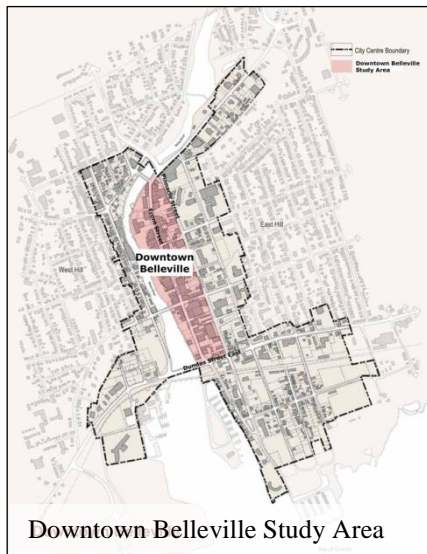


EVALUATING DOWNTOWN DESIGN: A comparative assessment of Cornwall and Belleville, Ontario.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1– INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this report is to compare the physical design of four case study downtowns in Eastern Ontario. Kent Robertson’s principles provide a guiding framework discussed below. The dearth of literature in this area unfortunately means that there are no recognized tools for evaluating the physical design of small downtowns. Thus, this report employs a number of unrelated tools to comparatively evaluate the case studies. Following the presentation of these findings is a discussion of the implications for the successful revitalization of the case studies, as well as recommendations for improving their physical design. Finally, this report concludes with a consideration of the limitations of the methods used and suggestions for improving the method in future research.

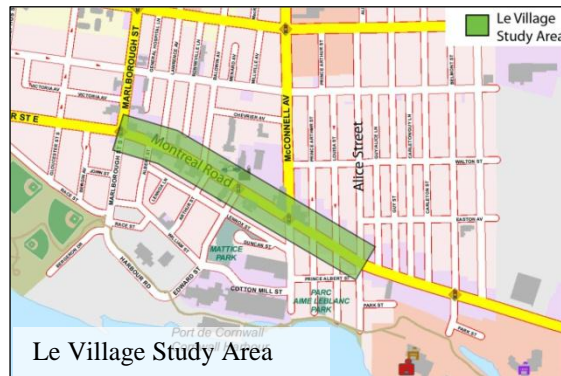


2 – CASE SELECTION

Four case study downtowns were selected for this report, two from the City of Belleville and two from the City of Cornwall. These cities were selected because of their broad range of similarities, including population and development history. Belleville’s current downtown has a distinct appearance and a notably “Main Street” building typology, showing evidence of decline. The decline of Belleville’s downtown led to the development of the *Downtown Belleville Master Plan (DBMP)* in 2006. The *DBMP* received an award from the Canadian Institute of Planners the following year, recognizing it as an exemplar of downtown design. This professional recognition allows the *DBMP* to function as a benchmark against which to compare the other case studies.

Cornwall's close relationship with Québec has resulted in the establishment of a strong French-Canadian presence in the city. The Francophone community was traditionally centered in the east of Cornwall, which led to the city's current state of possessing two distinct downtowns, one called Le Village in the east end and the other called simply Downtown Cornwall. Each downtown also has its own Business Improvement Association (BIA), and these work closely with the city to encourage revitalization programs.

3 – METHODS



The comparative evaluation of the case study downtowns was informed by Robertson's principles for successful downtowns, summarized below. Various tools were employed to evaluate each of the downtowns according to Robertson's principles, summarized below, and then to compare them to one another on a five-point qualitative scale from "very good" to "very poor". This analysis was conducted through site visits and supplemented by interviews with a senior planner from each city.

Plan/Vision for downtown – The plan should describe goals/objectives, streetscape guidelines, transportation and pedestrian considerations, design elements, site-specific projects, and linkages between primary downtowns within a city.

Downtown heritage – The number of downtown buildings with heritage designation.

Link between downtown and waterfront – The number and quality of linkages between the downtown and waterfront, if any.

Pedestrian friendliness – Kelly Clifton's PEDS walkability survey.





























Design guidelines – Jan Gehl's physical design assessment tool for downtowns, examines scale, function, attractiveness, design, and building details.

Distinctive sense of place – Jack Nasar's likability analysis, examines downtown for distinctiveness, five categories of likable features, building complexity, interrelationships between downtown buildings, and the overall structure and experience of the downtown.

4 – ANALYSIS

Robertson’s principles provided an effective guideline for the comparison of the case study downtowns. Data collection consisted of a document and policy review to examine any downtown plans adopted by the cities, followed by one visit to each downtown to conduct the necessary evaluations and take photographs as needed. The evaluation criteria and tools helped to identify the design strengths and weaknesses in the selected downtowns. The downtowns were then compared according to their treatment of each criteria or principle described by Robertson. The table below shows the relative performance of each downtown with respect to the given criteria.

Table i-1–Comparison of Case Study Downtowns

Criteria	DBMP	Downtown Belleville	Le Village	Downtown Cornwall
Plan/Vision for Downtown				
Downtown Heritage				
Waterfront Linkage				
Pedestrian Friendliness				
Physical Design				
Likability				
Overall				

The evaluation method was hindered by the wide array of tools that were employed, since these were not designed to address the peculiarities of small city downtowns. Since the tools were also designed to be employed individually, repetition arose when more than one tool required the evaluation of a given feature, such as downtown heritage. Conducting the analysis in January also affects the findings since it is common for downtowns to remove street furniture and other amenities during the winter, in addition to the poor weather conditions which can also influence the researcher’s perception.

5 – CONCLUSION

The *DBMP* was found to be the most representative of Robertson's criteria for successful downtowns, as expected. Recommendations for improving the *DBMP* emphasized the need to expand on the implementation of the *Plan*'s vision and design guidelines. It was also recommended that infill development bridging the waterfront and downtown be of an appropriate building type, and that the range of appropriate building types be extended to better reflect the diversity of buildings currently present in Downtown Belleville. Finally, a set of enforceable design guidelines should be incorporated into the *DBMP* so as to ensure a degree of compliance with the *Plan* in the implementation stage.

Downtown Cornwall was found to be the next most effectively-designed downtown, performing very well in terms of its downtown plans, pedestrian friendliness, physical design, and likability. The recommendations for Downtown Cornwall are to update its Zoning By-Laws and compile previously published revitalization plans as well as the adoption of design guidelines which reflect the various historical periods currently represented by existing buildings. This may also lead to greater recognition of, and protection for, its built heritage.

Downtown Belleville excelled in its treatment of heritage and waterfront linkages, but failed to capitalize on the excellent vision presented in the *DBMP* or on its pedestrian friendliness. Recommendations for Belleville include the adoption and implementation of the *DBMP*, updating and refining its Zoning By-Laws, and ensuring that design guidelines revitalize building styles and elements that are at risk of being lost in Belleville's downtown.

Le Village was found to be the poorest case study, performing poorly by comparison to the other case studies. It was found that Le Village possessed a large number of building types inappropriate for a downtown setting, and that the distribution of these buildings significantly hindered its performance. It is recommended that Le Village improve linkages to the waterfront by extending streetscape improvements to streets extending south of Montreal Road, as well as removing unnecessary elements from the streetscapes. Also, the adoption of a guiding vision or plan and design guidelines which can be enforced to some degree in conjunction with updated Zoning regulations would significantly improve the physical design of Le Village.

In terms of the methodology employed for this report, it is recommended that future researchers refine the variety of evaluation tools used by this study to better suit small city downtowns in North America. By improving on these tools and developing a means of effectively evaluating the physical design of small downtowns, researchers and planners will have a better means of assessing the design aspect of downtown revitalization programs.