

Batawa, Ontario: Reinventing the Design

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There is a strong history of company towns in Canada. Mainly built as resource extraction sites, usually in locations far from urban centres, they were built as complete communities including production sites, homes, shops, hospitals, schools and churches. Their creators aimed to offer workers services and amenities that were modern and generous, compared with those accessible to similarly skilled workers in larger cities. Most of these towns are no longer owned and operated by their founding corporations, and some have been abandoned. Many, however, remain populated by people determined to reinvent their home communities.

Batawa, Ontario – a town designed and constructed as the Canadian headquarters for the Bata Shoe Company – has followed a similar pattern of development, decline, and now reinvention. However, there are also some striking differences: unlike more remote company town locations, Batawa was built close to many major centres. The focus of manufacture on a finished product (shoes) does not fit the model of primary resource extraction upon which many company towns were based. Finally, one of the most interesting elements of Batawa at this time, even during its current period of reinvention, is the continued involvement of the town's founding family. Sonja Bata is the CEO of the Development Corporation for Batawa; this supports the perspective that perhaps for a planned community to be viable there is always a need for the founding visionary, or a close representative, to be present. This paper will discuss the similarities and differences between Batawa and other company towns in Canada, and explore the struggle for resilience experienced by these communities in a changing economic landscape.