

# Halifax has lost more than 80 per cent of its heritage buildings, study says

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A new project mapping Halifax's architectural heritage shows the city has lost most of its historical structures. A sailboat is shown in front of the Halifax skyline on Sunday, July 31, 2016. Darren Calabrese/The Canadian Press

A new project mapping Halifax's heritage shows the city has lost most of its historical structures.

The Halifax Memory Maps project, led by Jonathan Fowler, a Saint Mary's University archeologist and anthropology professor, has found the city has lost 87 per cent of historical buildings since 1878.

Fowler said the project began after realizing through discussions with his students there was no real way to track how many historical buildings remain in Halifax while the city's population grows.

The first instalment of the project compares early maps of Halifax drawn by American civil engineer Henry W. Hopkins in 1878 with current maps of the city, finding that only 1,143 of nearly 9,000 buildings remain.

The project found only 381 of the city's remaining buildings are registered as heritage properties with the Halifax Regional Municipality, protecting them from demolition. It also says 30 per cent of unregistered heritage buildings in downtown Halifax were demolished between 2009 and 2019.

Like other historic Canadian cities, Fowler said Halifax has an "incredibly rich" architectural heritage.

The bulk of the city was built in the 19th century with many old buildings built out of wood, stone or brick.

Unlike more recent builds that use modern materials like steel and concrete to create a functional building, Victorian structures built in Halifax have what Fowler called "little affectionate treatments" adding to their charm and history.

"These are the things we find interesting and I think speaks to the people who visit the city," Fowler said.

Fowler said maintaining heritage in the city is important for keeping the story of the city alive, because a lot of modern architecture doesn't have many distinguishing characters.

"For example in Ottawa, you can go for a walk down parts of Westboro and it just looks like all the modern architecture in Halifax, it's all the same sort of thing. That's part of the concern many of us have, is that not only do we lose these old buildings, but we also lose some of that character that makes Halifax distinct," he said.

Preserving the city's heritage goes beyond simply maintaining a charming esthetic for esthetics sake, Fowler added, and preserving heritage is necessary to maintaining the city's tourism industry as well.

"When we travel, we go to beautiful places, we go to interesting places, we go to places you have stories," he said. "People don't just come to Halifax to go to the mall, but they go to walk along the historic waterfront, they want to see some of these old buildings and get that vibe."

Beyond financial reasons, Fowler said preserving Halifax's remaining heritage is necessary to preserve the city's culture.

"People are not just animals who require food and shelter. We are beings of memory. We live through time, we require narrative, we are created by narrative. It gives us a sense of purpose and meaning and orientation in the world," he said.

But preserving heritage and allowing more growth aren't mutually exclusive, Fowler said.

He noted that cities are dynamic places and the best approach forward is thinking about what from the past is most worth preserving in the future.

“We should have a conversation because otherwise we end up ... sleepwalking into the future,” he said.

Fowler said several of the homes that were lost were unaffected by the Halifax Explosion in 1917, which destroyed many buildings in the Richmond neighbourhood in Halifax’s north end, which wasn’t heavily built up when Hopkins charted the city.

The destruction from the explosion will show on maps in the early 1900s, when densification in that area began.

The next instalment of the project — which should be ready next spring — will look at maps from 1899 and one of the oldest aerial photograph of Halifax.