

ASSOCIATION OF CANADIAN MAP LIBRARIES AND ARCHIVES

# BULLETIN

## City Character Prints: The Poster Maps Published by Archar Inc., Toronto, Ontario.

### Feature Article

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### Abstract

Archar Inc. of Toronto, Ontario was one of the most prolific publishers of pictorial poster-maps of North American cities during the 1970s and 1980s. Their “City Character Prints” were three-dimensional perspective maps created by artists to evoke the unique spirit of a place by including illustrations representative of city symbols, historical facts and cartoon-like caricatures of prominent citizens. Costs of poster production were subsidized by collecting advertising fees from local businesses and attractions in return for promotion on the finished map.

### Introduction

Pictorial maps inhabit a curious place within the cartographic genre. They do not portray scientific representations of the earth's surface and are of relatively limited use for navigation and direction-finding. Instead, they combine map elements with images and text in such a way as to tell a visual story or to capture a sense of place (Hornsby, 2017). The addition of pictorial elements to maps has a long history, but the pictorial form of mapmaking became especially common in the United

States. It was there that they are considered to have reached their "golden age" as a significant part of popular culture, beginning in the late 1920s until the 1960s (Hornsby, 2017).

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, several publishers found success in producing pictorial views of North American cities which were sold as poster art (Stevens, 2023). One of the most commercially successful was Archar Inc., of Toronto, Ontario who created a line of three-dimensional perspective maps called "City Character Prints."<sup>1</sup> This name was well-chosen in that each of their maps included images that attempted to evoke the unique spirit of a place. Rather than showing *only* a city's topography, vegetation, street system, and buildings, Archar's posters *also* included cartoon-like illustrations representing local symbols, people and events that infused playful energy into their urban views. The result was an unpretentious, nonthreatening map that invited visual exploration (Southworth & Southworth, 1982, p. 88).

### Archar's City Character Map Formula

Archar Inc. was in business between 1972-1985, and during that time, they employed artists and illustrators to create more than 100 maps of cities throughout the United States and Canada (See Appendix A). Each artist had their own unique style but, in general, each map they produced followed a standardized formula that employed common elements. Commenters have pointed out that "...the consistency [of Archar maps] is so strong that one has a difficult time distinguishing cities at first look since the graphic sauce which is overlaid on all the cities tends to obscure their differences" (Treib, 1980). Five common elements on Archar's city views included a prominent title, representative city symbols and local characters in the corners, textual annotations detailing quirky historical facts, cartoon illustrations of citizens engaged in everyday activities, and strategically located advertisements that identified local businesses and attractions who had paid an advertising fee to feature on the map itself.

1. **Map Titles** - Archar prominently titled their maps with the name of the city that was being pictured. Large and creative fonts (and sometimes map borders) were employed to provide a sense of a city's character. The title of Archar's *New Orleans* (1983) map, for example, imaginatively integrates a trumpet and saxophone in homage to the city being the birthplace of jazz music. Similarly, their *Detroit* (1973) map integrated a car wheel into the letter 'O' in the word Detroit in recognition of its "motor city" heritage.



Figure 1: Detail of title of *New Orleans* (1983) poster-map. Source: David Rumsey Historical Map Collection.

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<sup>1</sup> The company's maps were initially part of their "City Design Prints" series though this name was later changed to "City Character Prints" in mid-1978, seemingly after the name was trademarked. A separate publisher, Trans Continental Cartographers Ltd., Vancouver, B.C. produced a similarly named line of maps called "City Character Maps" from 1969-1974.

2. **Representative City Symbols & Associated Characters** - most instances, a city symbol (e.g., state flag, seal, etc.) or a caricature of an individual meant to represent the city and its people would be featured in a map corner. The *Pittsburgh* (1978) map, for example, shows "Pa Pitt", a personification of the City of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and a group of the city's legendary steelworkers. Likewise, the lower-left corner of the *Philadelphia* map (1980) includes a group of sports figures representing the city's four professional sports teams. In the lower right appears a caricature of Benjamin Franklin, who, as legend has it, conducted his famous kite experiment in Philadelphia in 1752 to investigate the nature of lightning and electricity.

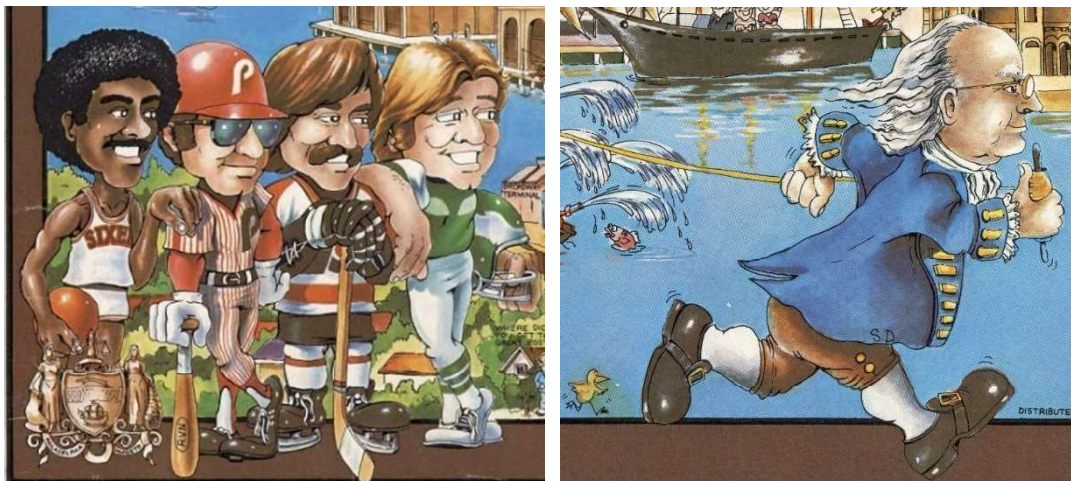


Figure 2: Details from *Philadelphia* (1980) poster map. Left: Professional sports figures caricatures appearing in lower-left corner; Right: Detail of Benjamin Franklin caricature appearing in lower-right corner. Source: David Rumsey Historical Map Collection.

3. **Textual Annotations Detailing Noteworthy or Quirky Facts** – Snippets of text scattered about Archar maps describe details about each city, its culture and people. This information may include unusual stories, historical anecdotes, or little-known facts. For instance, an annotation on the *Montreal* (1974) map reads, "La deuxième plus grande ville française du monde – second largest French city in the world." Another example, from the *Indianapolis* (1980) map, contains an apocryphal story about the origin of the local Hoosier nickname given to inhabitants of the State of Indiana. It states, "Where did the name Hoosier come from? Some say it was the response to 'who's there' to the knock on the door."
4. **Cartoon Illustrations of Citizens Engaged in Everyday Activities** - Dotted throughout Archar's maps are many cartoon-like drawings of local citizens going about their everyday activities. These often-humorous "street scenes" show individuals participating in the life of the city, whether attending a sports event, driving a motor vehicle, conversing with friends along a sidewalk, or even doing something outlandish like floating down the Niagara River in a barrel toward Niagara Falls as shown on the *Buffalo* (1982) map.
5. **Strategically Located Advertisements Identifying Local Businesses & Attractions** – Only those city businesses and local attractions who had paid an advertising fee were identified within the signage, billboards or vehicles depicted on Archar maps. Radio stations, banks, hotels, and airlines were the most frequent advertisers, but local

bookstores, printers, clothiers, newspapers and restaurants were usually present. Almost no empty spaces existed on maps as airplanes, hot-air balloons, helicopters, and watercraft of all shapes and sizes filled the skies and waterbody features. For example, in the *New York City* (1982) map, note the Aer Lingus jumbo jet in the skyline and the WCBC FM101-branded sailboat on the city's East River.

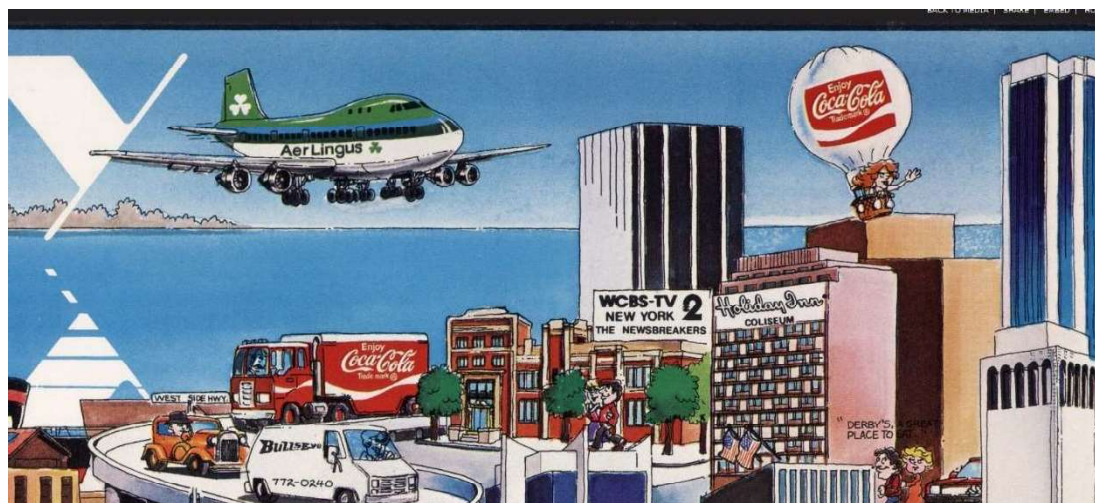


Figure 3: Detail of illustration of Aer Lingus jumbo jet and other advertisements as shown on *New York City* (1982) poster-map. Source: David Rumsey Historical Map Collection.

### Advertisements & Advertisers Subsidized Cost of Publication

Production of a single Archar poster map could take an on-site artist and several assistants about five to six months to create ("Charm city with a few surprises", 1977). Archar would offset the cost of map production and publication as a for-profit enterprise by having its sales agents visit local businesses and attractions to offer an advertising placements fee in return for promotion on their in-progress map. In 1977, for example, the sponsorship fee for the Baltimore map was between \$250 to \$1,000. Other city poster-map publishers active during this period (e.g., Trans Continental Cartographers, Ltd. of Vancouver, B.C.) also made use of this "subscription" model of cartography to support business operations (Stevens, 2023). Once completed, Archar's maps were available for purchase from business sponsors and directly from Archar by mail order. Sizes available were either large (29 by 39 inches) or small (14 by 18 inches).

### Archar's Business Associates & Artists

Archar, Inc.<sup>2</sup> was incorporated in 1972, and its earliest business associates included Robert "Bob" Baird, John Baird, Russ Baird, and first company president Stuart Sellars. The inspiration for their

<sup>2</sup> Short form for both "Art Chart" and "Artistic Characterizations."

venture may have come from John Baird, as he had previously worked selling advertising for British Columbia-based map publishers Trans Continental Cartographers and Inter Continental Cartographers and found himself free to compete with them (Russ Baird, personal communication, November 10, 2023). In their first few years of operation in the early-to-mid 1970s, Archar's most frequently identified artists were Swaena Lavelle, Bob Hastings and Tom Dodds, who primarily produced maps of cities in the Upper Midwest and Ontario.

In 1975, Stuart Sellars left Archar to start Archar (Western) Inc. and Archar International, Inc.<sup>3</sup> operated separately from Archar, Inc. despite their map publications remaining similar. Kim Forrest is credited as the artist who created many of the Archar (Western) maps, including a series of Hawaiian island tourist maps (e.g., *Hawaii The Big Island*, 1979). Archar International produced several maps and guidebooks for locations in Britain, Ireland and Mexico City. A second pictorial map publisher set up by Archar alumni was La Maison Descartes, which was incorporated by Russ Baird and Jean-Louis Rheault in 1978. Yet another was Unique Media, Inc., which John Baird and Swaena Lavelle started in 1979. In producing their map of *Los Angeles* (1979), Lavelle and Baird published report consulting a myriad of sources which included books, maps, photographs, historians, civic leaders, tourists, and friends in addition to visiting hundreds of places (Krier, 1979).

Though most of the company's early artists would leave after several years to pursue other opportunities, many talented artists were evidently available to produce Archar's City Character Prints. These Archar artists and illustrators included Don Inman, Bing Chapelle, Lawrence Peckmezian, Barbara Spurl, Bozidar Damjanovic-Benedict, Cindy Delpart, Georgina M. Bernache, Gayle Lavery, Shunichi Yamamoto, Donald Liu, Francesca Profili, Gerry Castello, Susan Dewar, Robert Van Nood, David Cooper, Gayle Grout, and Margaret Munro.

Archar's business operations would last approximately 14 years before the company officially went bankrupt in 1985. Prior to bankruptcy, many of Archar's map copyrights were sold to Don Scott Associates, Inc. (now Buffalo Games), who would go on to produce more than 80 City Character Prints jigsaw puzzles featuring many of Archar's original maps until the early 1990s.

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<sup>3</sup> The companies now operate as TGI Maps (Travel Graphics International).

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## Appendix A

Listing of known Archar Inc. Poster Maps, see attachment.