One option is to try and restore it to working condition and fire it up periodically during the year. Although expensive, this is feasible as witnessed by a Goldie-McCulloch sibling of the same size currently in working condition at the Ameliasburg Museum in Prince Edward County.

Our most recent project has been the retrieval of a jute breaking machine from Canada Cordage (formerly Doon Twines), one that is old enough to have been used at the original Doon Twines factory located in the village of Doon. This site has recently been landscaped, with a part of the original factory wall still visible. Our hope is to place the machine on site, not far from the wall, which according to a contemporary plan of the building housed a jute-breaking room where the current wall is located. There is the possibility, then, that the machine may end up very close to where it may once have been used.

My hope is that we can continue to place these machines on display at least for the near future, which would include the proposed Centre Block development in downtown Kitchener, although we are looking at a cut-off

date of around 2010 or 2012. This is partly a result of the difficulty of finding suitable machinery as much as anything else as sources for these machines are obviously becoming fewer with each passing year. I also hope that by that time the project will have established itself as an important legacy to Waterloo region and perhaps beyond, and will encourage others to make further contributions to expand the scale of the project beyond its original vision and become the voice of a working community.

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