

Halifax developer McCrea dies at 73

By JOHN DeMONT Staff Reporter

Published April 16, 2013

Projects changed the face of downtown Halifax

To understand Ben McCrea's approach to business, it wasn't necessary to see the Halifax developer in action in the boardroom.

McCrea, who died Tuesday at 73 after a lengthy illness, was said to be as able on the salmon river as he was at the negotiating table.

And like most anglers, McCrea had a theory on the best way to hook fish, according to his old fishing and hunting friend, Bruce Outhouse.

"Every season, there was one specific dry fly that would work on that river," recalled the Halifax lawyer.

"Ben would work through every fly until he found it. In bad fishing conditions, that might mean changing flies every five minutes. He'd just keep switching until he got the right one."

That kind of stubborn resolve wasn't limited to the salmon pools. McCrea, as much as any developer of his generation, changed the look of downtown Halifax. And he did so with similar single-minded determination.

Through his company, the Armour Group Ltd., McCrea is perhaps best known for transforming seven derelict warehouses on Halifax's waterfront into Historic Properties, which has won many national and international awards.

But in an interview last year with The Chronicle Herald, he said his most difficult project was Founders Square. That downtown Halifax project involved incorporating the facades of seven 18th-century buildings into a new office building.

In recent years, the Armour Group was involved in a protracted battle with Halifax Regional Municipality over the company's \$25-million Waterside Centre at the corner of Duke and Hollis streets.

At one point, McCrea even threatened to sue then-mayor Peter Kelly for defamation over comments Kelly had made. But the project eventually got the green light and construction started in February.

The potential lawsuit was no empty threat. McCrea once successfully sued the Globe and Mail and national reporter Stevie Cameron for defamation.

When the Waterside Centre is complete, Armour will have developed and managed some two million square feet of space in the Halifax area.

But McCrea, who has won a host of honours, including being inducted into the Junior Achievement Nova Scotia Business Hall of Fame last year, was also an ardent conservationist and environmentalist.

He said he took personal pride in Armour's Park Place Corporate Campus, which was the first LEED-certified commercial building in Atlantic Canada. (LEED stands for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design.)

In the 1980s, McCrea was also part of a group that bought the ailing Halifax Shipyard and resurrected it before selling it to the Irving family. According to a family statement, McCrea believed "the land and buildings were too important to the region's history and future to be used for any other purpose than as a shipyard."

"The issue," McCrea said of his approach to development in an interview with The Chronicle Herald last year, "has always been to create a sense of place so that there is some longevity and it is sustainable over time."

Born in Salisbury, N.B., and educated at the University of New Brunswick and the University of Illinois, Armour Mayes (Ben) McCrea moved to Halifax in 1972 to found the Armour Group.

He was driven to succeed, friends say. But he was also a strong family man who loved fine Scotch, a salmon pool when the fish were taking, and his springer spaniel bird dogs.

Longtime friend George Buckrell said there was more to McCrea than drive and ambition.

"People saw the hard-nosed side of him, but he was a complex guy — a thinker and a dreamer," said the former Royal Bank senior vice-president.

McCrea leaves wife Joanne, sons Stuart and Scott, daughters Alison and Janice, and their families.

Source: Chronicle Herald <http://thechronicleherald.ca/metro/1123652-halifax-developer-mccrea-dies-at-73>