

**“BETWEEN ILLUSION AND REALITY”: PRESENTATIONS OF THE PAST IN  
CANADIAN STREETScape EXHIBITS**

By

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Program in History  
in conformity with the requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Arts

Queen’s University  
Kingston, Ontario, Canada

July 2025

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## **Abstract**

Since Canada's first streetscape exhibit opened in the British Columbia Provincial Museum in 1972, visitors have immersed themselves in partial historical narratives. Built up with half-sized façades inspired by historical buildings and staged with historical artifacts to make the settings appear lived-in, streetscape exhibits offered visitors the chance to step back in time and experience history "as it actually was." Almost twenty years later, in 1989, the new Canadian Museum of Civilization took inspiration from this original streetscape for the design of their own history galleries. Both streetscape exhibits provided sensory-based, immersive experiences that promised "historical authenticity" without direct curatorial interpretation. This thesis examines how the 1972 streetscape exhibit at the BC Provincial Museum (now the Royal BC Museum) and the 1989 streetscape at the Canadian Museum of Civilization (now the Canadian Museum of History) reflected and shaped visitors' understandings of Canada's past. By entrenching history within settler commemorative practices that echoed popular Canadian historical narratives, these museums appealed to public desires for immersive entertainment. This research ultimately explores how the consumption of history in two Canadian streetscape exhibits from 1972 to 1989 reinforced different but complementary narratives of nation.

## Acknowledgments

I am indebted to current and former staff at the Royal British Columbia Museum for helping me locate invaluable files about the exhibit's design process. I'm especially grateful to former History Curator Lorne Hammond for his expertise navigating the Modern Human History Library, and to Chief of Exhibits Michael Barnes for his generous support, including allowing me to access the Exhibits' own internal archives for relevant photographs and material. I'm also thankful to Bianca Message for sharing her knowledge of the development of Old Town as passed down in stories from her father, Jean André. Thank you as well to the staff at the British Columbia Archives, including Sue Halwa, for helping me to navigate sensitive records requests in the midst of the Archives' move to a new collections building. Finally, I would not have thought to even begin this project without the enthusiasm I received from my friends and former coworkers at the Royal BC Museum – in alphabetical order, thank you Emma, Jenn, Jenny, Laurel, Madison, McKaila, Paul, and Phil.

At the Canadian Museum of History, librarian and archivist Benoit Thériault was very generous in helping to locate useful material concerning the development of History Hall, even going so far as to find me a CD of an early form of a digitized walkthrough of the streetscape so I could get a better sense of the layout of the no-longer-extant exhibit. Jonathan Wise at the Audiovisual Archives also went above-and-beyond helping me locate the recordings from the 1992 Historians' Retreat, which contained valuable information about the curators' thoughts concerning the first few years of History Hall.

I'm also extremely grateful for the support and generous encouragement from my supervisor, Dr. Caroline-Isabelle Caron. Her expertise and suggestions for new sources to look at and different ways of framing my investigative questions have proven invaluable throughout this

writing process. Months before I even began at Queen's, Dr. Caron was mentoring me by providing thoughtful suggestions about defining the scope for this project. In addition to her guidance on this thesis, Dr. Caron's sound grant-writing advice enabled this project to be supported by a Canada Graduate Scholarship through the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

I wish to also extend my thanks to Dr. Jane Errington for running a series of writing workshops over the last two years for my Master's cohort – having the space to share various chapter sections helped me overcome stifling instances of writer's block and reminded me to maintain focus on my chosen topic. I'm also very grateful for my wonderful cohort. I could not have asked for a brighter, funnier, or kinder gaggle of peers – who are now my dear friends – on which to undergo this Master's journey with. Emma Bock, Elizabeth Grundy, Kaileigh La Belle, and Kaitlyn Carter – thank you for your meticulous peer feedback on drafts, and for the much-needed laughter-filled breaks.

And a final thank you to my mom and dad – for your love that transcends the distance of this country, for our weekly FaceTimes, our daily Wordles, and your constant support. My love for you imbues every word on every page.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

BCPM – British Columbia Provincial Museum (name from 1886 to 1987)

CMC – Canadian Museum of Civilization (name from 1989 to 2013)

CMH – Canadian Museum of History (name from 2013 to present)

NMM – National Museum of Man (name from 1968 to 1989)

RBCM – Royal British Columbia Museum (name from 1987 to present)

## **List of Terms**

Old Town – the streetscape exhibit at the BCPM. The unofficial name of the module

“Urbanization and Industrialization,” within the Modern Human History gallery (“Becoming BC”).

History Hall – the streetscape exhibit at the CMC. Officially renamed in 1993 to “Canada Hall.”

## Prelude

I grew up in an imaginary city. The theatre played the same Charlie Chaplin films on endless repeat, loops of the mustachioed man bumbling from one comedy to the next. The open doors of the Grand Hotel perpetually beckoned weary travellers from the cobblestone street. The brightly-lit storefronts offered plumed hats and mink coats, fine China and polished silverware. I darted through dimly lit alleyways, listened to the banging of the blacksmith's hammer, breathed in the intoxicating smell of freshly-baked apple pie. I peopled the empty streets with characters from my own imagination; I played in an undefined, fuzzy imagining of the turn-of-the-century town. And at the end of my play, I waited for the whistle of the rumbling train at the station before being whisked off to the next diorama in the fantasy.

For decades, museum streetscape exhibits have been the playgrounds of Canadians' youths. As children, visitors played make-believe in the life-size dioramas, imagining that when they stepped through the exhibit archways that they were traveling back in time. It is a time travel unbound by logic, facts, or even history – the model of the streetscape exhibit depicts a fantastical past dissociated from a precise period to create a theatre within the mind where memories stage their own plays and stories. The exhibits depict a particular kind of heritage, and over the decades, have become pieces of heritage themselves. But what makes these immersive exhibits so appealing and evocative to generations of visitors from near and far? Why do different streetscape exhibits take similar snapshots of the past to present to their publics? And what time do these spaces of history claim to represent?

This thesis represents the first scholarly attempt to untangle the history of two particular streetscape exhibits constructed within the halls of two major Canadian museums. Streetscape exhibits are immersive, sensory-based galleries which contain life-size reproductions of

historical buildings staged with artifacts. The first of these exhibits constructed in Canada – known colloquially by generations of visitors as “Old Town” – was built at the British Columbia Provincial Museum (BCPM) in 1972. The streetscape was made to resemble a typical turn-of-the-century town in British Columbia, and was one of several dioramic displays in “Becoming BC,” an exhibit depicting the economic development of the province. The second exhibit examined in this thesis was a similar but expanded version of the BCPM’s streetscape model. The first phase of this streetscape was completed at the Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC) in 1989 and titled “History Hall.” Old Town was a snapshot of a fictional town frozen at a single point in time, but History Hall wound through a thousand years of history and proceeded East-to-West across its exhibits. While their openings were separated by almost twenty years, these streetscapes represent two entry points into a conversation about the negotiation of Canadian historical representations. Catering to a public eager to feel as if they were traveling back in time, curators aimed to create immersive experiences that reaffirmed existing popular understandings of narratives of nation. By staging history within settler commemorative practices that appealed to most visitors’ existing understandings of Canada’s colonial past, these exhibits reinforced settler fantasies as part of the process of modern nation-building.

I came to this research as a scholar already invested in spaces offering escapes into the past. Growing up in Victoria, British Columbia, my childhood was spent running down the cobblestones of the Old Town streetscape with my friends. Feeling like I could step back in time was an exhilarating pull into a sort of historical fantasy. The streetscape appears to cover many aspects of life in turn-of-the-twentieth-century British Columbia: leisure (with its movie theatre and saloon), travel (with its Grand Hotel and train station), and business (with its Chinese herbalist shop, photographer’s studio, draper’s shop, and ceramics store). As a child, I did not

question why certain buildings were chosen to be depicted over others, or that the exhibits themselves were devoid of information beyond the buildings' façades. The purpose of the streetscape was not to feel as if you were learning about the past – the purpose was to feel like you were *experiencing* it. But besides the immersion offered by the exhibit, just what was it about the streetscape experience that had so enthralled me and countless others? As articulated by David Lowenthal, it may have been our craving for “evidence that the past endures in recoverable form” or for “some agency, some mechanism, some faith that will enable us not just to know [the past], but to see and feel it.”<sup>1</sup> Experiencing that past in the streetscape appeared to offer a more “authentic” experience than whatever the most detailed exhibit signage could communicate. The historical fantasy was legitimized, and even encouraged.

But this is a fantasy grounded within settler-centric myths and idealizations. In 2021, following a series of independent investigations into the Royal British Columbia Museum (RBCM), the Museum issued a Report to British Columbians recognizing and apologizing for acts of racism and discrimination experienced within the institution. In addition, the Report acknowledged that the museum's “core galleries, particularly the human history exhibits, are outdated, some displays are offensive, and they all attempt to reinforce the colonial history of the province.”<sup>2</sup> Within months of the report's release, the acting-CEO announced that the Human History exhibits of the third floor – including the Old Town streetscape – would close for decolonization in order to make space for “new narratives that include under-represented voices and reflect the lived experiences and contemporary stories of the people in BC.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), 14.

<sup>2</sup> *Report to British Columbians* (Royal British Columbia Museum, 2021), 6.

<sup>3</sup> *Royal BC Museum Announces Upcoming Changes to Core Galleries* (Royal British Columbia Museum, 2021), 30.



Figure 1. View of artifact removal in Old Town, taken from the staircase of the Grand Hotel during the exhibit's closure, October 7, 2022. Author's personal photograph.

It was during this time of closure that I joined the RBCM as a Collections Technician. For several weeks, I worked exclusively in Old Town as part of a team to decant the galleries (Figure 1). I removed artifacts from the displays – an ornate plate from the house of a famous governor here, a small locket containing an unknown man's faded portrait there – cataloguing, photographing, and packing them away. It was an eerie experience. After years of playing in the exhibits and among the façades, there I was actively involved in their dismantling. The lights shone at full brightness, and the sound effects were silenced (although at first, the illusory train shadows kept passing the windows of the station, accompanied by the contraption's mechanical

rumbling until someone found its off-switch – it had never needed to be shut down before). If the exhibit were an illusion, then the magician had lifted the cloth to reveal the trapdoor responsible for fifty years of magic.

I remained struck by the emotions the exhibit continued to generate. Impassioned members of the public filed petitions to the provincial government, demanding Old Town reopen. Historians John Lutz and Jason Colby wrote missives in the local newspapers warning of the danger of closing the provincial museum’s history galleries without a clear plan – they wrote that the museum was creating a “crisis of history” in which the people of the province could lose “[their] historical consciousness.”<sup>4</sup>

Within this context I became increasingly interested in the history of the Old Town streetscape – how it came to be, and the place it had lodged in people’s hearts, but also by what kind of history was presented by the exhibit. Upon some initial digging, I discovered that the same historian, Dan Gallacher, was the curator responsible for developing both Old Town in addition to another well-known streetscape at the Canadian Museum of Civilization. I realized his role in shaping the streetscape-exhibit approach in Canada had so far been severely under-recognized. Further research into the galleries’ development revealed that Jean André, an exhibit designer who worked on some of North America’s most dynamic museum exhibits in the mid-late twentieth century, was also involved with the planning and review of both streetscapes.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> John Lutz and Jason Colby, “Comment: We are Losing our History – and with it, Ourselves,” *Times Colonist*, 7 December 7, 2022. <https://www.timescolonist.com/opinion/we-are-losing-our-history-ndash-and-with-it-ourselves-6210499>. While the Old Town streetscape did eventually reopen in July 2023 with minor changes (after originally closing in January 2022), other sections of the Human History floor, including nearly all the First Peoples gallery, remain closed at the present time of writing in June 2025.

<sup>5</sup> Among others, these included exhibits at Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump in Alberta, the Makah Cultural and Research Centre in Washington, and the National Atomic Testing Museum in Nevada. See: Darron Kloster, “Obituary: Jean Jacques André was Architect of Old Town, Natural History, First Peoples Exhibits at Royal B.C. Museum,” *Times Colonist*, January 7, 2022. <https://www.timescolonist.com/local-news/obituary-jean-jacques-andré-was-architect-of-old-town-natural-history-first-peoples-exhibits-at-royal-bc-museum-4931104>.

These facts offered to turn the BCPM and CMC streetscapes into museal “bookends” for my emerging study on this unexplored facet of Canada’s public history: while separated by three provinces and by almost two decades, these streetscapes were intimately connected by these two influential figures. The exhibits additionally bracket a larger history of immersive streetscapes and the framing of museal presentations of the past in mid-to-late twentieth century Canada.

I situate myself through these anecdotes because the streetscape galleries are inhabited with personal experiences, including my own. I also wish to acknowledge my own investment in studying these spaces. Streetscapes were built to appeal to visitors’ hearts; in any analysis, then, we need to acknowledge the emotional power they hold over us, what their draw is, and what role the visitor plays in their representations of history. Most importantly, we need to ask why some of them have become flashpoints of public contention. In addition, by structuring this thesis around narrative interludes that recount the experience of walking through the exhibits, I aim to inject some of the sensorial experience that these streetscapes were originally designed to evoke. Framing these exhibit descriptions alongside the personal anecdotes in these self-contained interludes bridges the movements of this thesis. In this way, I encourage the reader to complete their own textual walkthroughs of the streetscapes. The chapters following each of these interludes work to contextualize not only the histories of these exhibits, but also the histories to which they purport to speak.

## Introduction

Historians do not find their stories. Like fiction writers, they use their imagination to assign specific motifs, to define beginnings and ends, to “emplot” narratives with emotional beats, or to assign significance to events.<sup>6</sup> Hayden White’s application of narrative emplotment to historiography revolutionized how historians crafted their own textual accounts. Narrative may also be applied to other forms of presenting the past, such as in the history museum: the curator must employ the same techniques as the textual historian when crafting the narrative forming the backbone of most exhibits. The curator’s choice to depict certain elements of the past (along with their choice to exclude others) reveals the invention at work behind the constructed displays. Within streetscapes, this may result in depictions of a disproportionate number of respectable spaces (shops, theatres, train stations, etc.), while excluding disreputable spaces (taverns, brothels, slums, etc.). White’s work therefore helps us understand that streetscape exhibits do not just automatically present so-called authentic versions of the past. They are rather inventions themselves because the very emplotment of the history that they present is itself an invention.

Streetscape displays in North American museums constructed in the mid-to-late twentieth century almost always depict the decades bracketing the year 1900.<sup>7</sup> They are united by a common theme that emphasizes strides in technological progress. They often also share a degree of optimism and ethnic pluralism, as seen in the establishment of a diversity of multicultural

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<sup>6</sup> Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 7.

<sup>7</sup> This observation is based on streetscapes built from this era that still exist today. These include “Main Street” at the Griffin Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago, Illinois, “Progress” at the Center of Science and Industry in Columbus, Ohio, “Winnipeg 1920” at the Manitoba Museum in Winnipeg, Manitoba, “Streets of Old Milwaukee” at the Milwaukee Public Museum in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, “Boomtown” at the Western Development Museum in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, “Historic Streetscape” at the Thunder Bay Museum in Thunder Bay, Ontario, “Streets of Old Detroit” at the Detroit Historical Museum in Detroit, Michigan, and “Village Square” at the State Museum of Pennsylvania in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

businesses founded by successive waves of immigrants. The historical narrative most often told within streetscapes is one of imperial advancement, of technological and moral superiority, and of nation-building. These exhibits are not neutral spaces; they are not mirrors of a definite past, but are interpretations meant to be agreeable to the museum's imagined audience. This is why I argue that streetscapes are liminal spaces between illusion and reality. They occupy a shadowland that is neither wholly fact nor wholly fiction.

I propose that this historical shadowland is ripe for understanding the visiting public's emotional entanglements with conceptions of Canada's past. By playing on people's popular hopes and fantasies for a culturally united present (and future), studying the creation of these exhibits offers a window into the values and perceptions of history at the time of their creation. Examining streetscapes through both provincial and national lenses also allows us to compare origin stories and founding myths of Canada, which are centred around urban expansion and the silencing of Indigenous presence and displacement.

This thesis revolves around the exhibits of two museums. These are the provincial museum in Victoria, British Columbia, and the national history museum in Gatineau, Québec. For almost 100 years, the museum in Victoria was known as the British Columbia Provincial Museum (BCPM). In 1987, however, it was rechristened as the Royal British Columbia (RBCM).<sup>8</sup> For the purposes of this thesis, I have chosen to mostly refer to this museum in my chapters as the BCPM, since I primarily examine the streetscape exhibit in the context of its planning in the late 1960s and in its first few years after opening in the early 1970s. The Canadian Museum of History poses a similar name-related problem. Before the construction of the new buildings in Gatineau, the institution was known as the National Museum of Man

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<sup>8</sup> *Annual Report 1987-88* (Royal British Columbia Museum, 1988), 2.

(NMM). When the new buildings opened in Gatineau in 1989, it was renamed to the Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC). In 2013, with renovations announced for the Human History galleries, the museum's name was once again changed, this time to the institution's current title: the Canadian Museum of History (CMH).<sup>9</sup> Similar to my decision regarding terminology with the BCPM, I refer to the national history museum primarily as the CMC, since it is the 1989 building's streetscape design under study here rather than earlier or later iterations of the history exhibits. In the rare case that I refer to either the RBCM or the CMH, it is to reflect their present-day contexts, not their streetscapes as considered in the past.

I use these two museums as venues to address the framing of Canadian history within streetscape exhibits. I do this primarily by examining the role of authenticity in these exhibits' presentations of national settler histories. I argue that the pursuit of authenticity in streetscape exhibits inadvertently results in "lacunae" in the presented histories – not quite holes, but rather unfilled spaces around which the emplotted narratives have taken shape. My goal is not to directly compare the two streetscapes at the BCPM and the CMC, separated as they are across time and space, but rather to use their different locations, eras, and scopes to access different manifestations of this historical framing. I further argue that the streetscape exhibit approach risks flattening complex histories into teleological narratives supportive of nationalist myths of unity and progress. Streetscape exhibits prioritize the aesthetics of built environments in order to recreate authentic-seeming pasts, all whilst eliding non-aesthetic elements of history that could disrupt visitor immersion. My work upon this topic is ultimately guided by a series of research questions. What is the role of museums in shaping identities and the public's relationships to a

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<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of how the various names of the CMH have reflected national agendas, see: Melissa Aronczyk and Miranda J. Brady, "Branding History at the Canadian Museum of Civilization," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 40, no. 2 (2015): 165–84.

perceived shared past? How do public understandings of heritage and authenticity shape engagements with presentations of the past? How do these exhibits reinforce the invisible boundaries of definitions of “us” and “them”?

Within my own research, I have yet to find examples of other scholars examining solely the streetscape exhibit-type as its own model for presenting the past. Even where living history museums – perhaps the closest cousin to the streetscape exhibit – have been widely studied, streetscape exhibits are surprisingly overlooked. When streetscape exhibits are studied, it is usually in isolation as a review of a single display. Because streetscapes are large installations and expensive to construct, they often remain as permanent exhibits in museums. Their permanency perhaps makes them easier to study than temporary exhibits because of years of content generated from the planning, marketing, and updating of these immersive displays.

Authenticity and heritage are slippery concepts, but are nonetheless essential to understanding history as presented in streetscape exhibits. Stuart Hall defined “Heritage” in one 1999 speech as “the whole complex of institutions and practices devoted to the preservation and presentation of culture and the arts.”<sup>10</sup> Hall argued that Heritage “provides the archive” for the distilled essence of the nation, embodied within the arts and artifacts that represent its traditions and founding myths.<sup>11</sup> In this way, Heritage does not just refer to physical monuments or exalted historical objects – it is a means for constructing collective social memory.<sup>12</sup> Laurajane Smith expands on Hall’s work to argue that lower-case heritage is a cultural and social process rather than an accretion of tangible “things.”<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, Smith stresses that heritage is a

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<sup>10</sup> Stuart Hall, “Whose Heritage? Un-settling ‘The Heritage’, Re-imagining the Post-nation,” in *Whose Heritage? Challenging Race and Identity in Stuart Hall’s Post-nation Britain*, edited by Susan L.T. Ashley and Degna Stone (Routledge: 2023), 13.

<sup>11</sup> Hall, “Whose Heritage?” 15.

<sup>12</sup> Hall, “Whose Heritage?” 15.

<sup>13</sup> Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (Routledge, 2006), 2.

negotiation. While heritage is at one level “about the promotion of a consensus version of history... to regulate cultural and social tensions in the present,” it can also *challenge* cultural values by reworking how it presents the past.<sup>14</sup> Heritage, just like history, is therefore subject to the same laws of White’s theories on narrativity in which the changing of its emplotment changes its meaning.

While history and heritage share their reliance on constructed narratives to generate meaning, heritage is fundamentally about “feeling” true by confirming people’s beliefs about the past.<sup>15</sup> David Lowenthal’s musings on history and heritage have therefore been particularly useful for this thesis, as he deems heritage to be not a “testable or even plausible version of our past,” but instead a “*declaration of faith* in that past.”<sup>16</sup> Lowenthal further argues that heritage “alters” the past in various ways: among them, these modes of fabrication include “upgrading” (making the past better than it was); “updating” (projecting present-day values onto past events or icons); and “selectively forgetting” unpleasant or contradictory historical things.<sup>17</sup> These alterations to the past are commonly seen in streetscapes, as they fabricate this desirable and fantastical heritage.

“Authenticity,” like heritage, is a difficult term to define because of its myriad meanings. It can at once mean something to be historically accurate, or it can refer to a person’s feeling that the portrayal encapsulates the past’s essence. Additionally, describing something as authentic may also indicate that the object shown is not a copy or a fake. The word implies that the past can be made recognizable through particular symbols – or that if enough of those symbols are

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<sup>14</sup> Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, 4.

<sup>15</sup> Alan Gordon, *Time Travel: Tourism and the Rise of the Living History Museum in Mid-Twentieth-Century Canada* (UBC Press, 2016), 12.

<sup>16</sup> David Lowenthal, “Fabricating Heritage,” *History and Memory* 10, no. 1 (1998): 7.

<sup>17</sup> Lowenthal, “Fabricating Heritage,” 12.

evoked, the representation becomes an “authentic” portrayal. The validity of these symbols differ from person to person, meaning that authenticity is individually defined. Therefore, the examination of authenticity reveals people’s own assumptions about what they believe to be true about the past.<sup>18</sup> “Authentic” presentations of the past are frequently evoked in exhibits and museums claiming to immerse visitors in the past. Streetscapes and living history museums both accomplish this in similar ways, but the defining line between the two types of displays is heavily blurred because of their overlapping purposes and shared characteristics. For the purpose of this thesis, I therefore present my own definition and explanation of the common features of a typical streetscape exhibit.

A streetscape is a life-sized indoor environmental reconstruction of a city street staged with authentic-seeming objects. These objects may be original artifacts, or supplemented with props historically accurate to the depicted period. In most streetscapes, the buildings constructed along the street are façades – perhaps designed based on blueprints of buildings that once existed, or inspired by a particular style of architecture from the period which the exhibit depicts. These façades may be life-sized, but often, space restrictions within the building require some ingenuity. Exhibit designers may therefore skew the scale of these buildings, making the first storeys true-to-size, but the second-storeys shorter, with optical illusions in the upper-storey windows to give the appearance that the scale is unaffected by ceiling heights. Other times, the streetscape is made from entirely “real” buildings, uprooted from their places of origin and placed along the indoor street to recreate the scene. In both of these cases, the buildings are often fitted with period rooms, hallways, staircases, and other interiors to display both artifacts (from

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<sup>18</sup> Mitch Combs, “Consuming a Settler Colonial History: Frontier Authenticity and the Collective Memory of the Fort,” *Western Journal of Communication* 85, no. 5 (October 2021): 715. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10570314.2021.1959633>.

furniture to personal effects) and features (such as room layouts, carpets, and wallpapers). These are the base features shared by streetscapes around the globe.

In comparison, living history museums or pioneer village sites are often tied to a particular location because of either a historic connection to a plot of land, or because of outdoor space requirements. Jay Anderson, one of the first scholars to write about living history in academia, defines living history museums as places in which people attempt to simulate life in another time, usually as an alternative method to interpret material culture.<sup>19</sup> Like streetscape exhibits, the buildings at a living history museum might be replicas, inspired reconstructions, or original structures. Perhaps the starkest difference between the two exhibit models is that living history museums are outdoor attractions, while the streetscape exhibit is housed inside a single building. In addition, the “living” component of living history museums’ mandates comes from the fact that they are usually interpreted by staff in period costumes or uniforms, who may take on personalities of people from the past to re-enact scenes for visitors. This theatrical element is core to the living history museum’s mission to transport guests back in time for the purpose of experiencing the past. While some streetscapes also employ costumed staff to enliven the displays (as happened in the CMC streetscape for a short period of time), this is not their core element. Streetscapes represent a hybrid between traditional museum exhibit techniques (with artifacts behind barriers or glass) and living history museums (with life-sized structures giving the sense of urban time travel). Both types of presentations of the past ultimately aim to transport their visitors back in time by emphasizing affect (“experiencing” or “sensing” the past) over learning (“knowing” about the past).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Jay Anderson, “Living History: Simulating Everyday Life in Living Museums,” *American Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (1982): 291. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2712780>.

<sup>20</sup> See for examples on the dichotomy between these two ways of presenting the past: Jay Anderson, ed., *A Living History Reader* (American Association for State and Local History, 1991); Christina Goulding, “The

Part of the difficulty in centralizing literature on streetscapes includes the variety of names used to address the same exhibit model.<sup>21</sup> Streetscene, cityscape, or cityscene are all used interchangeably within the museum literature to refer to what I call streetscapes. However, I use the term “streetscape” throughout this thesis because that was how these two exhibits were most frequently referred to in their contemporary literatures. There are several other advantages to using streetscape over other terms. For example, a “cityscape” implies a cross-section of an entire city: a sampling of neighbourhoods, representative of an entire urban area, composed of multiple streets and alleys. However, the vast majority of streetscape exhibits are comprised of only one or two actual streets. The exception, of course, are streetscapes such as the CMC’s, which resembled more a winding tunnel with several offshoots; however, even with this, there was primarily one central avenue rather than grid-like blocks or city layouts.<sup>22</sup> Streetscape exhibits do not usually include many key features of a city (such as hospitals or schools), instead focusing on structures rich with artifacts that the museum already has in its collection – so, focusing on portraying commercial buildings like shops on a single main street. Additionally, I choose “scape” over “scene” because it better encapsulates the environmental context of the exhibit more fully; a “scape” implies that what is being viewed is not just the buildings, but also the *land* around the buildings. This might be the cobblestones of the street, or the prompting of

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Commodification of the Past, Postmodern Pastiche, and the Search for Authentic Experiences at Contemporary Heritage Attractions,” *European Journal of Marketing* 34, no. 7 (August 2000): 835–53; Scott Magelssen, *Living History Museums: Undoing History through Performance* (Scarecrow Press, 2007).

<sup>21</sup> For example, while Peter Rider’s chapter about the Canadian Museum of Civilization deals extensively with the CMC History Hall streetscape, he only refers to it as an “immersive environment.” David Thiery Ruddel uses both “streetscape” and “street scene” interchangeably in his article about the merits of this exhibit design model. The Manitoba Museum calls its streetscape exhibit a “cityscape” exhibit. See: Peter Rider, “Presenting the Public’s History to the Public: The Case of the Canadian Museum of Civilization,” in *Studies in History and Museums*, ed. Peter Rider (Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1994), 77–101; David Thiery Ruddel, “Streetscape: Dead End or Signpost to the Future?,” *Muse* (Winter 1985): 18–22; “Making the Old New Again, but Still Old! The Winnipeg 1920 Cityscape - Manitoba Museum,” Manitoba Museum, May 17, 2022, <https://manitobamuseum.ca/making-the-old-new-again/>.

<sup>22</sup> Dan Gallacher, “The Canada Hall: A Museum Approach to Epic History,” unpublished manuscript, February 2009, 99.

the visitor to consider the architectural composition of the juxtaposed façades. “Scene,” as well, implies that the streetscape is a bordered vignette, whereas the purpose of the “scape” is to transport the visitor so they forget that they are in a definable space.

### *Historiography*

Museums are products of politics and memory. As sites of historical production, they are therefore also sites of identity production. This makes the streetscape model a particularly poignant way to examine portrayals of nationalist histories and settler identities, especially within the context of post-centennial Canada. National narratives often absorb racial and ethnic difference in favour of crafting unity; and in turn, the sense of a single, shared history supports the curation of a national identity. The nostalgic yearning for an imagined shared past (and the values associated with that past, or, at the very least, projected onto it) results in a romanticizing of one’s own fantasy.<sup>23</sup> By focusing on this “authenticity” aspect, museums search to “[mitigate] national identity crises and to confirm values and experiences of white, European settlers.”<sup>24</sup> Nostalgic memories are triggered within the streetscape by the highlighting of familiar or iconic elements of material culture, encouraging visitors to project their own historical fantasies onto the exhibit. Wrapped up within an authentic depiction of the past is the promise of originality – this is accompanied by the nostalgic fascination with origin seeking, which frequently privileges the colonial history of settlers.<sup>25</sup>

Museums are spaces in which the past is both performed and simulated. To understand this phenomenon, I draw upon postmodernist philosopher Jean Baudrillard’s theories about

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<sup>23</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (Basic Books, 2001), xiii.

<sup>24</sup> Combs, “Consuming a Settler Colonial History,” 720.

<sup>25</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (University of Chicago Press, 1998), 91; Combs, “Consuming a Settler Colonial History,” 722.

simulation. Here, I argue that streetscapes can be conceptualized as simulacra. These exhibits are copies of things with no original; the cities (and even the pasts) that they copy never existed in the first place. Exhibits are therefore representations not just of “the past,” but of particular versions of the past, aiming to resonate with public audiences who possess varying levels of familiarity with or knowledge of historical events. These museal versions of history can therefore never be true reconstructions of reality – they can only communicate a “sense of the past.”<sup>26</sup> Baudrillard argues that simulations reduce representations to signs.<sup>27</sup> While representation purports the sign and the real to be equivalent, simulation takes the sign as a reversion.<sup>28</sup> Baudrillard also takes Disneyland as the “perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulacra” because of its illusory play and haunting phantasms.<sup>29</sup> He goes further to suggest that people are attracted to the simulacra of Disney because it is a social microcosm of a miniaturized version of real America. Disneyland exists to hide the real – it is “set up in order to rejuvenate the fiction.”<sup>30</sup> When applying Baudrillard’s concepts to the streetscape exhibit type, it shows that the past claimed to be depicted never really existed. Instead, the exhibit is an idealized imagination of what that past should be like. As Baudrillard writes though, behind this illusory mask, there is no real version of the past waiting to be uncovered. Thus, the act of unmasking the streetscape simulacra becomes an exercise in existentialism – without a definable past, what historical grounding can people have? Perhaps this is one of the reasons the streetscape spaces remain so contested; because there is no agreement on how to replace these simulacra, any improved version would instead just mask another phantasm of reality.

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<sup>26</sup> Jordanova, “Objects of Knowledge,” 25.

<sup>27</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (University of Michigan Press, 1994), 5.

<sup>28</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 6

<sup>29</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 12.

<sup>30</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 13.

Streetscapes do not just generate knowledge, but rather *mimic experience*.<sup>31</sup> I argue, however, that the simulacrum nature of these immersive exhibits does not make them any less important, since visitors' very belief in the authority of these spaces to tell "the truth" or to describe a factually accurate past endows them with a weight that makes these spaces real. Reality, as constructed within museums, is a function of the imagination, with visitors instead experiencing a *virtual* reality; this is what scholar Lara Rutherford-Morrison refers to as "the capacity to be immersive, to be imagined as a fully articulated, emotionally engaging world, distinct from the visitor's everyday lived reality."<sup>32</sup> This virtual reality is an oxymoronic experience – it pairs the living history of the recreated street with the dead history of old artifacts displayed in the exhibit's building façade windows. Visitors enter a contract with these spaces by suspending their own belief, by engaging in what is, at its core, a game of make-believe.<sup>33</sup> Immersive history exhibits are therefore not replicas of historical reality, but instead, producers of "imaginative play."<sup>34</sup>

The past is frequently invoked in questions about power and identity.<sup>35</sup> As argued by Raphael Samuel in *Theatres of Memory*, people's sense of that past "is quite as much a matter of history as what happened in it."<sup>36</sup> Scholars of Canadian history have examined the various ways in which this "sense of the past" feeds nationalism. For example, Matthew Hayday and Raymond Blake argue in their text *Celebrating Canada* that Canadian national identity is not found within "the struggle between biculturalism and multiculturalism, nor between municipal or provincial or

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<sup>31</sup> Jordanova, "Objects of Knowledge," 25.

<sup>32</sup> Lara Rutherford-Morrison, "Playing Victorian: Heritage, Authenticity, and Make-Believe in Blists Hill Victorian Town, the Ironbridge Gorge," *The Public Historian* 37, no. 3 (2015): 91. <https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2015.37.3.76>.

<sup>33</sup> Rutherford-Morrison, "Playing Victorian," 91.

<sup>34</sup> Rutherford-Morrison, "Playing Victorian," 92.

<sup>35</sup> Cecilia Morgan, *Commemorating Canada: History, Heritage, and Memory 1850s-1990s* (University of Toronto Press, 2016), 13.

<sup>36</sup> Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory* (Verso, 1994), 15.

national priorities, nor between modernists and anti-modernists, nor between Indigenous people and non-Indigenous people... it is all of these together, and, collectively, they all contribute to the mental construction of nationalism.”<sup>37</sup> Raymond and Blake’s edited series explores how commemorations and other mechanisms of identity-crafting (such as holiday celebrations and anniversaries) are ways of buttressing national unity and social cohesion.

In her introduction to the edited collection *Diverse Spaces*, Susan L. T. Ashley explores ways of inspecting the roles of public spaces in the “expression or contestation of different histories, different identities, and different forms of local, national and transnational citizenship,” particularly in regards to multiculturalism.<sup>38</sup> Most saliently for this thesis, Caitlin Gordon-Walker writes in one chapter within Ashley’s collection that multiculturalism has become part of Canada’s national mythos: that national unity has been achieved not in spite of a plurality of cultures, but *because* of that diversity.<sup>39</sup> And yet, this nationalism is inclusive only up to a point – cultures in neoliberal society are understood as “discrete and bounded entities,” and are reified in the service of creating national stability.<sup>40</sup> Scholar Richard Day also challenges the idea that multiculturalism is about equality, instead arguing that multicultural policies are about controlling difference.<sup>41</sup> He argues that multiculturalism is a “reproduction of an ethnocultural economy which takes as its raw material the 'objective contents' of Canadian diversity and hopes to produce out of it a simulacrum of Canadian unity.”<sup>42</sup> By imagining that Canada has achieved a

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<sup>37</sup> Raymond B. Blake and Mathew Hayday, eds., *Celebrating Canada: Commemorations, Anniversaries and National Symbols* (University of Toronto Press, 2018), 21-22.

<sup>38</sup> Susan L. T. Ashley, *Diverse Spaces: Identity, Heritage and Community in Canadian Public Culture* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 1.

<sup>39</sup> Caitlin Gordon-Walker, “The Process of Chop Suey: Rethinking Multicultural Nationalism at the Royal Alberta Museum,” in *Diverse Spaces: Identity, Heritage and Community in Canadian Public Culture*, ed. Susan L.T. Ashley (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 17.

<sup>40</sup> Gordon-Walker, “The Process of Chop Suey,” 19.

<sup>41</sup> Richard Day, *Multiculturalism and the History of Canadian Diversity* (University of Toronto Press, 2000), 9.

<sup>42</sup> Day, *Multiculturalism and the History of Canadian Diversity*, 9.

utopian multicultural present, history is telescoped into a series of events in which a mythologized shared heritage obscures “the violence of colonialism, the antagonism between Britain and France, and the marginalization of racialized immigrants.”<sup>43</sup>

Within twentieth-century Canada, the plurality of histories and identities was adopted into a “mythological celebration of difference” to create a unified narrative of national progress.<sup>44</sup> Ultimately, this pluralism was incorporated into official public policy to become a key feature of Canadian culture – but it is a pluralism “mobilized to bolster settler nationalist mythology.”<sup>45</sup> Inspired by Caitlin Gordon-Walker’s approach in her monograph, *Exhibiting Nation: Multiculturalism (and Its Limits) in Canada’s Museums*, I therefore investigate how within policies of multiculturalism, the recognition and incorporation of cultural groups into Canada is done so as to not “pose a threat to the nation’s real or perceived unity.”<sup>46</sup> In addition, as scholar Mitch Combs writes, since white identities are positioned as the default of American (or, I argue here, Canadian) culture, invoking whiteness within exhibits is inherently tied to authentic representations of shared heritage.<sup>47</sup> These two approaches illuminate how the BCPM and CMC streetscapes approached representations of race, ethnicity, and culture in distinct but parallel ways.

While both streetscapes examined in this thesis grapple with national narratives of historical diversity, the CMC streetscape additionally straddles a complex conversation about the competing presentations of French and English histories. For example, one of the modules in the CMC streetscape claimed to portray a typical square in an eighteenth-century New France town,

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<sup>43</sup> Caitlin Gordon-Walker, *Exhibiting Nation: Multicultural Nationalism (and Its Limits) in Canada’s Museums* (UBC Press, 2016), 51.

<sup>44</sup> Eva Mackey, “Tricky Myths: Settler Pasts and Landscapes of Innocence,” in *Settling and Unsettling Memories: Essays in Canadian Public History*, ed. Nicole Neatby and Peter Hodgins (University of Toronto Press, 2012), 314.

<sup>45</sup> Mackey, “Tricky Myths,” 314.

<sup>46</sup> Gordon-Walker, *Exhibiting Nation*, 53.

<sup>47</sup> Combs, “Consuming a Settler Colonial History,” 727.

while the other module represented an urban nineteenth-century street in Ontario. Being located in the national museum, the streetscape's presentation of Canada's history was heavily influenced by the government's adoption of multiculturalism as official policy. Daniel Francis addresses this myth of utopian multiculturalism by examining the differences in Québec nationalist and English Canadian readings of the country's history. He argues that according to Québec nationalist conceptions of Canadian history, the Conquest was a grand humiliation that toppled a domino effect of other humiliations.<sup>48</sup> English-Canadians, in contrast, frequently have little sympathy or understanding of French Canada's conception of the humiliation – they were “lucky... to lose the war,” since the country began seeing rapid technological improvement. Francis also observes how some versions of the Conquest even depict the event as a battle with no victors – and therefore no one was vanquished. Francis writes that in this view, the Conquest “was a favour done by the British,” and with that, the myth of unity (that the French and English built Canada together as partners) was born.<sup>49</sup> English Canadians, “unable to lord [the Conquest] over the Québécois,” instead patronized them with infantilizing portrayals of Québécois as having a “quaint” folk history that could be encapsulated with rustic folk songs, food, and other cultural activities.<sup>50</sup> As explored in Chapter 2 of this thesis, this folk-centred history was on full display at the CMC within the New France Square streetscape – capitalizing on the fantasy that contributed to the myth of unity.

The streetscape exhibit model is a part of the larger story of living history sites. Living history museums educate visitors about the past through recreation of those physical environments, staffed by interpreters in period-appropriate clothing. Scholarly works concerning

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<sup>48</sup> Daniel Francis, *National Dreams: Myth, Memory and Canadian History* (Arsenal Pulp Press, 1997), 93.

<sup>49</sup> Francis, *National Dreams*, 94.

<sup>50</sup> Francis, *National Dreams*, 97.

the performance of history at these sites (and their constructions of different pasts and historical realities) have been published for several decades now. Early texts about living history museums mainly came from the perspective of improving present-day heritage interpretation for historic sites, rather than treating the museums and exhibits as objects of history themselves.<sup>51</sup>

The work of Alan Gordon is particularly helpful for understanding the role of heritage in shaping public memory, as well as for understanding living history museums as artifacts. In *Making Public Pasts*, Gordon writes how public memory connects “the myths and symbols of public history to the ‘undifferentiated time’ of memory.”<sup>52</sup> Because of its symbolic connections, public memory supports public attachments to the imagined community of the nation.<sup>53</sup> Public memory was evoked particularly strongly at places such as the living history museum. For visitors, the draw to living history sites and streetscape exhibits consisted of their offerings of authentic recreations of the past. However, as noted by Gordon in *Time Travel*, “authentic” depictions of the past do not mean the same thing as “realistic” depictions of the past.<sup>54</sup> Living history sites do not exist in a vacuum; as museums, they are constantly being reinterpreted by both curators and publics, as the dominant historiography adapts to present-day interests. In addition, the museums’ pursuit to reconstruct an “authentic” version of the past seems to imply that this closeness to the past is more achievable in the immersive exhibit than through the written word.<sup>55</sup>

In the post-war period, the past was commercialized in new ways, most notably within theme parks. The newly constructed Disneyland was an experiential daydream, with its “Main

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<sup>51</sup> Jay Anderson, *Time Machines: The World of Living History* (American Association for State and Local History, 1984).

<sup>52</sup> Alan Gordon, *Making Public Pasts: The Contested Terrain of Montréal’s Public Memories, 1891-1930* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001), 9.

<sup>53</sup> Gordon, *Making Public Pasts*, 9.

<sup>54</sup> Gordon, *Time Travel*, 12.

<sup>55</sup> Gordon, *Time Travel*, 11.

Street USA” being perhaps the greatest influence on the development of streetscape exhibits. Main Street was a “childlike replica of a ‘typical’ small-town main street that served as a funnel past shops and souvenir stands.”<sup>56</sup> Although inspired by Walt Disney’s own nostalgic memories of his childhood hometown, the space was meant to resemble “anytown” at the turn-of-the-twentieth century.<sup>57</sup> Fuzzy in both time and space, it was an idealized blank slate on to which any visitor could project their own memories and fantasies.

Alongside the “anytown” of the Disney streetscape was a marginally older tradition of streetscapes built within museum spaces. In the 1930s, museums began redesigning their indoor displays to echo the authenticity of to-scale historical environments. In 1938, the York Castle Museum in England opened its “Kirkgate” exhibit – a reconstruction of a Victorian street, complete with buildings, cobblestones, horse troughs, carriages, and store fronts stocked with artifacts (Figure 2).<sup>58</sup> The York Castle Museum even had a precursor in the form of a medieval and Elizabethan “Old London” street constructed for the International Health Exhibition of 1884.<sup>59</sup> In this walkable diorama, builders had constructed life-size replicas of the old gate from papier-mâché, an Elizabethan house with latticed windows, and a set of stocks with a whipping post.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Gordon, *Time Travel*, 77.

<sup>57</sup> Gordon, *Time Travel*, 77.

<sup>58</sup> It is unclear how many of the buildings from this streetscape are reconstructions (i.e., built from modern materials to resemble real buildings from the past) and how many are “real” structures – the current website lists one of the timber-framed buildings as being from the sixteenth century, and notes that it was “taken apart and brought all the way here to be a part of the museum.” See: “Kirkgate,” York Castle Museum, <https://www.yorkcastlemuseum.org.uk/kirkgate/>. Accessed June 11, 2025.

<sup>59</sup> Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, 182.

<sup>60</sup> Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, 182.



Figure 2. Kirkgate streetscape, 1940, two years after its opening in the York Castle Museum.<sup>61</sup>

However, it was not until after the Second World War and the Disneyfication of tourist entertainment that this type of museum display began appearing outside of Europe. With the rise of consumerism in North American culture (following increased prosperity after the Second World War), people felt a profound sense of loss: modernity “challenged the authenticity of everyday experience.”<sup>62</sup> To differentiate themselves from Disneyfied environments appearing at theme parks or on the screen, museums began to place increased emphasis on sensory experiences. It was not about just witnessing the past. It was about experiencing it.

The most significant breakthrough in streetscape exhibits came in 1965, when Stephan de Borhegyi, Director of the Milwaukee Public Museum, opened one of the earliest (and largest)

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<sup>61</sup> Image courtesy of “Kirkgate,” York Castle Museum, <https://www.yorkcastlemuseum.org.uk/kirkgate/>.

<sup>62</sup> Gordon, *Time Travel*, 15.

North American streetscapes, entitled “Streets of Old Milwaukee.” Joseph Walzer’s 2017 PhD dissertation about nostalgia and conceptions of German heritage in Milwaukee is one of the few academic examinations of the memory-making employed in this particular streetscape exhibit. Walzer argues that the Disney-inspired exhibit “combined a cleaned-up, nostalgic version of the city’s past with... highly theatrical, spectacle-based amusement.”<sup>63</sup> Walzer observes that the softness of the streetscape’s periodization (which is dubbed vaguely “turn-of-the-century”) further reinforced the perception of the exhibit as a memory reproduction rather than as a historical reproduction. As Chapter 1 of this thesis explores, exhibit designer Jean André was deeply influenced by Borhegyi’s approach and the Milwaukee Public Museum’s streetscape. André’s work on Old Town thus inherited this particular version of presenting the past, making history attractive to modern audiences hungry for entertainment.

The first texts to document the Old Town streetscape were two books written by BCPM curator Peter Corley-Smith: *The Ring of Time: The Story of the British Columbia Provincial Museum* (1985) and *White Bears and Other Curiosities: The First 100 Years of the Royal British Columbia Museum* (1989).<sup>64</sup> Written as souvenir books for the public, these texts were meant to provide brief overviews of the exhibit’s planning and production phases, and so mostly contain anecdotes and photographs of the museum’s evolution over the years.<sup>65</sup> Both of Corley-Smith’s institutional histories were published by the museum itself, and were sponsored with funding from the Friends of the Museum volunteer association. The story told in both texts is a

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<sup>63</sup> Joseph B. Walzer, *Making an Old-World Milwaukee: German Heritage, Nostalgia, and the Reshaping of the Twentieth Century City* (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, 2017), 146.

<sup>64</sup> Peter Corley-Smith, *White Bears and Other Curiosities: The First 100 Years of the Royal British Columbia Museum* (Royal British Columbia Museum, 1989); Peter Corley-Smith, *The Ring of Time: The Story of the British Columbia Provincial Museum* (British Columbia Provincial Museum, 1985).

<sup>65</sup> Note that these books have still been reviewed by scholars and museum professionals; see, for example: David Richeson, “Peter Corley-Smith, *The Ring of Time: The Story of the British Columbia Provincial Museum* and *White Bears and Other Curiosities: The First 100 Years of the Royal British Columbia Museum*,” *Material Culture Review* 37 (Spring 1993): 80-81.

triumphant one, emphasizing the institution's humble origins and struggles before its transformation into a world-class space of public education and entertainment. The books do not critically analyze the museum's displays or decisions by the curators – but that was not the books' purpose, as they instead look to trace the physical history of the museum and the stories of its staff for the interest of the especially curious visitor, not the researcher.

Corley-Smith does not include footnotes or citations for his sources, and unlike in *White Bears and Other Curiosities*, he does not include the names of individual museum staff in *The Ring of Time*, referring to them only by their position title. However, with this in mind, *The Ring of Time* is still a helpful text to situate the context in which Old Town was built and the historical debates that shaped the streetscape's development.<sup>66</sup> Corley-Smith details the curatorial decision to focus on economic changes in the province for the Modern History exhibit, and some of the financial challenges of the museum to represent immersive history through the streetscape design.<sup>67</sup> The creation of the galleries is represented by Corley-Smith as a collaborative process between curator, designer, and conservator “each with his or her own imperatives.”<sup>68</sup> Here, the curator is said to be “wholly dedicated to historical or scientific accuracy” while “the designer is engrossed with a mixture of theatre and effective communication.”<sup>69</sup> This marked division does not reflect the reality of either of these positions, and downplays the role of the curator in storyline generation.

Overall, however, *The Ring of Time* provides the bones of the historical context visitors may have been missing when entering the gallery space. The souvenir book frames the Old Town

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<sup>66</sup> *White Bears and Other Curiosities* is less helpful for this thesis, as it primarily deals with the years of the BC Provincial Museum before the construction of the new building in the 1960s.

<sup>67</sup> Corley-Smith, *The Ring of Time*, 14.

<sup>68</sup> Corley-Smith, *The Ring of Time*, 10.

<sup>69</sup> Corley-Smith, *The Ring of Time*, 10.

streetscape in the terms of resource extraction, urban life, and technological improvement – immigration, while mentioned, is not contextualized within the history of colonization, and its intersections with race, ethnicity, and gender are left unexplored. Much like the exhibits themselves, *The Ring of Time* only details Indigenous history in terms of the distant past and as entirely separate from the Modern History section of the gallery. This separation of colonialism from modernity ultimately prioritizes settler comfort, permitting white visitors to fantasize recent history as being removed from the violent ongoing processes of colonization.

The second text that looms large in any historiography of the BC Provincial Museum is Patricia Roy's *The Collectors: A History of the Royal British Columbia Museum and Archives*, published in 2017 by the institution itself as an officially sanctioned history.<sup>70</sup> The text details the history of the museum from 1886 to the book's time of writing, with focus on the creation of the Modern History Galleries contained mostly within the chapter "What's on Show." While Roy draws somewhat upon *The Ring of Time* and *White Bears*, she primarily uses original sources such as internal museum correspondence, newspaper articles, and importantly, interviews conducted with present and former museum staff. Roy thoroughly details the design process of the galleries, and the specific influences on the two major figures within their creation: exhibit designer Jean André and Daniel Gallacher. *The Collectors* is thoroughly cited and depicts a clear timeline of events and people but, like *The Ring of Time*, it is restricted in its scope: it is an institutional history concerned principally with the physical evolution of the galleries rather than the effects of the exhibits and their framings of history.

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<sup>70</sup> Patricia Roy, *The Collectors: A History of the Royal British Columbia Museum and Archives* (Royal British Columbia Museum, 2018).

Other authors have commented on the ambiance of the galleries, frequently within the format of short exhibit review articles of *Old Town*.<sup>71</sup> Published often in museum journals, or as short public history review pieces, these works are primarily concerned with the material effectiveness of the displays rather than within the historical context of which they were first created. Instead, it is Caitlin Gordon-Walker's monograph *Exhibiting Nation* that makes the greatest historiographical contribution about the kind of history on display at the BCPM. Unlike the exhibit review articles or the official institutional histories, Gordon-Walker uses the Human History exhibits as a case study in her larger examination of multicultural nationalism in Canada. Several of her observations (like how the streetscape promotes a brand of "inclusive" history that "obscures the violence of colonialism") are particularly relevant for my own work, as I seek to untangle how the exhibits entrenched history within settler commemorative practices that appealed to most visitors' existing understandings of Canada's colonial past.<sup>72</sup> However, Gordon-Walker primarily deals with the present-day iteration of the exhibit, which includes the 1992 addition to the streetscape of the Chinatown alleyway, using the Chinatown expansion as the anchor for her framing of multicultural nationalism in the exhibit. Since my work primarily focuses on the original 1972 design of Old Town, Gordon-Walker's analytical framing of Old Town in its later years is limited in its practical application for this thesis.

The exhibits at what is now the Canadian Museum of History have been well-documented over the years. Located in Gatineau, Québec, the museum is within the national capital region and thus often at the centre of analysis for Canadian narratives of nation. However,

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<sup>71</sup> See for examples: Claire Campbell, "Modern History Gallery, Royal British Columbia Museum," *The Public Historian* 26, no. 4 (2004): 108–11; Misao Dean, "Managing Diversity in the Representation of BC History: Point Ellice House and 'Chinatown,'" *BC Studies* 134, vol. 2 (Summer 2002): 71–86; Ian MacPherson, "British Columbia Provincial Museum, Modern History Galleries," *Material Culture Review* 12 (January 1981): 61–70; Joan Seidl, "Royal British Columbia Museum, Victoria, Chinatown," *Material History Review* 40 (Fall 1994): 74–78.

<sup>72</sup> Gordon-Walker, *Exhibiting Nation*, 51.

since the streetscape was built in 1989, and only completed in 2003, there are few historical studies that deal with the streetscape's specific framing of history on display. The Canadian Museum of Civilization itself was a large publisher of many of the early pieces concerning the history galleries; these were often part of the ongoing Mercury Series papers. *Toward the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: New Directions for Canada's National Museums*, published in 1989 and edited by Leslie Tepper, was one such collection.<sup>73</sup> Authors in the collection included Flora MacDonald (then Minister of Communications and member of the Conservative Party), and George MacDonald, director of the new CMC. MacDonald's piece reveals early pitches about the human history exhibit, and how the streetscape would concentrate almost exclusively "on the period of immigrant peoples" to Canada.<sup>74</sup> However, the majority of MacDonald's chapter focuses on the First Peoples Hall, the Children's Hall, and MacDonald's own museological theories: namely, that museums "are highly charged, symbolic space-time capsules in which our value hierarchies are made manifest."<sup>75</sup> These were ideas later refined in MacDonald and Alsford's popular book *A Museum for the Global Village*. This text is essential for understanding the globalist themes that shaped the development of the CMC streetscape exhibit, as it further situates MacDonald's own musings on museological theory and the ongoing responsibilities of museums.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> The book is a result of a series of lectures co-sponsored by the four national museums and Carleton University about the "future-forward" ideas of Canadian museums. Leslie Heyman Tepper, ed., *Toward the 21st Century: New Directions for Canada's National Museums* (Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1989).

<sup>74</sup> George MacDonald, "Crossroads of Culture: The Canadian Museum of Civilization," in *Toward the 21st Century: New Directions for Canada's National Museums*, ed. Leslie Heyman Tepper (Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1989), 33.

<sup>75</sup> MacDonald, "Crossroads of Culture," 35.

<sup>76</sup> MacDonald was a prolific writer on the role of museums as an interface between education and the public. For more on his writings as they pertain to the CMC, see: George MacDonald and Douglas J. Cardinal, "Building Canada's National Museum of Man: An Interprofessional Dialogue," *Museum*, 149 (1986): 9-15; George MacDonald and Stephen Alsford, "Museums as Bridges to the Global Village," in *A Different Drummer: Readings in Anthropology with a Canadian Perspective*, eds. Bruce Alden Cox, Jacques Chevalier, and Valda Blundell (The Anthropology Caucus of Carleton University, 1989); and George MacDonald and Stephen Alsford, *A Museum for the Global Village* (Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1989). Scripts for various conference presentations made by MacDonald can also be found in the Canadian Museum of History Library.

Peter Rider, a former curator at the CMC, has written the bulk of the published academic literature about the History Hall streetscape.<sup>77</sup> More than other authors, Rider's works concern the immersive nature of the exhibits, the influence of Disneyland, the search to implement authenticity and entertainment within the museum, and the tensions between curators and senior staff in the design process. Rider's essay in *Studies in History and Museums* provides a retrospective of the exhibit design process and the considerations, such as the staff's intention to emphasize culture by demonstrating how "all Canadians helped shape and continue to shape their history."<sup>78</sup> Rider reflects upon the exhibit's "limited consideration of politics and foreign and military affairs," and the irony that these missing core themes would be integral to a full presentation of culture in Canada.<sup>79</sup>

The most substantial key text about History Hall is by another curator: Dan Gallacher. His unpublished manuscript, *Canada Hall: A Museum Approach to Epic History*, (which is only available in full at the Canadian Museum of History's internal library), is a helpful source for understanding the conversations and forethought that went into the planning of the history exhibits leading up to the CMC opening in 1989. Since Gallacher was intimately involved in the development of the exhibit itself, his work gives a level of detail (including valuable photographs) that others do not.<sup>80</sup> However, the work at times reads like a defense for the curatorial decisions regarding History Hall's construction. While it provides valuable insights

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<sup>77</sup> See for examples: David Dean and Peter Rider, "Museums, Nation and Political History in the Australian National Museum and the Canadian Museum of Civilization," *Museum and Society* 3, no. 1 (April 2015): 35–50, <https://doi.org/10.29311/mas.v3i1.63>; Rider, "Presenting the Public's History to the Public," 77–101.

<sup>78</sup> Rider, "Presenting the Public's History to the Public," 89.

<sup>79</sup> Rider, "Presenting the Public's History to the Public," 98.

<sup>80</sup> It appears Gallacher's manuscript was originally written with the idea of it becoming an official publication by the museum. However, in a foreword to the manuscript, David Morrison (then-CMC Director of Archaeology and History) wrote that it was not suitable for publication, as "no one author could provide the kind of over-arching analysis and perspective required of an official institutional history" (1). The result is that while the first half of the manuscript is a fairly polished history of the early years of planning and building the 1989 exhibits, the second half is more loosely organized and lacks a centralizing theme.

into Gallacher's own considerations and historical background (for example, his experience with the BCPM and valuation of J.M.S. Careless' metropolitan thesis), it also reads as Gallacher's own justification as to why the curators chose to avoid implementing political history within the exhibits.<sup>81</sup>

Texts about the exhibits themselves come from scholars hailing from a wide field of disciplines, though rarely from the perspective of history.<sup>82</sup> For example, Carolyn Finlayson's paper in *Mnemographia Canadensis* frames the museum's mission and origins within the terms of Canadian memory and nationhood.<sup>83</sup> While written as a present-day (published in 1999) critique of the museum, Finlayson identified how the CMC "needs to be understood as an artifact" itself, and as a key proponent of federal unity.<sup>84</sup> The lack of mention of conflict in the CMC's exhibits shows, Finlayson argues, that the museum crafts a homogenizing collective memory reliant on amnesia.<sup>85</sup> Cultural critic Robyn Gillam has similarly situated the exhibits at the CMC as expressions of multicultural nationalism in her collection of essays, *Hall of Mirrors: Museums and the Canadian Public*.<sup>86</sup> Gillam focuses on the construction of the museum itself rather than just on the History Hall exhibits, but deals primarily with MacDonald's museology theory as inspired by philosopher Marshall McLuhan, arguing that MacDonald's "crime" with

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<sup>81</sup> Gallacher, "The Canada Hall," 42-43.

<sup>82</sup> Scholars from museum studies and curriculum and education studies in particular have written about streetscape exhibits. They put the CMC into an interesting perspective by contextualizing the museum's pedagogical role in crafting national identity. See: Cynthia Wallace-Casey, "Constructing Patriotism: How Canada's History Hall Has Evolved over 50 Years," *History Education Research Journal* 15, no. 2 (October 2018), <https://doi.org/10.18546/HERJ.15.2.10>. With the renovation of the exhibit in the 2010s, polemics were also written about the narratives presented in the museum's history galleries. While outside the scope for this analysis, some sections containing interviews with present-day curators might be interesting for the curious reader. See: C.P. Champion, "The Historians and the History Museum," *Dorchester Review* 4, no. 2 (Autumn/Winter 2014): 17-24.

<sup>83</sup> Carolyn Finlayson, "Defining the Country: Memory and Nationhood in the Canadian Museum of Civilization," in *Mnemographia Canadensis: Essays on Memory, Community and Environment in Canada, with Particular Reference to London, Ontario*, ed. D.M.R. Bentley (Canadian Poetry Press, 1999).

<sup>84</sup> Finlayson, "Defining the Country," 226.

<sup>85</sup> Finlayson, "Defining the Country," 225.

<sup>86</sup> Robyn Gillam, *Hall of Mirrors: Museums and the Canadian Public* (Banff Centre Press, 2001).

the CMC was “not that he made his museum like Disneyland, but that he made it reflect a philosophy of representation and empowerment through communications technology.”<sup>87</sup>

Overall, this thesis historicizes the streetscape exhibits at the BCPM and the CMC while surveying the historiographical debates that shaped these settler-nationalist displays of the past. As scholar Gaynor Kavanagh writes, museums open up “dream spaces,” allowing visitors to respond to the past in personal ways by “lift[ing] the lid on our memories.”<sup>88</sup> Museums are a form of negotiated reality, and embody “the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves.”<sup>89</sup> Within the negotiated reality of the streetscape, the past is depicted as pleasant, and as a place of escapism where nothing changes. The consequences of this line of nostalgic thinking for visitors is that despite knowing the fiction of the space, something is implied to be lost between the transition from the Canada of the turn-of-the-century and the supposedly inferior present.<sup>90</sup>

Chapter 1 follows these strands by examining the development of Canada’s first streetscape exhibit in 1972 – Old Town, at the BCPM – and how its displays evoked a type of immersive nostalgia. The streetscape was one part of the larger Modern Human History galleries illustrating the socio-economic history of the province, following the frontier-thesis and resource-centred interpretations of history made popular at the time by historians such as J.M.S. Careless. I argue that the image of British Columbia as presented by the original 1972 streetscape was one more strongly shaped by imperial attachments and the province’s history as a colony of the British Empire rather than an attempt to reflect a distinct national identity. The streetscape emphasized British iconography – in the names for its built structures, or in the recorded

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<sup>87</sup> Gillam, *Hall of Mirrors*, 152.

<sup>88</sup> Gaynor Kavanagh, “Making Histories, Making Memories,” in *Making Histories in Museums*, ed. Gaynor Kavanagh (Leicester University Press, 1996), 3-4.

<sup>89</sup> Kavanagh, “Making Histories, Making Memories,” 6.

<sup>90</sup> Walzer, *Making an Old-World Milwaukee*, 153.

conversations planned for its period rooms – for this imaginary town. This imperial focus (and emphasis on symbols associated with British-ness) was exclusionary as a result, reflecting a mythologized history about British Columbia at the turn of the twentieth century that was devoid of Indigenous peoples and racialized minorities. The perceived authenticity of the immersive exhibit by some members of the public seemingly legitimized this settler-centric fantasy, and to this day continues to stymie efforts to redevelop the Human History galleries to depict a fuller and more inclusive history of the province.

If Chapter 1 opens a window onto the early years of the streetscape exhibit model in Canada and its place in settler-colonial discourses, Chapter 2 concerns the twilight years of the streetscape model and its limits on the framing of history. It covers the declining popularity of the streetscape approach as embodied by the issues that beleaguered the curators and designers who crafted the 1989 History Hall streetscape at the CMC. I argue that within this streetscape, a sense of total immersion or authenticity was sacrificed to instead create space for visitors to construct their own parallels between a multicultural past and a multicultural present. Heavily influenced by the global village and culture-centric vision of museum director George MacDonald, History Hall was an exercise not in representing the past, but in *essentializing* it to reinforce a nationalist narrative of a united Canada.

By living vicariously through the historical experiences sold within these exhibits, scholars have argued that these types of spaces cultivate a misleading sense that the past is knowable – that its foreignness can somehow be overcome through reconstruction.<sup>91</sup> This blurring between representations and descriptions results in the fuzziness between the “illusion and reality” within immersive streetscape exhibits.

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<sup>91</sup> Jordanova, “Objects of Knowledge,” 26.

## Interlude 1: Old Town, British Columbia Provincial Museum, 1972

It is a cool dusky evening from some hazy year straddling two centuries, perhaps in the 1880s or the 1920s.<sup>1</sup> The chiseled wooden cobblestones are worn from years of both leather-soled shoes and iron-clad horses striding down the city block's main street. Soon the cobblestones will be further worn by rubber tires, like those belonging to the 1910 Model T Ford sitting silently in the City Garage. Walking closer to the knee-high iron rail guarding the car from the cobblestoned street, you smell the oily rags discarded on the workbench and the cold steel of the sleeping automobile. Incandescent bulbs blinking to your right draw you towards the Roxy Theatre like a moth to a flame.<sup>2</sup> While the wooden ticket box is devoid of its attendant, a sandwich board out front invites passers-by to come inside to see the latest film.

Continuing down the street, you are led to the white-and-green clapboard building of Columbia Printers. Inside the printer's shop, tomorrow morning's broadsheet from the *Cariboo Sentinel* lies half-inked on the press bed. The open drawers of the typesetter's cabinet reveal rows of scattered letters, waiting to be arranged to spell news of *GOLD!* in the creeks and *GOLD!* in the hills. The tinkling of piano keys to your left soon leads you to the establishment next door. Glittering words arced across the windowpanes claim the "Best cigars, wines, and liquors" just a step inside the North Pacific Saloon. But the door is locked. Are you here too early, or are you just not welcome?

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<sup>1</sup> Curator Dan Gallacher gives the years that the dioramas are meant to represent in an article published soon after Old Town's opening. They represent a mix of years spanning from the 1880s to the 1910s. Daniel Gallacher, "Exhibits as Overviews: The Case of British Columbia Modern History," in *Western Canadian History: Museum Interpretation*, ed. D. R. Richeson, Mercury Series 27 (National Museum of Man, 1979), 23.

<sup>2</sup> Those familiar with the modern-day version of Old Town may note that the location of the theatre is different in 1972 than in 2025. This change was a result of a renovation completed in 1997 to make room for a fire staircase, and resulted in the refurbishment of the Roxy façade (where the structure was also renamed to its present-day title: the Majestic Theatre). For more on changes to the theatre, see: Arlene Yaworsky, "A Bold, New Façade," *Royal British Columbia Museum: Discovery Magazine*, September 1997, 4.

You've wandered around the corner now. Across the street from the saloon is Dominion Drapers, the clothier shop. White evening dresses and black mourning dresses hang from the racks at the back of the shop. Spools of fabric and stacks of pattern boxes line the shelves above – Egyptian cotton, Indian silk, and British dress patterns for all the latest styles.

Turning from the clothier shop, a curved staircase beckons you to ascend to the second story of the Grand Hotel. The luscious red carpet is soft underfoot. Black and white pictures of past monarchs stare stoically from the walls. The room to your left is richly decorated with darkly stained wooden furniture. Desks, padded chairs, typewriters, crumpled papers, a heavy coat hanging from a rack – this is an office. A model sailing ship symbolizes the marine ventures for which the clerks pore over their ledgers. Deeper into the bowels of the Grand Hotel, you wander past an eclectically-furnished bedroom. A silk tablecloth of floral designs, an ebony mantle clock, a warming screen printed with cherry blossoms, hanging pictures of tranquil landscapes and robed women, and all manner of Chinoiserie-inspired furnishings speak to the silent performance of class and wealth on display. It is a period room not meant for its occupants to experience comfort, but instead, to demonstrate their ownership over the colonial “exotic.”

The smell of cinnamon wafting from a kitchen pulls you further down the hallway, where a hulking nineteenth-century stove sits with its door open, an apple pie precariously perched on its rack. While brimming with homely goods, the kitchen is utilitarian; the chairs are absent the whorls of the Orientalist-style furniture from down the hall, and various objects of manual labour – a butter churn, a broom, a coffee grinder, and all manner of cooking implements – are silent indicators of the physicality that occurs within the space. And yet despite the simplicity of the rustic tools and decorations, two neat rows of mismatched tableware line the shelves of one wall, decorated with colourful floral motifs, blue patterning, and delicate red linework. These are not

fancy sets purchased as one complete set – these are the teacups and plates of generations of families that have been passed down piece-meal.

Descending the stairs back to the cobblestone street, you follow the sound of clip-clopping horses to arrive at a dead-end. Here, you find a furniture and household goods store and, in the ground-storey of the Grand Hotel, an eclectically styled parlour room, complete with green velvet curtains, lamps and statuettes, and a harp standing in the far corner. Who lives here? Where does this wealth come from?

Tucked around the corner of the parlour you find a livery and blacksmith, set up to make horseshoes for the animals that will soon become obsolete with the car lying in wait in the garage at the street's opposite end. Tracing your path back, you turn at the fork in the street to enter the train station. Every five minutes (according to an unposted schedule), a piercing steam whistle heralds an approaching train, and the lights in the station's windows are replaced with a locomotive's passing shadows. You smile in delight, listening to the Doppler rumbles of the train that will never stop at the station.

The train gone, the street is quiet once again. It is still dusk. It will always be dusk here.

## Chapter 1: Entering the Twilight Zone at the British Columbia Provincial Museum

When the British Columbia Provincial Museum (BCPM) unveiled its Modern History Galleries in 1972, it was pitched as striking “the delicate balance between something entertaining and something relevant.”<sup>1</sup> The indoor exhibit was the first of its kind in Canada – a “walk through time” that aimed to immerse its visitors through its use of reconstructed environments, sensory elements, and upwards of 10,000 or 15,000 props and artifacts.<sup>2</sup> As historian Alan Gordon explores in his work on living history sites in Canada, immersive displays such as these in the 1960s and 1970s “captured imaginations about what history was and what it could be.”<sup>3</sup> Visitors were invited to participate in history, to live out fantasies of the past authorized by a museum establishment broadly regarded as trustworthy by the public. It was through these kinds of emotive experiences that exhibit designer Jean André and curator Daniel Gallacher believed that visitors could achieve a heightened awareness of a past that was “alive” rather than locked behind textual signage.<sup>4</sup> By using familiar icons and “baits,” André and Gallacher sought to incite emotions and dramatize the presented history within Old Town.<sup>5</sup> Immersive museum exhibits ultimately attempted to mix modern interpretations of social history with mass entertainment. They were radically different from the museums of the past, aiming to appeal to family audiences other than the elites to which these institutions had traditionally catered.

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<sup>1</sup> “Bennett Opens ‘Champagne’ Display,” *Victoria Times*, July 8, 1972.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Gallacher, “Exhibits as Overviews: The Case of British Columbia Modern History,” in *Western Canadian History: Museum Interpretation*, ed. D. R. Richeson, Mercury Series 27 (National Museum of Man, 1979), 13; Daniel Gallacher, “Forward,” in *Exhibit Guide: British Columbia Modern History, 1740’s-1970’s* (Friends of the BC Provincial Museum, 1974), 6.

<sup>3</sup> Alan Gordon, *Time Travel: Tourism and the Rise of the Living History Museum in Mid-Twentieth-Century Canada* (UBC Press, 2016), 23.

<sup>4</sup> Bill Thomas, “Alive! That’s How History Should Be... That’s How They Want to Make It,” *Daily Colonist*, January 31, 1971.

<sup>5</sup> Patricia Roy, *The Collectors: A History of the Royal British Columbia Museum and Archives* (Royal British Columbia Museum, 2018), 329.

In the years preceding Canada's 1967 centennial, hundreds of museums and heritage sites – the BCPM included – received federal grants worth millions of dollars.<sup>6</sup> The substantial funds granted by the federal government's Centennial Commission were intended to boost Canadian cultural output for the country's centennial and to inspire in citizens a sense of national pride in the country's heritage. As previously discussed, heritage is a declaration of faith in a group's past, a way to pass on origin myths to reinforce the sense of a shared community.<sup>7</sup> Creating these communities, however, is inherently exclusionary. Heritage is valuable not because it is shared by everyone, but because it is shared only by a select group. In the 1960s, the boundaries delineating that group were blurred, without a clearly defined national identity. While the heritage promoted within the country's existing museums and historic sites often referenced Canada's settler-colonial past, new exhibits sought to expand the meaning of this heritage.

The BCPM History galleries were thus built at a time of transition. Popular depictions of Canada's past emphasized the country's historic ties to the British Empire while also demonstrating its maturation into a modern nation shaped by successive waves of settlers. In the climate of the new Social History, the "ordinary" nature of these settlers was increasingly emphasized as the visiting public looked for themselves to be reflected in the presentations of the country's past. Indeed, scholar Benjamin Filene argues that in the 1970s, history museums had "entered the custom identity business" alongside the rise of the New Social History.<sup>8</sup> Museums' stronger emphasis on the importance of the individual asked visitors to connect the history they encountered in the exhibits with their own lives.<sup>9</sup> Museums thus increasingly became places

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<sup>6</sup> G. Clifford Carl to John Cotton Wright, September 20, 1966, file 3, box 65, series GR-0111, Provincial Museum correspondence inward, British Columbia Archives, Victoria, BC, Canada (hereafter cited as BCA).

<sup>7</sup> David Lowenthal, "Fabricating Heritage," *History and Memory* 10, no. 1 (1998): 7-8.

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin Filene, "History Museums and Identity: Finding 'Them,' 'Me,' and 'Us' in the Gallery," in *The Oxford Handbook of Public History*, ed. Paula Hamilton and James B. Gardner (Oxford University Press, 2017), 329.

<sup>9</sup> Filene, "History Museums and Identity," 331.

where visitors could explore and foster their own self-identities – even if those self-identities were based upon fabricated heritage. Visitors therefore constructed their own historical fantasies within the simulacra of the streetscape based upon their personal nostalgias for a past that had never really existed.<sup>10</sup>

This chapter uses the example of the streetscape exhibit of Old Town, one section of the BCPM's Modern History Galleries, to explore one facet of this effort to craft a sense of shared heritage in British Columbia's – and thereby Canada's – past. The nostalgic performance of history elevated the past lives of everyday, ordinary people within this imagining of British Columbia's past. The biggest draw for visitors to the BCPM's 1972 Modern History Galleries was not necessarily the opportunity it represented to *learn* about the past – it was about the “authentic” experience it offered. The curators and exhibit designers had designed the streetscape in the hopes that it would inspire in visitors “a feeling that they're really there, and then.”<sup>11</sup> Visitors could even forget that they were inside a museum building, and not outside roaming the streets of an early British Columbia town. Yet, while Old Town was advertised as a supposed mirror of the past, it instead reflected visitors' own desires and expectations for a settler-focused history. While Old Town displayed some heightened awareness of various social issues throughout history, the exhibit's lack of interpretation and explanation *of* those social issues instead reproduced the very lacunae it was meant to address.

I make this argument based on an examination of both external reactions to the streetscape (seen mainly through the opinions expressed in newspaper articles and visitor

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<sup>10</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (University of Michigan Press, 1994), 68; Silke Arnold-de Simine, *Mediating Memory in the Museum: Trauma, Empathy, Nostalgia* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 28.

<sup>11</sup> Erith Smith, “A Look into the Twilight Zone: Museum's Project 70 Makes B.C. Past Seem Real,” *Daily Colonist*, June 4, 1972.

surveys) and internal considerations about the exhibit (achieved by analyzing curatorial exhibit reviews, museum staff correspondence notes, and other institutional records generated from Old Town’s creation). I read these primary sources alongside secondary source scholarship about museums, nostalgia, and imperialism as evoked within Canadian public history displays. I use this literature to show that the past as presented by Old Town in 1972 was heavily influenced by shifting scholarship about conceptualizing Canadian identity. This included new discourses on imperialism as it related to Canada, and a growing focus on understanding Canadians’ regional and local identities in place of solely nationalist ones.<sup>12</sup> Canadian historians of the mid-twentieth century have often focused on “assumptions about Canada’s move away from British ties.”<sup>13</sup> However, this historiography neglects how imperial ties were embedded within the very search for nationalist legitimacy. Phillip Buckner argues that Canadian values were articulated as part of imperial traditions: British immigrants “sought to create... not merely a neo-Britain but a better Britain.”<sup>14</sup> Tonya Davidson writes that the use of imperial traditions in spaces of public history represent an anxiety about Canada’s imperial origins slipping away – or rather, “Canada’s Whiteness slipping away.”<sup>15</sup> It is therefore essential to understand imperialism as a function of nationalism. This harkens back to Carl Berger’s influential thesis that “Canadian imperialism was one form of Canadian nationalism — a type of awareness of nationality which rested upon a certain understanding of history, the national character, and the national mission.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Phillip Buckner, “Limited Identities’ Revisited: Regionalism and Nationalism in Canadian History,” *Acadiensis* 30, no. 1 (2000): 4.

<sup>13</sup> Tonya Davidson, “Imperial Nostalgia, Social Ghosts, and Canada’s National War Memorial,” *Space and Culture* 19, no. 2 (March 2016): 180. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1206331215623220>.

<sup>14</sup> Phillip Buckner, “The Invention of Tradition? The Royal Tours of 1860 and 1901 to Canada,” in *Majesty in Canada: Essays on the Roles of Royalty*, ed. Colin Coates (The Dundurn Group, 2006), 32.

<sup>15</sup> Davidson, “Imperial Nostalgia,” 180.

<sup>16</sup> Carl Berger, *The Sense of Power: Studies in the Ideas of Canadian Imperialism, 1867–1914*, 2nd ed. (University of Toronto Press, 2013), 9.

The immersive experience of Old Town presented a specific past that fit the expectations of visitors for a colonial British Columbia town in the early twentieth century. Old Town itself is an especially important case to examine in terms of immersive history sites in Canada, since it was the first example of a full, indoor streetscape exhibit to be built in Canada. Throughout the 1970s, the Old Town streetscape was regarded as an exemplary public history display that inspired the immersive elements echoed by subsequent museum exhibits not just in other Canadian provinces, but also across the world.<sup>17</sup> The exhibit continues to provoke strong reactions in present-day visitors, making the illumination of Old Town's history increasingly important to understand the tension behind the streetscape's presentation of the past.

*Centennial Celebrations and Narrative Needs (1960-1968)*

The BCPM was constructed in a museal climate newly receptive to social history. Displays like Old Town did not reference political events or even influential individuals in their framings of history, instead choosing to focus on "ordinary" lives of people from the past.<sup>18</sup> It was about evoking a feeling of the time, rather than describing particular events or actions that had led to the time in question. In addition, the opening of highly popular theme parks in North America (such as Disneyland in 1955) and their success in drawing in large crowds of families had significantly changed the expectations for how museums should attract visitors.<sup>19</sup> By expanding their mandates to focus on entertainment, museums explored new exhibit designs that could capture the attentions of broader audiences. Finally, the occasions of the Canadian centennial of 1967 and the British Columbia centennial of 1971 meant that both national and

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<sup>17</sup> "City Museum 'Best in World,'" *Daily Colonist*, June 1, 1979.

<sup>18</sup> Dan Gallacher, interview with Viktor Rabinovitch, June 9, 2004, AV2013-1000, Research Material for the Canada Hall, Canadian Museum of History Library (hereafter CMHL).

<sup>19</sup> Gordon, *Time Travel*, 76.

provincial governments sought to commemorate history.<sup>20</sup> This combination of factors – the rise of social history, the growth of Disneyland-like entertainment, and government-led projects to commemorate the past – made the atmosphere ripe for an exhibit such as Old Town to be built.

As early as 1959, staff at the British Columbia Provincial Museum had earmarked the institution for a new building.<sup>21</sup> In its original home in the provincial legislature, the museum’s exhibits (which covered only the disciplines of natural history and ethnology) were cramped and restricted by the old building’s layout. The new building, purpose-built for collection storage and display, would finally give the provincial museum room to introduce new exhibits “relating to history.”<sup>22</sup> Prior to construction of the new museum building in the late 1960s, objects relating to the settler-history of the province were contained within the provincial archives. Early ideas for the new museum building therefore proposed an absorption of the BC Archives’ physical object collection, but staff quickly recognized that simple amalgamation would not be sufficient.<sup>23</sup> This was because the archives’ object collection was the result of sporadic donations and not guided by a specific collecting mandate, and was treated as what the Provincial Archivist described as “the official attic and basement of the province.”<sup>24</sup> Future history curators and collection managers of the museum would adopt the task of answering several key questions to define the museum’s new collections, and the eventual exhibit which would emerge from their selections: what objects could possibly represent BC’s history? Would these be individually historically

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<sup>20</sup> Helen Davies proposes in *Commemorating Canada* that large-scale celebrations, such as Canada’s 1967 Centennial, help to create historical continuity to create cultural cohesion and political stability. Commemorations as memorable events designed to inspire pride become regular “benchmarks” within the flow of time. Helen Davies, “Canada’s Centennial Experience,” in *Commemorating Canada* ed. Raymond Blake and Matthew Hayday (University of Toronto Press, 2018), 176.

<sup>21</sup> “A Ten-Year Plan for the Provincial Museum,” October 16, 1959, file 2, box 0966, series GR-0111, Provincial Museum correspondence inward, BCA.

<sup>22</sup> “A Ten-Year Plan for the Provincial Museum,” October 16, 1959, BCA.

<sup>23</sup> “The Next Ten Years,” June 1963, file 6, box 67, GR-0111, Provincial Museum correspondence inwards, BCA.

<sup>24</sup> Roy, *The Collectors*, 157.

significant items, or would they consist of common objects found throughout the lives of British Columbians over the centuries? And finally, how would the museum acquire these objects? The museum's new collections mandate, the construction of the new building, and the staffing decisions would dramatically shape how these questions were answered over the subsequent years.

The museum's proposed expansion would encompass "the entire field of History, from the time of first discovery by Europeans to the present."<sup>25</sup> In 1966, an amendment to the BC Museums Act thus proposed "to broaden our scope to include all human history of the province, not just Indian history as presently spelled out."<sup>26</sup> While this expanded mandate brought more of history's scope under the purview of the provincial museum, it also separated Indigenous history from the history of the province itself. Future exhibits in the new building would further reify this division along departmental lines.

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<sup>25</sup> "The Next Ten Years," June 1963, BCA.

<sup>26</sup> G. Clifford Carl to John Cotton Wright, September 20, 1966.



Figure 3. The Provincial Museum in 1909. The museum in the BC legislature remained largely unchanged from its inception 1898 until it moved to the Heritage Court complex in 1968. The old building's limited space restricted the types of exhibit techniques that could be used.<sup>27</sup>

The impetus for the new museum was predicated upon two factors: a dramatic growth in the population of British Columbia which the building needed to serve, and the pressure to transform the archives and museum into modern sites of education and entertainment. Since the BCPM was first established in 1886, the population of British Columbia had grown from 74,000 to approximately 2,000,000.<sup>28</sup> Expanding the new exhibit space to roughly twelve times its footprint in its old headquarters reflected this dramatic population increase (Figure 3). The museum's target audiences had also shifted. Museums in Canada recognized that families with children now represented a significant new demographic because of the Baby Boom. Museums

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<sup>27</sup> "Ethnological Department of the Provincial Museum of Natural History," 1909, Item I-61549, Collection F5, Archives visual records collection, BCA.

<sup>28</sup> "The Next Ten Years," June 1963, BCA.

would increasingly reorient themselves to create family-activities for these growing publics rather than for the traditional cultural elites who visited as individuals.<sup>29</sup> In addition, while some museums and curators derided increasingly popular forms of entertainment like immersive theme parks, these institutions also recognized the growing competition from Disneyfied sites.<sup>30</sup> Support for museums pioneering new ways of engaging their visitors in the 1960s was thus shaped by the idea that these institutions were places where people of all ages could attain both cultural value and entertainment simultaneously.

Finally, the 1951 Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences declared that Canadian museums were in a “sorry plight” with “widespread public indifference to their inadequacy.”<sup>31</sup> Since this report was published, federal, provincial, and local governments began increasing their support of newer heritage institutions to rectify the deficit.<sup>32</sup> Growing governmental support of museums in the late 1950s and early 1960s echoed the similar governmental support given to post-secondary institutions to boost scholarship that benefited the nation.<sup>33</sup>

From its inception, government administrators and museum planners envisioned the BCPM and its new exhibits to be a world-renowned example of cutting-edge research and display techniques. The BC Deputy Minister of Public Works wrote in a memo that “this museum we are planning must be of the very best. It will need every idea we can bring into it.”<sup>34</sup> Ministers, designers, and other provincial governments staff sought out other examples of state-

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<sup>29</sup> Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (Taylor and Francis, 2013), 109.

<sup>30</sup> Corinne A. Kratz and Ivan Karp, “Wonder and Worth: Disney Museums in World Showcase,” *Museum Anthropology* 17, no. 3 (1993): 32, <https://doi.org/10.1525/mua.1993.17.3.32>, 32.

<sup>31</sup> Robyn Gillam, *Hall of Mirrors: Museums and the Canadian Public* (Banff Centre Press, 2001), 75.

<sup>32</sup> Gillam, *Hall of Mirrors*, 75.

<sup>33</sup> David M. Cameron, “The Challenge of Change: Canadian Universities in the 21st Century,” *Canadian Public Administration* 45, no. 2 (2002): 150.

<sup>34</sup> A.E. Webb to Colin Crump, August 27, 1962, file 1, box 2, series GR-0999, Public works records relating to museum and archives, BCA.

of-the-art display techniques to explore what this new provincial museum could look like. In 1962, an architect hired onto the BCPM project was told to visit the museums in Chicago and in Milwaukee.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps it was at this time that inspiration for the streetscape first began, as the architect would have seen the brand new, state-of-the-art streetscape exhibit designed by Stephen Borhegyi at the Milwaukee Public Museum.

A memorandum about the new BCPM building stated how a museum “should be a source of community pride” and that it should be used for “guidance and entertainment of the highest order.”<sup>36</sup> The proposed exhibition halls would ideally convey “the character and personality of British Columbia.”<sup>37</sup> Most importantly, a new museum “should form an integral part of the people it serves, and not an ivory tower perched high above the community, misunderstood by the majority, and frequented only by the snobbish few.”<sup>38</sup> However, one of the most pressing design problems of the new museum was how to address “museum fatigue,” a phenomenon newly recognized as the popularity of large entertainment venues began to grow.<sup>39</sup> The stimulus of exhibits without places for rest meant potential visitors would soon tire and become overwhelmed with information. To counter fatigue, British Columbia’s new provincial museum needed to put its visitors into receptive frames of mind, giving them space to feel rather than ask its visitors to engage with moralizing or didactic stories at each display.

In a letter to a director of another museum, Clifford Carl (director of the BCPM) wrote that the BCPM’s new building was supported in large part by the federal government’s 1964 promise “to underwrite part of the costs of new public buildings in each province of Canada to

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<sup>35</sup> A.E. Webb to W.N. Chant, August 27, 1962, file 1, box 2, GR-0999, Public works relating to museum, BCA.

<sup>36</sup> W.D. Lougher-Goodey, “New Museum Building: Government Precinct,” n.d. (ca. 1959-1964), file 1, box 2, GR-0999, Public works relating to museum, BCA.

<sup>37</sup> W.D. Lougher-Goodey, “New Museum Building,” n.d. (ca. 1959-1964).

<sup>38</sup> W.D. Lougher-Goodey, “New Museum Building,” n.d. (ca. 1959-1964).

<sup>39</sup> J.A. Cochrane, “Museum Trip Report,” n.d., file 1, box 2, GR-0999, Public works relating to museum, BCA.

celebrate our 1967 Centennial.”<sup>40</sup> The federal grant was worth 2.5 million dollars, which was intended to be matched by provincial governments.<sup>41</sup> The federal government recommended to provinces that they should prioritize museums as the main beneficiaries for the grant.<sup>42</sup> Finally, British Columbia premier W.A.C. Bennett announced in 1963 that a new museums building was planned as a special project to mark the centennial of confederation in 1967, using these funds from the Centennial Grants project.<sup>43</sup>

The Queen Mother officiated the formal laying of a cornerstone at the site of the new building on 19 March 1966, demonstrating how even early on in its development, the new provincial museum would continue to celebrate its traditional ties with Britain (Figure 4).<sup>44</sup> The inauguration of the museum was tied to key elements of Canadian nationhood, as evidenced by its unveiling and the use of imperial rituals and traditions to dedicate the space.<sup>45</sup> Similar to the unveiling of the National War Monument thirty years earlier in Ottawa, the unveiling of an important public space by a British royal is what Tonya Davidson calls an actualization of memory.<sup>46</sup> The time-honoured ritual of a British royal attending the opening of a large project with national importance made the abstract concrete – as Davidson writes, the rituals produce a community “saturated in specific understandings of Canadian patriotism and public citizenship; the affective ties to the imaginary community that is the Canadian nation are both produced and renewed through engagement in these liminal, transformative rituals.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> G. Clifford Carl to John Cotton Wright, September 20, 1966, BCA.

<sup>41</sup> G. Clifford Carl to John Cotton Wright, September 20, 1966, BCA.

<sup>42</sup> G. Clifford Carl to John Cotton Wright, September 20, 1966, BCA.

<sup>43</sup> “A Brief History of the Provincial Museum,” June 12, 1968, file 14, box 2, GR-0999, Public works relating to museum, BCA.

<sup>44</sup> “A Brief History of the Provincial Museum,” June 12, 1968, BCA.

<sup>45</sup> Davidson, “Imperial Nostalgia,” 181.

<sup>46</sup> Davidson, “Imperial Nostalgia,” 181.

<sup>47</sup> Davidson, “Imperial Nostalgia,” 181-182.



Figure 4. The Queen Mother laying the cornerstone for the BCPM in March, 1966.<sup>48</sup>

While the museum was still not finished by 1967, its themes were finally decided. Each exhibit – both the human history floor and the natural history floor – would revolve around the intertwining theme of “Man and nature.”<sup>49</sup> One of the main aims of the Human History Floor was to depict “the coming of the white man” with the subjects consisting of “early exploration, fur trade, gold rush, pioneers.”<sup>50</sup> While there was no mention in this early version of the proposed exhibit plan for how British Columbia’s urban centres were to be depicted, at this stage, “both full-size and miniature dioramas” had been decided to be used, “as well as period rooms, photographs and continuous strip film.”<sup>51</sup> Major dioramas were also planned for the

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<sup>48</sup> “Provincial Museum: Victoria, British Columbia,” souvenir booklet (British Columbia Provincial Museum, 1968), 4.

<sup>49</sup> G. Clifford Carl, “Proposed Exhibit Plan – British Columbia Provincial Museum,” June 30, 1967, file 3, box 2, series GR-0999, Public works records relating to museum, BCA.

<sup>50</sup> Carl, “Proposed Exhibit Plan,” June 30, 1967, BCA.

<sup>51</sup> Carl, “Proposed Exhibit Plan,” June 30, 1967, BCA.

natural history exhibits, along with a life-size building reconstruction in the First Peoples Hall.<sup>52</sup> The new museum building finally opened on a sunny day in August in 1968.<sup>53</sup> It was around this time that Dan Gallacher was hired on as curator for the newly created History Department.<sup>54</sup>

Delays in construction and staff appointments necessitated a staggered opening of the exhibits, with the permanent exhibits built one after another. Despite the History exhibits receiving the vaguest of the plans of the permanent exhibits, they were still decided to be the museum's first exhibition project.<sup>55</sup> The Human History exhibits were codenamed "Project 70," with the new goal to open the third-floor galleries in 1970 – while three years too late for the Canadian Centennial, this would roughly coincide with British Columbia's own centennial celebration in 1971.<sup>56</sup>

#### *"Authenticity" and the Building of Old Town (1969-1972)*

This section briefly discusses the building of Old Town itself between 1969 and 1972. The process of choosing the buildings, crafting immersive elements, finding artifacts to populate the displays, and marketing the time travel experience were all steps in the creators' desires to achieve "historical authenticity" within the streetscape. Old Town's curators took inspiration from their own mentors to decide upon a historical framework of the exhibit – mainly, J.M.S. Careless, and his concepts of "limited identities," metropolitanism, and the hinterlands.<sup>57</sup> This

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<sup>52</sup> "A Brief History of the Provincial Museum," June 12, 1968, BCA.

<sup>53</sup> *Report of the Year 1968, British Columbia Provincial Museum* (Province of British Columbia: Department of Recreation and Conservation, 1969), 11.

<sup>54</sup> *Report of the Year 1968, British Columbia Provincial Museum*, 30.

<sup>55</sup> "Provincial Museum: Victoria, British Columbia," souvenir booklet (British Columbia Provincial Museum, 1968), 10.

<sup>56</sup> "Official Opening of the British Columbia Modern History Exhibits: Programme," British Columbia Provincial Museum (1972), Royal British Columbia Museum Modern Human History Library (hereafter cited as RBCM MHHL).

<sup>57</sup> Ian MacPherson, "British Columbia Provincial Museum, Modern History Galleries," *Material Culture Review* 12 (January 1981): 62.

section of the chapter explains that while the framework for the exhibit's interpretation was based on contemporary research and historical discourse, it also built historical absences (especially in regards to Indigenous peoples, women, and non-European immigrants) into the very fabric of the exhibit itself.

Before the exhibits could begin construction, they needed a unifying theme. The curators and exhibit designers decided on a concept called a "ring of time."<sup>58</sup> Visitors would start their journey through the exhibit in the present, then walk back through time "to the dawn of man and then returning, through the re-creations of archaeology and the history of the native peoples, to the present."<sup>59</sup> The desire for international recognition in the museum meant that these exhibits needed to draw visitors from outside the province – a didactic display would not work to properly capture the imaginations of the public. It needed to be a history of the province that was readily accessible and attracted attention. British Columbian history – and Canadian heritage – therefore also became a performance for a foreign audience. However, the budget to create this new, state-of-the-art exhibit was limited to \$20,000.<sup>60</sup>

With the scant funds, the exhibits were decided to be designed modularly, with artifacts displayed inside square crates to be stacked around the exhibit.<sup>61</sup> Several external reports criticizing these planned exhibits were submitted to the provincial government, but the museum director, Clifford Carl, did not pay them much heed.<sup>62</sup> While the BCPM's PR department communicated an aura of optimism about the state of the new museum, behind the scenes, staff

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<sup>58</sup> Peter Corley-Smith, *The Ring of Time: The Story of the British Columbia Provincial Museum* (British Columbia Provincial Museum, 1985), 10.

<sup>59</sup> Corley-Smith, *The Ring of Time*, 10.

<sup>60</sup> Corley-Smith, *The Ring of Time*, 11.

<sup>61</sup> Roy, *The Collectors*, 197.

<sup>62</sup> Roy, *The Collectors*, 198.

were frustrated with the direction that the exhibits were taking. That is, until talks began with an external museum contractor by the name of Jean Jacques André.

André had a life-long fascination with museums. He had pursued careers in photography, taxidermy, and illustration before settling in Victoria, eventually starting his own design firm.<sup>63</sup> André had applied for the Chief of Exhibits position at the BCPM in 1965, but the job was given to another candidate with more experience.<sup>64</sup> In the meantime, André kept his own consultancy company, working contractually for the Exhibits Department at the BCPM.<sup>65</sup> When Stephan Borhegyi of the Milwaukee Public Museum came to Victoria in a whirlwind visit of 20 hours to evaluate the BCPM's progress on the new history exhibit, he “flamboyantly advised the museum's executive to throw out everything it had built to that point and start again.”<sup>66</sup> As a result, André was asked by the museum if he would do the honour of hosting Borhegyi for his visit in Victoria. André agreed, and for an evening he entertained the Milwaukee Museum director. Not long after Borhegyi returned to Milwaukee, the Exhibits department at the BCPM was invited to view the Milwaukee Museum's newly completed streetscape exhibit. Busy with their own projects, André was again asked by the Exhibits department if he would make the visit to see the Milwaukee streetscape. André complied – and the experience forever changed the trajectory of his exhibit-designing career.

André was deeply impressed by the meticulous attention to detail in Streets of Old Milwaukee. His main takeaway was that the exhibit was an experience, and that visitors would be more likely to remember (and be impressed with) these experiences over didactic lessons. It

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<sup>63</sup> Darron Kloster, “Obituary: Jean Jacques André was Architect of Old Town, Natural History, First Peoples Exhibits at Royal B.C. Museum,” *Times Colonist*, January 7, 2022. <https://www.timescolonist.com/local-news/obituary-jean-jacques-andré-was-architect-of-old-town-natural-history-first-peoples-exhibits-at-royal-bc-museum-4931104>.

<sup>64</sup> This candidate was Eric Thorn, who had previously worked at various European museums as well as the National Museum of Man in Ottawa. Roy, *The Collectors*, 197.

<sup>65</sup> Bianca Message, conversation with author, August 21, 2024.

<sup>66</sup> Jamie Craig, “Museum a Long, Costly Work but It Could Be Very Best,” *Vancouver Sun*, May 18, 1973.

was this defining visit that convinced André that streetscape exhibits could be extremely effective ways for communicating presentations of the past. Soon after André's return to Victoria the museum (impressed by his productive conversations with Borhegyi in Milwaukee) hired André to replace the former Chief of Exhibits in 1968. With André officially onboard, proper planning for the history exhibit could finally begin. But to make these experiences as believable as possible, the exhibits would also need to seem *authentic* – indeed, as one newspaper put it, “a mistake in detail might destroy [the] careful sense of reality.”<sup>67</sup>

From 1970-1972, a team of twenty technicians, curators, and exhibit designers worked around the clock to transform grand plans for an imagined British Columbia town at the turn-of-century into a brick-and-mortar – or rather, plywood-and-fibreglass – streetscape exhibit (Figure 5).<sup>68</sup> As the first module of the Modern Human History galleries, Old Town was situated as a shining example of the museum's dedication to modern exhibition techniques. However, more importantly, Old Town was the keystone in the overarching theme for the rest of the History galleries.

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<sup>67</sup> Thomas, “Alive! That's How History Should Be... That's How They Want to Make It.”

<sup>68</sup> Jean André and Dan Gallacher were always adamant that the work of the History Galleries was a huge team effort. For the purposes of this thesis (and for clarity), I focus almost solely on the stories of Gallacher and André for their involvement in the exhibit. However, there were dozens of people involved in the exhibit building and design process, including assistant curator Jim Wardrop and chief of display production Alec James. Other figures instrumental in the building of the streetscape included Tom Palfrey, Tom Putnam, John Smyly, and Jack Waters. Bruce Obee, “Huge Job to Remake History,” *Victoria Times*, June 12, 1972; “Museum Credits,” in *Exhibit Guide: British Columbia Modern History, 1740's-1970's* (Friends of the Provincial Museum, 1974), 67.



Figure 5. Scaffolding for Old Town. The building on the left is the Grand Hotel, with the parlour in its bottom storey (c. 1970).<sup>69</sup>

This chosen theme was shaped by chief curator Dan Gallacher's own recent training as a historian. Gallacher was completing his Master's degree in History at the University of Victoria while planning the exhibits for the BCPM. He openly acknowledged the influence of one of his mentors, Canadian historian J.M.S. Careless, on the direction of the exhibits. Careless' new approach to regionalism and nationalism as articulated in his 1969 article inspired Gallacher's generation of historians who sought to apply it to the New Social History.<sup>70</sup> Gallacher was particularly interested in Careless' framing of the relationship between the frontier and the metropolis. Careless would most clearly articulate this relationship several years later in a lecture

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<sup>69</sup> "2002s1028410," RBCM MHHL.

<sup>70</sup> J.M.S. Careless, "'Limited Identities' in Canada," *Canadian Historical Review* 50, no. 1 (March 1969): 1–10.

paper in *Frontier and Metropolis*, in which he stated that “Canada took shape through the successive occupation of frontiers.”<sup>71</sup> Careless ultimately argued that the occupation of these frontiers was driven by successive waves of workers in resource industries, rather than by isolated homesteaders. These workers forged connections with the industry offices in metropolitan centres to gain access to markets hungry for primary resource stock. As Misao Dean writes in her discussion of the BCPM and its embedded narratives, Careless’ frontier-metropolis thesis was embodied by the very organization of the Modern Human History Galleries.<sup>72</sup> The exhibit’s structure required “the visitor to pass through Old Town and then into the ‘hinterland’ of resource industries.”<sup>73</sup> Old Town visitors themselves were transformed into Careless’ image of “metropolitan outrunners in the primeval forest.”<sup>74</sup>

Old Town’s official title, “Urbanization and Industrialization,” echoed the economic themes that Gallacher wished to highlight in the exhibit. Within the Careless-inspired historical framing of the gallery, Gallacher decided to focus almost exclusively on what he called “socio-economic” principles. This meant he was interested in analyzing how people participated in the resource-driven economy and their relationship between the metropolis and the hinterlands. Gallacher wanted to present British Columbia’s past as being symbolized by both worlds – this would be done through representing new technologies (as shown by the automobile in the City Garage), trade (such as through the various shops dotting the Old Town streetscape), and connections to the frontier (as evidenced by the train station and shipping office). This was an expanded slice of the kind of history on display in traditional museums, rather than focusing on

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<sup>71</sup> J.M.S. Careless, *Frontier and Metropolis: Regions, Cities, and Identities in Canada Before 1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), 8.

<sup>72</sup> Misao Dean, “Managing Diversity in the Representation of BC History: Point Ellice House and ‘Chinatown,’” *BC Studies* 134, vol. 2 (Summer 2002): 82.

<sup>73</sup> Dean, “Managing Diversity,” 82.

<sup>74</sup> Careless, *Frontier and Metropolis*, 15.

the lives of politicians and how “Great Men” had shaped the development of the province within Canada.

The job of constructing authenticity fell to exhibit designer Jean André. André’s chief task was to make the exhibit look and feel like it belonged to a nebulous “turn of the twentieth century” time. In an interview with the editor of the *Friends of the Royal BC Museum* journal a decade after André’s work on the Old Town display, André said:

I am not an academic, an archeologist or a scientist, and I don’t consider myself an expert in any particular field. What I try to do is understand it. Then to it, you add old techniques from the theatre and new ones from the computer age and visually you carry a story by the excitement you have generated.<sup>75</sup>

Some of these theatre techniques included skewing the scale of the buildings on display; while the first storeys were life-sized replicas of real buildings, the second storeys were shrunk to about two-thirds scale (Figure 6).<sup>76</sup> From the street, visitors could catch glimpses of the second-floor interiors, giving the illusion that these were inhabited buildings.

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<sup>75</sup> Kay Lines, “Experience the Silence of the Deep,” *Discovery: Friends of the British Columbia Provincial Museum Quarterly Review* 14 no. 2 (April 1986): 6.

<sup>76</sup> “Basically, we try to keep everything at scale in Old Town from eight feet down, so the doors, windows and steps are at scale. Above this, we ‘fudge it’ to get the proper proportions and perspective to fit the space.” Arlene Yaworsky, “A Bold, New Façade,” *Royal British Columbia Museum: Discovery Magazine*, September 1997, 4.



Figure 6. “Dominion Drapers” and the train station in Old Town (c. 1970).<sup>77</sup>

The idea of evoking impressions of the past was at the heart of curators’ designs. Gallacher wrote that it would be “ludicrous” to attempt “thorough treatment” of gender history and the history of the racialized in the museum’s exhibits, and that instead, staff should focus on promoting general interest through evocative displays.<sup>78</sup> Specific educational information would instead be published in material (available for purchase in the gift shop), or featured in lectures and other learning programs, “in the hope that visitors take it upon themselves to search-out more information and deeper meanings.”<sup>79</sup> Curators did not imagine the streetscape to be the

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<sup>77</sup> “2002s1028380,” RBCM MHHL.

<sup>78</sup> “Docent Training Guide,” n.d., RBCM MHHL.

<sup>79</sup> “Docent Training Guide,” n.d., RBCM MHHL.

main mode of education; textual material found outside the exhibit would fulfill that role instead. However, to accomplish this goal of presenting an entertaining impression of the past, the exhibit needed to convince visitors that Old Town was an “authentic” portrayal.

The quest to depict an authentic British Columbia past extended into debates about entertainment and education in the Old Town exhibit. For example, the theatre in Old Town was supposed to be a place for the archives to showcase some of their historical material. The theatre would play archival newsreels to showcase “slices of pioneer life.”<sup>80</sup> However, as early as October of 1972 (within months of Old Town’s opening), Charlie Chaplin films (along with Laurel and Hardy) were being “rented from Vancouver to offer continuous entertainment” in place of reels seen to be more educational.<sup>81</sup> André, however, wanted to “add some National Film Board historic films” to the theatre’s roster.<sup>82</sup> It was unclear if André intended for these to be archival films similar to the archival newsreel screenings, or NFB documentaries. Early on in Old Town’s lifespan, then, its purpose shifted from an “authentic” portrayal of the past (the use of cinema as a source of news) to a portrayal of the past as imagined by visitors, filled with familiar Chaplin films to please audiences.

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<sup>80</sup> Leslie Peterson, “On a Time Journey Redolent of the Past,” *Vancouver Sun*, July 22, 1972.

<sup>81</sup> Nancy Brown, “Happiness Is a Fresh Stack of Manure Daily,” *Daily Colonist*, October 15, 1972.

<sup>82</sup> Brown, “Happiness Is a Fresh Stack of Manure Daily.”



Figure 7. Old Town in its opening year, 1972.<sup>83</sup>

Premier W.A.C. Bennet finally opened the BCPM's new exhibit in 1972 (Figure 7). While several years past its initial proposed deadline, the opening was a huge success, with over 45,000 visitors coming to see the exhibit within its first week alone.<sup>84</sup> Reviews frequently commented upon the immersive sense of the past felt within the so-called authentic displays. Journalists noted how it was "like walking through some of the recreation of Disneyland – ... [minus] the animated characters and the admittance fee," and that "if a more realistic display exists, I've yet to see it."<sup>85</sup> "There's nostalgia in the air," wrote another reporter in the opening

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<sup>83</sup> Craig, "Museum a Long, Costly Work but it could be the Very Best."

<sup>84</sup> Roy, *The Collectors*, 335.

<sup>85</sup> Roy, *The Collectors*, 335.

months, “and it comes from the thousands of hand-bevelled wooden bricks that form the roadway [and] from the real type in the print shop galleys.”<sup>86</sup> Another article praised how the “board walkways portray early 19<sup>th</sup>-century life so precisely that any feeling of being inside a modern-day museum is easily forgotten.”<sup>87</sup> “What has been completed in the exhibition,” read a final early article, “is artistically done and smacks of authenticity.”<sup>88</sup>

Shortly after the exhibit’s opening, Gallacher published his own article about the design and purpose of Old Town. Gallacher claimed the thousands of objects in Old Town created “as comprehensive a view of urban material history as exists anywhere in Canada.”<sup>89</sup> “Authenticity is absolutely vital,” Gallacher wrote, “if we ever get a reputation for inaccuracy the whole effort goes to waste.”<sup>90</sup> Indeed, one visitor survey conducted in 1987 reveals further insights into these public opinions of authenticity in the streetscape. 65% of the total 705 respondents rated Old Town as “excellent,” with a further 18.4% rating it “good.”<sup>91</sup> 69.6% of visitors rated the authenticity of displays as very important for enjoyment, with a further 22.7% rating it as fairly important.<sup>92</sup> Perhaps the most interesting question (and resulting response) asked how successful the third floor galleries were in “presenting a true picture of how things really were.”<sup>93</sup> 76% said it was very successful; only three respondents out of 602 (or 0.5%) said not very successful. For a final report submitted the next year in September 1988, more visitors rated the “sense of history/of being the past” as the most favourable feature at the museum than the presence of

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<sup>86</sup> Brown, “Happiness Is a Fresh Stack of Manure Daily.”

<sup>87</sup> Obee, “Huge Job to Remake History.”

<sup>88</sup> Pat Dufour, “‘Big Boys’ of Industry Blamed for Holding Back History of B.C.,” *Victoria Times*, February 18, 1972.

<sup>89</sup> Gallacher, “Exhibits as Overviews,” 23.

<sup>90</sup> Dufour, “‘Big Boys’ of Industry Blamed for Holding Back History of B.C.”

<sup>91</sup> Bruce Campbell, “Heritage Site Visitor Survey Interim Report: 1, Provincial Museum,” Campbell Goodell Consultants, October 5, 1987, RBCM MHHL.

<sup>92</sup> Campbell, “Heritage Site Visitor Survey Interim Report,” RBCM MHHL.

<sup>93</sup> Campbell, “Heritage Site Visitor Survey Interim Report,” RBCM MHHL.

artifacts/antiques, with “authenticity” also taking home the lion’s share of responses (after only the First People’s Gallery and Old Town).<sup>94</sup> These statistics give a rare glimpse into the public’s perspective on the success of authenticity in the streetscape, offering valuable insight into how the narratives crafted by curators were received.

### *History Through the Prism of the Simulacrum*

This next part of the chapter discusses the opening and the initial reception of Old Town. The historical framing and actual content of the exhibit was commented upon considerably less than another aspect of the exhibit: the almost “Disney-like” fantasy that had been created, where “history [was] not being taught so much as used to entertain museum-goers on a Sunday afternoon.”<sup>95</sup> Despite some early criticisms, the exhibit proved to be immensely popular (with museum attendance soaring), attracting visitors and museum professionals from across the country.

Visitors to the new exhibit corroborated the past as presented in Old Town with their own preconceptions of history. Each individual believed, according to their own experiences (from watching movies, reading books, recalling classroom knowledge, or even attending other museums) that they had the authority to know what was real or not real. In other words, visitors had pre-existing *memories* of what the exhibit should look like – if the presented past did not conform to these expectations, then it could not be historically accurate. The success of the exhibit was tied to whether or not it made people feel nostalgic about the past. As well, this sense of reflective nostalgia would encourage visitors to come back, to repeat their forays into familiar pasts. Gallacher described the galleries as “so exacting in historical detail and the mood so

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<sup>94</sup> Campbell, “Heritage Site Visitor Survey Interim Report,” RBCM MHHL.

<sup>95</sup> “Is Disneyland the Model for Provincial Museum?,” *Victoria Times*, June 12, 1971.

powerful that visitors often forget they are in a museum.”<sup>96</sup> Gallacher also wrote that “ironically, the designers have been so successful in re-creating past atmospheres that the larger historical themes upon which the storyline rests often are lost on the visitor.”<sup>97</sup>

The storyline of the exhibit was perhaps made most clear with the help of one of André’s innovative exhibit techniques as on display in the second story of the Grand Hotel. Visitors could climb a short flight of stairs, and then stroll down an ornately carpeted hallway where several period rooms were staged behind low bannisters. Since none of the rooms contained immersion-breaking signage, the designers needed another method to transmit the socio-economic historical information that Gallacher had compiled for Old Town’s storyline. André decided to incorporate some of this information in the form of recorded conversations, which would be played from hidden speakers in several of the Grand Hotel rooms.<sup>98</sup> These recordings were meant to feel like the visitor was “overhearing” conversations occurring between characters from the past, happening just beyond a slightly ajar door in each period room. The aim was for visitors to feel like if they could just look a little further beyond a corner, or step into the room itself, that they would discover real people from the past. This helped to further immerse visitors, since the just-out-of-sight characters meant that André did not need to use mannequins to stage the exhibits (indeed, both Gallacher and André felt that mannequins would also break the immersion, and this neatly sidestepped the problem).

One of the most common ways that museums used sound in exhibits was to have a motion sensor triggered by a visitor stepping close to the display’s banister. However, André was not satisfied with the artificiality of this technique – the action was triggered by the visitor, rather

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<sup>96</sup> Gallacher, “Exhibits as Overviews,” 14.

<sup>97</sup> Gallacher, “Exhibits as Overviews,” 14.

<sup>98</sup> Bianca Message, conversation with author, August 21, 2024.

than appearing to occur whether the visitor was present or not. Instead, André looked to new advances in computer technology and sound system improvements as pioneered in another immersive environ: Disneyland. Hidden behind the walls of the Disney dioramas were wired connections that linked each diorama in what was called a “Binloop” system. The intricate solution created a sense of organic spontaneity (with sounds triggering based on calculated algorithms), while avoiding the issue of overlapping noises that drowned each other out.

André designed a similar version of this system for the rooms of the Grand Hotel.<sup>99</sup> The audio was comprised of recorded conversations performed by actors talking in historical personas. The loops randomized the conversations in the Grand Hotel rooms, giving the illusion of serendipity when a visitor “stumbled” onto a recorded conversation. The sound system encouraged visitors to linger in each of the rooms. The audio system rewarded visitor curiosity, and reinforced the belief that visitors were stepping back in time into someone else’s world, and that they were happening upon these tidbits of information. The visitor then became part of the vignette.

The first of these audio zones was the kitchen. In this conversation, a visitor could overhear an Irish couple talking.<sup>100</sup> The kitchen was furnished with simple, functional objects rather than decorative pieces, with a hidden fan gently blowing the kitchen curtains – the simple room was allegedly supposed to signal “the lower-class status” of the people who lived there. In the kitchen conversation, the husband discussed politics, arguing that the most recent wave of immigrants from China were taking away jobs from Irish men such as himself. It is curious, here, that the curators chose an Irish ethnic identity for the couple occupying this lower-class kitchen. As Angèle Smith has noted in her article on public perceptions of Irish immigration to Canada,

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<sup>99</sup> Brown, “Happiness Is a Fresh Stack of Manure Daily.”

<sup>100</sup> Bianca Message, conversation with author, August 21, 2024.

there had never been a significant number of Irish immigrants to British Columbia.<sup>101</sup> Smith further that notes that Irish Canadians are traditionally represented as urban immigrants rather than “pioneers” of the West, and that the “supposed lack of Irish in the Canadian West” is a product of a manufactured Irish identity: one that is “colonial, and Othered, lacking power, equated with the non-white and feminine.”<sup>102</sup> To choose the kitchen, then – a space associated with the feminine – for this Irish couple to have their conversation about Chinese immigration to British Columbia – which represents an additional layer of Othering – thus is a fascinating presentation of Irish identity. It is at once progressive (by talking about Irish perspectives at all in a space where they have been seemingly ignored in the province’s history) while also remaining an archetypal representation of Irish immigration to Canada at large. Just like the exhibit itself, the Irish presence in the streetscape plays a more “symbolic” role of what Smith calls a “product of colonial ideas about gender, class, religion and Irish identity” rather than a “true” representation of the diverse Irish experiences in Canada.<sup>103</sup>

In the second audio zone (the bedroom suite, lavishly furnished with objects of Chinese, Japanese, and Indian origin), another couple could be heard discussing town gossip.<sup>104</sup> Listening to the couple’s conversation revealed to visitors that the occupants of the eclectically-styled room were British émigrés who had previously been living in India, and had only recently come to the growing metropolis of Victoria in British Columbia. Compared to their previous circumstances, as discussed by the high-society couple, Victoria was a “backwater” lacking in servants to tend to their household.<sup>105</sup> Sarah Cheang’s article on colonial nostalgia as articulated through the

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<sup>101</sup> Angèle Smith, “Fitting into a New Place: Irish Immigrant Experiences in Shaping a Canadian Landscape,” *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 8, no. 3 (2004): 218, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10761-004-1138-x>.

<sup>102</sup> Smith, “Fitting into a New Place,” 219.

<sup>103</sup> Smith, “Fitting into a New Place,” 221.

<sup>104</sup> Bianca Message, conversation with author, August 21, 2024.

<sup>105</sup> Bianca Message, conversation with author, August 21, 2024.

ownership of culturally elite “Orientalist” goods thus helps to make sense of the history on display in this period room. Cheang suggests that the “exotic” has often been conflated with the “primitive” regarding non-Western goods.<sup>106</sup> Yet the elaborate silks, fine porcelain and intricate carvings typical of these goods instead position the exotic as “both sophisticated and degenerate.”<sup>107</sup> The cornucopia of goods found in the Grand Hotel bedroom, then, was a celebration of empire and imperial connections to trade all the whilst “masking the political, economic and social injustices inherent in imperialistic relationships.”<sup>108</sup>

Finally, the last audio zone was a tax office. The conversation here was related to the ships sailing along Vancouver Island coast, and the ledgers (seen in tidy rows in the bookcase at the back of the office) kept by the clerks about shipments lost to the Graveyard of the Pacific. The out-of-view clerks discussed the construction efforts of the new West Coast Trail, and how it would radically change their industry by providing a lifeline to shipwrecked survivors on the rocky coast. This audio zone broached an interesting conversation about coastal navigation along British Columbia’s shorelines. Jesse Robertson’s article about light keepers on the West coast of Vancouver Island demonstrates how lighthouses “generated a kind of state knowledge that was integral to settler projects of mobility and access to land, resources, and marine environments.”<sup>109</sup> Therefore, inherent in each of these audio zones were connections with the imperial state – while they provided additional context otherwise missed by just observing the objects in each of the period rooms, the Binloop conversations were performances made to be the most readily consumed as “authentic” by a general public.

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<sup>106</sup> Sarah Cheang, “Selling China: Class, Gender and Orientalism at the Department Store,” *Journal of Design History* 20, no. 1 (2007): 2.

<sup>107</sup> Cheang, “Selling China,” 2.

<sup>108</sup> Cheang, “Selling China,” 4.

<sup>109</sup> Jesse Robertson, “Lightkeepers on Huu-ay-aht Shores: Indigenous Labour and Knowledge in the History of Coastal Navigation,” *BC Studies*, no. 222 (Summer 2024): 50-51.



Figure 8. Promotional image of the Grand Hotel, perhaps featuring one of the couples from the Binloop conversations. The exhibit did not employ costumed interpreters in its gallery.<sup>110</sup>

These recordings did not feature long in the streetscape exhibit (Figure 8). The Binloop audio zones were costly to maintain, requiring significant amounts of energy to run, and upper management questioned if the system's over-engineering was wasted on the relatively small exhibit. Mere months after the exhibit opened, a newspaper article noted that "conversation sets to tell the story of Canada... are currently in limbo as the department has run out of money and has to wait for its new budget."<sup>111</sup> Without signage or other interpretation, the little social history

<sup>110</sup> "2003s0711873," RBCM MHHL.

<sup>111</sup> Brown, "Happiness Is a Fresh Stack of Manure Daily."

context that had been included in these displays was lost. In addition, since these conversations were only around for a short period of time at the beginning of the exhibit's lifespan, the exact content of these conversations remains unknown. Without those transcripts or audio files of the audio zones, it is nearly impossible to fully analyze the nuances of Old Town's early attempt to present several social history narratives within the streetscape.

To further supplement the storyline for the displays, Gallacher included a "small temporary exhibition" gallery to exhibit more cultural subjects, "including ethnicity, decorative arts, and even women's history."<sup>112</sup> From its very inception, Old Town was not designed to represent the diverse histories of British Columbia. Within its permanent displays, Dean argues that the exhibit constructed its ordinary visitor "as a White man (who could enter buildings like hotels, railway stations, and movie theatres at will but could not enter the millinery shop) moving through the town towards a hinterland destination."<sup>113</sup> Within less than a year of the gallery opening, reviewers (such as Jamie Craig from the *Vancouver Sun*) criticized both the exhibit's lack of cultural history and its over-reliance on Careless' thesis:

It's possible [the exhibit] is presented as simply an objective statement of fact, but it's more reasonable to read it as extolling the virtues of land rape and the loss of Canadian sovereignty for the money it got us. This kind of talk is obviously in contradiction to the museum's stated goal, and is reinforced by countless other subtle inclusions in the display. This bias is explained by the fact the display's curator is an historian, and an economic historian to boot. This in turn explains why there is not the least semblance of any social history in the display, nor political history, nor any mention of the role of the Doukhobors in B.C., nor the Japanese, nor the Norwegians, and only the slightest reference to the role played by the Chinese.<sup>114</sup>

Criticism of Old Town's presentation of the past is therefore not a recent phenomenon. From its opening days, visitors, reviewers, academics, and museum professionals cautioned that Old

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<sup>112</sup> Gallacher, "Exhibits as Overviews," 18.

<sup>113</sup> Dean, "Managing Diversity," 83.

<sup>114</sup> Craig, "Museum a Long, Costly Work but It Could Be Very Best."

Town's picture of British Columbia depicted was incomplete. This was a time of expanding social history, where race, gender, and class were being discussed in new and insightful ways in both academic institutions and public museums. And yet, despite these critical shortcomings, the exhibit remained immensely popular for the next fifty years, inspiring exhibits across Canada.

The historical narratives promoted within Old Town were linked not just to empire, but also to memory and nostalgia. Here, I ask: how did the image of British Columbia continue to be tied to an identification with the British Empire, despite the emerging historiographic trends that sought to displace imperial attachments?<sup>115</sup> In what ways did the streetscape exhibit draw the boundaries around who was (and was not) represented in the history of the province? Did the invocation of reflective nostalgia in the exhibit strengthen these connections, or did it obscure them?

An imperial sense of the past imbued the exhibit. For example, one docent guide contains some general descriptions of British Columbia's architecture and their resulting influence on the exhibit. One section of the guide reads:

As one of civilization's backwaters, British Columbia never fully accepted this trend [of ornate and ostentatious European design] – behind the gingerbread, lace and brick of provincial buildings, the basic box remained. Still, interior furnishings could give a sense of elegance, that aura of sophistication so desired by recently arrived immigrants. The brawling towns and vast outdoors need not be overpowering if one's dwelling retained the familiar, the comfortable, the memory of home. Our [the museum team's] task was to recreate some of these styles and furnishings; *yours is to recapture the feeling of that time* [emphasis my own].<sup>116</sup>

The docent guide encouraged the speaker to make explicit the connections between the visitor and the exhibit – between the so-called collective memory on display in the period rooms of the streetscape, and the associated personal memories. Indeed, it became the visitor's job to

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<sup>115</sup> Bryan Palmer, *Canada's 1960s: The Ironies of Identity in a Rebellious Era* (University of Toronto Press, 2009), 416.

<sup>116</sup> "Docent Training Guide," n.d., RBCM MHHL.

recapture the feeling of that time. It can be inferred that this part of the docent guide was likely to be read at one of the domestic scenes of the exhibit – i.e. the parlour, or the kitchen, rather than somewhere like the Chinese herbalist shop or the theatre or the garage. But these domestic scenes appealed to a strictly upper-class *white* settler memory of that life – and even with that, a very different context than that which was being portrayed inside the streetscape.

Curators navigated the exhibit’s historical lacunae by providing docents with background information that could supplement the missing material from Old Town.<sup>117</sup> However, these guides did not always provide many specifics beyond general information. For example, in one docent guide, the author summarizes immigration to British Columbia with the short, un-descriptive note that immigrants were “often from Europe, America, and Asia... [in addition to] eastern Canada,” and that newcomers usually came “from long-settled communities.”<sup>118</sup>

Racial and social tensions in British Columbia were summarized with the following statement:

Serious social problems were inevitable with such rapid change: Native Indians suffered greatly at the hands of governments and individuals. Other minority groups like Asiatics were victimized and harassed... unconscionable resource exploitation practices were widespread and devastating to the environment.<sup>119</sup>

Without mention of significant events such as the Douglas Treaties or the Chinese Head Tax, docents were left only with impressions of a province’s history marked by violent land theft, racist exclusionary policies, and environmental degradation – much like how visitors to Old Town faced only impressions of a generic British Columbia town at the turn-of-the-century.

Along with this idea of memory being evoked by the exhibit’s appearance, Dan Gallacher wanted the names of the businesses featured in Old Town to evoke an imperial sense of the past. In a memo to the museum’s assistant director and the exhibits team, Gallacher lists possible

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<sup>117</sup> A “docent” is the technical term for a volunteer museum guide.

<sup>118</sup> “Docent Training Guide,” n.d., RBCM MHHL.

<sup>119</sup> “Docent Training Guide,” n.d., RBCM MHHL.

names for the structures. He wrote that “I believe that we can use enough imagination in our choice of store and street names to evoke curiosity and nostalgia in the visitor.”<sup>120</sup> For example, the street itself would be called “New Caledonia Avenue,” after the original name for the mainland of what is now British Columbia. “Columbia Printers” would be “reminiscent of Columbus (new world)” along with its obvious connections to the Columbia River and British Columbia itself. “Colonial Druggists and Chemists” would be named “from our colonial period.” “Dominion Drapers” was an “opportunity to work in our greater affiliation” to Canada. Finally, “Imperial Studio” was given to a photographer’s second-storey dwelling, in order to “conjure thoughts of empire and strength – just as the word imperial did in 1909.”<sup>121</sup> These titles again raise the question of how the exhibit reinforced British Columbia’s connection to the British Empire, reflecting and conjuring an idealized Victorian period as typical of the Canadian past.

Nostalgia is grounded in material culture and sensory experiences. In many museums, the visitor must deliberately interact with an exhibit to engage a sense. These senses are often triggered in isolation. You look at a text panel, or you hear an audio clip by donning a pair of headphones, or you touch an object on an interactivity cart. However, in Old Town, the visitor’s senses are engaged simultaneously: a guest will feel the soft fabric of the plush chairs in the mock theatre when they sit to watch a film. They will then hear the artificial clicking of a non-existent film reel while they watch the black and white picture. These sensorial types of affective memories have power. The symbiosis between one’s senses and one’s memory serves to heighten the nostalgia felt within the exhibit.

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<sup>120</sup> Dan Gallacher to J.B. Foster, J. André, A. James, “Street Scene: Store and Street Names,” October 28, 1970, RBCM MHHL.

<sup>121</sup> Gallacher to Foster et. al., “Street Scene,” October 28, 1970, RBCM MHHL.

Caitlin Gordon-Walker explores these ideas of sensory memories throughout her book *Exhibiting Nation*. She uses the case of the apple pie as seen in the Old Town kitchen as an example of how the exhibit has used a certain object to evoke a nostalgic memory of Canadian identity within visitors – while noting that the memory is not held by everyone.<sup>122</sup> To explain this, she quotes a short excerpt from a story about a Korean Canadian child who invites one of her white friends to dinner:

I told my mother that we had to serve apple pie – my five-year-old logic being that you couldn't serve Korean food to a white friend from school. My mother had never baked a pie, and the farmhouse only had a woodstove oven at the time. Still she made the pie from scratch, leaving a full Korean dinner on the stove. I was ecstatic that we could serve Laurel "normal" food.<sup>123</sup>

Gordon-Walker concludes that not everyone will have sensory memories linked to apple pie.

Despite this, the presence of an apple pie in the Old Town kitchen persuades visitors to identify with the colonial exhibit by evoking white Canadian culture. Old Town's use of memories held in the collective consciousness further serves to create a convincingly authentic history.

Old Town does not create a place for "meeting across difference."<sup>124</sup> It does not challenge perceptions of the past, and instead presents a sanitized history: there is no garbage in the street, brawling in the saloon, or panicked travelers running to catch their train.<sup>125</sup> One reviewer, writing nearly a decade after Old Town had been constructed, commented that the "stores evoke memories from older tourists about candy and patent medicines; everywhere there are nostalgic memories..."<sup>126</sup> The same reviewer noted the absence of historical people in the galleries, asking how many Chinese, British, or Italians may have lived in British Columbia's towns in the early

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<sup>122</sup> Caitlin Gordon-Walker, *Exhibiting Nation: Multicultural Nationalism (and Its Limits) in Canada's Museums* (UBC Press, 2016), 79.

<sup>123</sup> Ann Shin, "Learning to Walk," in *Han Kut: Critical Art and Writing by Korean Canadian Women*, ed. Korean Canadian Women's Anthology Collective (Toronto: Inanna, 2007), 72.

<sup>124</sup> Filene, "History Museums and Identity," 340.

<sup>125</sup> Gordon-Walker, *Exhibiting Nation*, 79.

<sup>126</sup> MacPherson, "British Columbia Provincial Museum, Modern History Galleries," 65.

twentieth-century.<sup>127</sup> Finally, the reviewer also remarked how there was “little sense of immediate environment, of class or ethnic division” because of the “overwhelming emphasis... on a middle-or upper-class.”<sup>128</sup> Within these exhibits, museums should negotiate the tension between familiarity and foreignness of the past in order to instill an appreciation for historical differences.<sup>129</sup>

In 1992, the RBCM replaced the earlier Chinatown display in a corner of the Old Town street – which until then, had consisted of two display cases filled with an assortment of Chinese artifacts – with a detailed replica of a Chinatown alleyway. Branching off from Old Town’s main avenue, the alleyway contains shopfronts for two Chinese businesses, with living quarters and a meeting hall staged in the second storey. David Chuenyan Lai, a guest curator who helped plan the new exhibit, stated that the display had three objectives: to enhance visitors’ knowledge of an old Chinatown; to entice visitors to wander and peep at artifacts through windows; and, to make visitors experience “the feelings of curiosity, mystery and ‘fear’ in strolling through Chinatown at dusk, as it was historically perceived as a “Forbidden City” by the white public.”<sup>130</sup> As Misao Dean observes, the exhibit was grounded in *white* “memories” of Chinatown’s past.<sup>131</sup> The exhibit emphasizes the racial segregation of British Columbia towns at the turn-of-the-twentieth century, using the dusk setting, closed shops, and constricted, maze-like space to make the visitor feel unwelcome. Importantly, while the exhibit was meant to inspire familiarity in Chinese-Canadian visitors, Lai noted it was likely only elderly Chinese Canadians who had grown up in

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<sup>127</sup> MacPherson, “British Columbia Provincial Museum, Modern History Galleries,” 65.

<sup>128</sup> MacPherson, “British Columbia Provincial Museum, Modern History Galleries,” 65.

<sup>129</sup> Viviane Gosselin and Phaedra Livingstone, “Introduction: Perspectives on Museums and Historical Consciousness in Canada,” in *Museums and the Past: Constructing Historical Consciousness*, ed. Viviane Gosselin and Phaedra Livingstone (University of British Columbia Press, 2016), 7, <https://doi.org/10.59962/9780774830638-004>.

<sup>130</sup> Joan Seidl, “Royal British Columbia Museum, Victoria, Chinatown,” *Material History Review* 40 (Fall 1994): 77.

<sup>131</sup> Dean, “Managing Diversity in the Representation of BC History,” 83.

Chinatowns during the period portrayed in the exhibit who would feel comfortable in the space. A reviewer of the Chinatown exhibit in 1994 wrote that one of the stated exhibit objectives was to help visitors “be confident that the exhibit is an accurate reflection of the past.”<sup>132</sup> The reviewer, however, also wrote that “the Museum is still asking visitors to take it on blind faith.”<sup>133</sup> This seems to echo scholar Aleida Assmann’s statement that “a memory culture without historical scholarship is blind, and historical scholarship with no reference to memory is empty.”<sup>134</sup>

Fundamentally, the streetscape’s added Chinatown alleyway imposes one cultural memory: one of isolation and exoticism rather than interaction between white and Chinese-Canadian communities.<sup>135</sup> For example, the subtitle for the exhibit (as it was the only place in Old Town to feature interpretive signage) was “This Doesn’t Belong Here: (and neither do you).”<sup>136</sup> The exhibit text can be read two ways: either, that the visitor is white and is an intruder into the alleyway space; or, that the visitor *is* Chinese-Canadian, but is an intruder into the much larger space of (white) Old Town. While both readings of the text work to heighten the visitor’s awareness of racial tensions, in each version of historical reality, Chinatown is falsely fashioned into an undesirable place within the larger context of British Columbian society. While Dean writes that the display does attempt to challenge racial exclusion in the province by drawing attention to a visitor’s presumed “whiteness,” Gordon-Walker questions the feasibility of musealizing racial segregation without inadvertently reproducing it.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Seidl, “Royal British Columbia Museum,” 76.

<sup>133</sup> Seidl, “Royal British Columbia Museum,” 76.

<sup>134</sup> Aleida Assmann, *Is Time Out of Joint? On the Rise and Fall of the Modern Time Regime*, trans. Sarah Clift (Cornell University Press: 2020), 220.

<sup>135</sup> Dean, “Managing Diversity,” 85.

<sup>136</sup> Gordon-Walker, *Exhibiting Nation*, 83.

<sup>137</sup> Dean, “Managing Diversity,” 85; Gordon-Walker, *Exhibiting Nation*, 86.

## Conclusion

This chapter concludes by recapitulating how Old Town's depiction of the past was grounded in creating a sense of nostalgia in visitors rather than a cohesive national identity. The streetscape ultimately represents the struggles of curators and historians as they sought to define the province's history at a time when Canadian history itself was being questioned and reframed.

Museums are shapers of identity that have been used as cultural tools to reinforce behavioural norms and power relationships.<sup>138</sup> They are spaces in which the historical consciousness of the public is activated and constructed.<sup>139</sup> While this sometimes results in a challenge in which the visitor is forced to critically engage with the past, it can also serve to entrench visitors' memories or understandings of what the past *should* be like.<sup>140</sup> Visitors are not blank slates; they enter the exhibit with their own personal and collective memories. Old Town was never meant to challenge these memories or ask visitors to confront their own sense of nostalgia. The History team at the BCPM sought to blur the line between "illusion and reality" for visitors.<sup>141</sup> That the exhibit represented the "real" past was itself a construction of memory relying upon settlers' link to the old British Empire. Old Town emphasized the province's colonial origins; this was part of the trend of educators framing Canadian history "as a narrative of progress and prosperity, and their link to British institutions."<sup>142</sup>

Nostalgia relies on memory, whether it is personal or belongs to a larger collective culture. It also relies on the sense of a disparate present and past that can never be reconciled. Grounded in pessimism, the elements of the past which a nostalgic museum-goer may cherish

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<sup>138</sup> Filene, "History Museums and Identity," 328.

<sup>139</sup> Gosselin and Livingstone, "Introduction," 3.

<sup>140</sup> Gosselin and Livingstone, "Introduction," 3.

<sup>141</sup> Corley-Smith, *The Ring of Time*, 9.

<sup>142</sup> Cecilia Morgan, *Commemorating Canada: History, Heritage, and Memory, 1850s-1990s* (University of Toronto Press, 2016), 160.

seem to always be beyond their reach for use in the present. Visitors to the Old Town streetscape were “entranced not by the unknown wonder of the new but by the nostalgia of the old.”<sup>143</sup> Yet, no two nostalgias are alike. Of memory scholar Svetlana Boym’s restorative and reflective nostalgia, the exhibits of the BCPM fall into the latter category. Old Town opens a multiplicity of wallowing opportunities: the “could-have-been’s” of history. The BCPM also relies upon its visitors to possess a specific cultural memory: that of a white settler who fondly resonates with the apple pie in the kitchen and who feels apprehensive and fearful in a Chinatown that is “not for them.”

Streetscape exhibits, such as Old Town, use nostalgia and collective memory to instill in the public a sense of a factually accurate past. Most museums segregate contemporary lived experience from the past while immersive history museums offer their exhibits within contextual vignettes. These exhibits are sites of “emotion and affect” that are charged “with a mission to keep collective memories alive.”<sup>144</sup> The curators, exhibit designers, and technicians of Old Town enhanced this immersion by excluding possibly distracting labels and descriptions from its exhibit displays. In similar spaces, such as living-history museums, claims to historical authenticity had profound effects on what people thought the past was like.<sup>145</sup>

Nicole Neatby and Peter Hodgins write that “all acts of remembering are social, pluralistic, and driven by present-day concerns.”<sup>146</sup> With the addition of sensory effects, the exhibit becomes a piece of nostalgic heritage that seems to represent a past that anyone could experience. Indeed, certain memories, as upheld by Old Town, “become dominant or

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<sup>143</sup> David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), 24.

<sup>144</sup> Gordon, *Time Travel*, 23.

<sup>145</sup> Gordon, *Time Travel*, 18.

<sup>146</sup> Nicole Neatby and Peter Hodgins, eds., *Settling and Unsettling Memories: Essays in Canadian Public History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 4.

institutionalized, often in the form of an official narrative of nation.”<sup>147</sup> Memory, collective and otherwise, is not immutable; it changes through time, and not everyone possesses the same understanding of the past. History and memory are fluid and variable, constantly “moving in and out of each other, circling each other warily or amorously, sometimes embracing, sometimes separating, sometimes jostling for position on the discursive terrain that is their common habit.”<sup>148</sup> Perhaps that is partially why Old Town has remained: individuals or groups with settler-centred sets of historical consciousness have treated the past “as immutable and look to it only as a means of confirming existing myths, beliefs, and identities.”<sup>149</sup> Rather than questioning the role of the exhibit or the historical narrative that Old Town tells, it serves to reinforce their memories.

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<sup>147</sup> Neatby and Hodgins, *Settling and Unsettling Memories*, 4.

<sup>148</sup> Geoffrey Cubitt, *History and Memory* (Manchester University Press, 2007), 5.

<sup>149</sup> Neatby, and Hodgins, *Settling and Unsettling Memories*, 7.

## **Interlude 2: History Hall, Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1989**

You have walked centuries in minutes. Through forests and past rocky shores, you've traveled from the far east coast where the wind whistles and fishermen shout, to here, this place of walled stone. Deep shadows obscure the entrance through the fortified wall – the way to the Square, your first foray into urbanity from the rural countryside of New France, is a dark maw.

You emerge into the small town's centre, the rustic buildings cast in the waning blue light of dusk. While it appears to be the close of day, cheerful sounds pepper the Square. You can hear animals – chickens clucking, dogs barking, birds chirping – layered beneath the drone of conversations and market dealings in lilting French. Children laugh as they play unseen, and dappled foliage peeks out from the tops of the town's perimeter walls. Directly to your right is a simple inn with a lit lantern hanging beside its door, while in front of you is a cooper's clutter of barrels and crates piled high around a roughly hewn table. The buildings on the other side of the square are two, or even three stories tall, with the windows shuttered amidst their plain, mortared stone walls.

Stepping inside the inn, a lit fireplace crackles. While the walls have been whitewashed like the building's exterior, they are dirty from soot and daily grime. Simple candlesticks, pewter pots, and a couple of chess and checkerboards dot the tops of the mismatched cabinets and dressers lining the inn's walls. Several wooden tables host straight-backed chairs, and an open doorway leads presumably to the sleeping chamber. It is homely and close in the inn; while empty now, you have heard that this is the best place for town gossip. If you stick around long enough, the barmaid may come around to share a tale about the unfortunate soul who once danced past midnight in this very inn, thereby summoning the devil to the door.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In 2006, the Canadian Museum of Civilization released a digital walkthrough of the History Hall in which the visitor could “click” through the series of streetscape modules and listen to clips of stories performed by actors from

Outside once more, you look back at the archway through the fortified wall from which you came. A British coat of arms is bolted to the stone blocks; quickly, you begin to recognize other intrusions into the New France space, such as English merchant signs further down the Square and various symbols for the Royal Engineers. While you do not know the year, you must have arrived during some post-Conquest decade in the mid-eighteenth century.

Further along, you peer through an open doorway to observe a one-room hospital within the confines of a convent. Deep red curtains hang over each of the two beds, drawn open to allow fresh air to move the stench of sickness from the space. Someone lies motionless in the bunk at the far end of the hospital.<sup>2</sup> Small glass bottles of unknown liquids and jars of dried herbs form a miniature apothecary between the two beds. But the body in the bed will not move again. In the New France Square, “people went to the hospital to die.”<sup>3</sup>

You leave the Square to traverse one more century where, after winding through wilderness vignettes, you emerge from a lumber mill into an urban landscape once again. This is Ontario Street. Immediately, you are struck by the height of the buildings towering over you. The façades are constructed from a variety of materials, wooden slats and bricks and carved limestone, rather than the whitewashed mortared stone of the previous Square. The brightly lit storefronts of all manner of businesses – J. G. Reid and Son’s cabinetry and undertakers, Albert Carr and Co. China Glass Earthenware, the Millinery and Fancy Dry Goods store – display a wealth of goods imported from across the British Empire. Even the red mailbox you stroll by signals the interconnectedness of this town with the rest of the world, a stark cry from the

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the CMC theatre troupe. This particular story about the barmaid is one of those narrations, and demonstrates the folksy, anti-modern narrative supported by other elements of the New France Square module (as further analyzed in Chapter 2). See: *The Canada Hall: A Virtual Journey Through Canadian History* for CD-ROM, Canadian Museum of Civilization, Immersionography Associates, released 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Unlike in Old Town, mannequins were sometimes used in the History Hall streetscape. Gallacher, “The Canada Hall,” 124.

<sup>3</sup> *The Canada Hall: A Virtual Journey*.

smallness of yesteryear's Square. In addition, gone are the New France lanterns hanging precariously from hooks by the sides of doors, replaced instead by modern iron lampposts to light your way.

A picturesque white picket fence in front of a Victorian-style merchant's house marks the boundary between commercial and residential. Stepping inside the home, you find the parlour set for tea. The wallpaper is richly patterned, as are the carpets and textiles furnishing the sumptuous space. The house represents, wealth prosperity, and modernity – here, the latest fashions will be displayed and the most current events discussed by society's elite.

Across the house and at the end of the street is the Canadian Pacific Railway Telegraph station. The station is housed in sturdy bricks, signalling a permanency that earlier wooden stations never did. The station is the final symbolizer of the leaps in modern technology achieved by the occupants of Ontario Street – connected to the rest of the country, and the continent, Ontario Street becomes the cultural doorway for a plethora of new imports. Maybe from here, you can finally catch a train too and continue your journey even further west – perhaps to some other station, to some other “old town.”

## Chapter 2: History Wars at the Canadian Museum of Civilization

In 1989, the Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC), Canada's newest national museum opened the country's largest exhibit dedicated to the telling of a nationally shared story. However, if the 1972 streetscape at the British Columbia Provincial Museum (BCPM) represented the cutting edge of a new era of museum education and entertainment, the 1989 streetscape at the CMC was built in the twilight years of the streetscape exhibit model's waning popularity. Titled "History Hall," the history exhibit was envisioned by CMC director George MacDonald to be a bigger and better version of the smaller streetscapes that by now dotted the country's museal landscape. But by joining the "tail end" of the streetscape wave, History Hall was burdened with the pressure to transcend the accomplishments of smaller museums' iterations on the immersive exhibit model.<sup>1</sup> The national importance of the CMC (and the millions of dollars spent building the over-budget and over-time museum) additionally meant the streetscape was under constant examination by a skeptic public.<sup>2</sup>

In the almost twenty years between the two exhibits at the BCPM and the CMC, the streetscape model for exhibit design had been thoroughly picked apart, with museologists doubting its effectiveness for conveying accurate information about the past.<sup>3</sup> The "Golden Age of Nostalgia" –David Lowenthal's crowning title for the 1970s – had also come to an abrupt end; by the end of the 1980s, nostalgia had acquired an almost "escapist" connotation.<sup>4</sup> One CMC

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<sup>1</sup> Dan Gallacher, *Consultant's Report: 'Streetscape' Design* (1984), file 14, box 1028, PR-2383, André and Associates Interpretation & Design Fonds, BCA.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Lynch, "Marvel: but Lacking Artifacts," *Ottawa Citizen*, June 24, 1989; Bronwyn Drainie, "Museum of Civilization: A Cultural, Financial Nightmare," *Globe and Mail*, October 7, 1989; Christopher Hume, "I Came Not to Bury this Museum But to Praise It," *Toronto Star*, November 4, 1989.

<sup>3</sup> CMC Director George MacDonald acknowledged the turning tide of the streetscape trend in his book published for the opening of the new national museum. See: George MacDonald and Stephen Alford, *A Museum for the Global Village* (Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1989), 95-96.

<sup>4</sup> David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), 4.

curator, expressing doubt as early as 1985 with the proposed plans for History Hall, stressed that streetscapes “often leave the public with a romanticized impression about the past” and that museums should “go beyond evoking nostalgic feelings.”<sup>5</sup> Additionally, History Hall proposed to adopt a much larger scope than Old Town, aiming to cover a thousand years of history, from the Vikings to the present day.<sup>6</sup> However, as with the BCPM, the exhibit’s scope still only encompassed white settler history, and relegated Indigenous peoples’ history to a separate floor of the museum. With the streetscape-model being an inherently urban depiction, curators and consultants alike questioned whether it could ever succeed in representing the wider country with a population that had been overwhelmingly rural for the majority of Canada’s existence.<sup>7</sup>

As this chapter reveals, the streetscape approach was seen as essential by museum executives to convey the museum’s national mandate, using a depiction of the past to craft an idealized present. Exhibit designers and curators divided the exhibit into sections they called modules, usually divided by theme, time period, or geography.<sup>8</sup> The original twelve modules of the streetscape were planned to represent various diasporas and their contributions to the Canadian project.<sup>9</sup> Basque fisheries, Ukrainian booksellers, and Chinese laundries were constructed to populate this multicultural streetscape. Most importantly for the museum, though, were the modules in the first phase of the streetscape that emphasized the country’s dual French and British origins, as seen in its “New France Square” and “Ontario Street” sections. Within the

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<sup>5</sup> David Thiery Ruddel, “Streetscape: Dead End or Signpost to the Future?,” *Muse* (Winter 1985): 18.

<sup>6</sup> Dan Gallacher, “The Canada Hall: A Museum Approach to Epic History,” unpublished manuscript, February 2009, 100.

<sup>7</sup> Ruddel, “Streetscape: Dead End or Signpost to the Future?,” 22.

<sup>8</sup> In order, these modules were: The Norse; Fishing & Whaling; Early Acadia; Rural New France; Urban New France; Fur Trade; Métis Campsite; Timber Trade; Loyalist Settlements; British Military; Maritime Shipyard; and Ontario Street. Dan Gallacher, “Canada Hall: Display Modules Phase One,” October 1993, Documents: Gallacher, box H-389, Administrative documentation related to Canada Hall, Canadian Museum of History Library (hereafter CMHL).

<sup>9</sup> MacDonald and Alford, *A Museum for the Global Village*, 97; Floorplan for History Hall, 1986, file 6, box 1029, PR-2383, André & Associates Interpretation and Design, BCA.

urban streetscape (which was seen to be the most familiar environment for city-dwelling visitors), MacDonald envisioned modern-day visitors constructing their own parallels between a multicultural past and a multicultural present.<sup>10</sup>

This chapter explores the CMC's decision to choose the streetscape model as the design for the History exhibit at the new national museum complex built in 1989 in Gatineau, Québec. By tracing the design development, curators' concerns, visitors' reactions, and the ensuing renovations of the early modules of the exhibit, this chapter shows how multiculturalism was used to buttress a nationalist narrative about the country's past. While Old Town at the BCPM expressed an imperialist nostalgia for British Columbia's colonial past, the streetscape at the CMC cast aside direct nostalgic callbacks to instead focus on an immersive experience that reinforced a nationalist narrative of a united Canada. However, the History Hall streetscape at the CMC debuted at a time of unease regarding the feasibility of the future of this united Canada. A series of flashpoints representing competing sovereignty claims – such as Indigenous activism against 1992 Columbus Quincentenary celebrations, and the 1995 Québec sovereignty referendum – challenged the cooperative founding myth put forth by Canada's national history museum.

The CMC streetscape was a fertile battleground for the museum's very own history war. While the question of authenticity still ran as an undercurrent throughout the exhibit's design just as with the BCPM, the main concern of the CMC curators increasingly became how to define "Canada" as it applied to a fragmented population. Ultimately, I argue that nationalist policies (and the discourse they conveyed) were what determined the narrative and historical choices of

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<sup>10</sup> George MacDonald and Stephen Alford, *A Museum for the Global Village* (Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1989), 96.

the streetscape. Within these, the theme of multiculturalism represented a curious wrinkle in the apparent threat to the unity of the nation.

This chapter analyzes the debates that went on behind the scenes at the museum during the creation and debut of History Hall through the lens of a diverse source base. The previous chapter drew upon sources mostly created by and for the eyes of the public (such as newspaper articles and exhibit reviews). In comparison, this chapter draws primarily upon a selection of dozens of internal curatorial documents (correspondence records, artifact lists, deposited staff interviews, compiled analyses of visitor comment cards, and even the recordings of a multi-day retreat held by the museum's curators as they discussed the future of the exhibit) from the Canadian Museum of History's internal library and archives. This source base is supplemented by several key published books and unpublished manuscripts (such as George MacDonald's *Museum for a Global Village* and BCPM/CMC curator Dan Gallacher's *The Canada Hall: A Museum Approach to Epic History*). Several documents from Jean André's museum consultation files, held at the British Columbia Archives in Victoria, British Columbia, further demonstrate the close connections between the Old Town and History Hall streetscapes despite their positions as chronological and geographical bookends across almost 20 years of Canadian streetscape representations.

### *The Medium is the Message / The Streetscape is the Story*

This section summarizes the intellectual influences on the CMC history streetscape while contextualizing them within the purpose of the new federal museum. I seek to show that while History Hall was similar in design to Old Town, the streetscape's purpose (to evoke a sense of shared cultures) was quite different. I first provide some background on the national museum

itself and its own history with immersive displays, before introducing museum director George MacDonald and his philosophy on the purpose of these cultural institutions. I then bring these two threads together to show how these strands culminated in the design of the streetscape itself.

The 1989 History Hall was the third iteration of the national museum's attempt to construct an overarching story about Canada's past. Each of the earlier exhibits, housed in the Victoria Memorial Building in Ottawa (now the Canadian Museum of Nature) possessed immersive elements that would eventually make up the streetscape of the future Canadian Museum of Civilization. The first iteration, built in 1967, was comprised of period rooms focusing on four of Canada's "Fathers of Confederation." The second iteration, unveiled in 1977, was titled "A Few Acres of Snow" and presented the "history and heritage of the everyday Canadian" through a larger narrative about how Canada's Northern environment shaped the country's national identity.<sup>11</sup> Each of these exhibits were fundamental for the construction of the streetscape-version of the History Hall built in 1989: they represented a shift from political history to the history of everyday Canadians. In addition, heritage scholar Cynthia Wallace-Casey argues that both exhibits (and eventually the 1989 History Hall) treated Indigenous peoples as outside Canadian history. In each of the national museum's history exhibits, Canadian identity was interpreted as the product of "shared historical experiences [that were] unique to this country and to the non-Indigenous peoples who settled it."<sup>12</sup> Wallace-Casey also suggests that "A Few Acres of Snow" provided a message of unity as the country faced an identity crisis "as Separatist forces were gaining ever greater momentum in Québec."<sup>13</sup> The 1989 History Hall was an extension of this message of national unity, although under the leadership of new museum

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<sup>11</sup> Cynthia Wallace-Casey, "Constructing Patriotism: How Canada's History Hall Has Evolved over 50 Years," *History Education Research Journal* 15, no. 2 (October 2018), 296. <https://doi.org/10.18546/HERJ.15.2.10>

<sup>12</sup> Wallace-Casey, "Constructing Patriotism," 298.

<sup>13</sup> Wallace-Casey, "Constructing Patriotism," 298.

director, George MacDonald, this was on a much larger scale than the previous two history exhibits.

MacDonald was originally trained as an anthropologist and ethnologist before being selected as Project Director for the new museum building.<sup>14</sup> Within a year of this appointment, MacDonald was promoted again, this time Executive Director in early 1982. In his later career, he reflected on how his early ethnographic work impressed upon him the power of oral histories and storytelling. He noted that it was these influences that inspired him within his new Executive Director role as he sought to make the proposed museum focused on story-based experiences. MacDonald's promotion gave him extraordinary power over the exhibit design. His insistence on the streetscape concept – even against the opinion of other museum experts on the design team – meant the usual exhibition planning process became reversed. Instead of storyline creation being the first step in the process (followed by planning for the physical design of the exhibit), the narrative storyline would need to be written with an eye to making it conform to the pre-existing limitations of the streetscape model.<sup>15</sup>

The new national museum was built on the recommendation of the Ontario Heritage Policy Review, as well as by the administration of the old national museum in the Victoria Memorial Building:

In seeking to define Canada's unique cultural identity, we have become increasingly aware of the need to have a sense of who and what we are as a collective.... This sense of self in the individual or in groups is a vital sustaining force in adversity and essential for the mobilization of community resources. But it requires an appreciation of what we have inherited, a collective memory, and a will to cultivate it.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Gallacher, "The Canada Hall," 24.

<sup>15</sup> Gallacher, "The Canada Hall," 35-37.

<sup>16</sup> MacDonald and Alsford, *A Museum for the Global Village*, 1-3.

MacDonald's vision for this new museum project was that it would not be a mere "depository" of that collective memory – it would shape it. The streetscape from its inception would fashion and articulate a "cultural" identity for Canadians. This was rhetoric that was tied both to the multiculturalism policy influencing the themes of the new museum, and to MacDonald's own professional background.

MacDonald was particularly fond of the work of Canadian philosopher and media scholar Marshall McLuhan, including his concept of the "global village." While most famous for coining the expression "the medium is the message," it was McLuhan's concept of the global village that most influenced MacDonald. In this global village, the globalization of markets (and even cultures) was seen as paving the way to the creation of a new kind of collective identity. This was the direction in which MacDonald wanted to pitch the new national museum: an institution in which Canada was represented not as a melting pot, but rather as a crossroads for global villagers to meet.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, to reinforce the idea of a cultural cross-roads, exhibits were envisioned to grapple with:

...the truly global cultural origins of our immigrant ancestors through the past millennium, acknowledging the personal struggle and, often, the anguish associated with the colonization and with the immigrant experience.... Celebrations of ethnic origin and successful transplantation to Canadian citizenship will be regular occurrences against the backdrop of these displays.<sup>18</sup>

This was not to be a history of individuals and fragmentation, but of interdependence and unity.<sup>19</sup>

MacDonald believed that the duty of a national museum of history was to help "define cultural identity" and the identity of the country itself.<sup>20</sup> It should stimulate "pride amongst Canadians in

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<sup>17</sup> Macdonald and Alford, *A Museum for the Global Village*, 59.

<sup>18</sup> *Vision Statement* (Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1987). File 8, box 1029, PR-2383, André & Associates Interpretation and Design, BCA.

<sup>19</sup> Macdonald and Alford, *A Museum for the Global Village*, 5.

<sup>20</sup> Macdonald and Alford, *A Museum for the Global Village*, 3.

their own culture” and offer an “initiation into the national identity.”<sup>21</sup> The very heart of the new museum’s ambition was to be a “crossroads of cultures.”<sup>22</sup> They would do this by dissolving the frame around displays, recreating experiences of past cultures (not the past itself) to foster intercultural understanding.<sup>23</sup> MacDonald would ultimately advocate for the museum to “celebrate and contribute to the maintenance of ethnic identity” and reinforce images “concerning our heritage.”<sup>24</sup>

MacDonald’s phrasing is telling. He equates the visitors to the museum only as the descendants of immigrant ancestors and constantly uses “our” in invoking shared heritage. MacDonald importantly also only notes the pain experienced by settlers of centuries past, all of which reveals who the creators of the exhibit saw as the audience consuming the presented narratives within the exhibit. By choosing what to include in the streetscape, MacDonald and the museum curators chose the Canada they wanted to show to the audience. Yet this audience was not homogenous. For the Anglophone audience, the museum would present an image of Canada in which the country was multicultural. For the Francophone audience, the museum presented a Canada that, while once *was* French, was greatly improved by Anglophone dominance and their ushering in of modernity. Daniel Francis writes in his text on myth and memory that:

...the history of Canada tells two contradictory stories depending on whether it is viewed from a French-Canadian or an Anglo-Canadian perspective. For the Québécois, history describes a struggle to survive the assimilationist intentions of the English majority. For English-speaking Canadians, history describes the evolution of political freedom in a framework of British justice and parliamentary democracy.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> MacDonald and Alsford, *A Museum for the Global Village*, 3.

<sup>22</sup> MacDonald and Alsford, *A Museum for the Global Village*, 59.

<sup>23</sup> MacDonald and Alsford, *A Museum for the Global Village*, 62.

<sup>24</sup> *Vision Statement*, BCA.

<sup>25</sup> Daniel Francis, *National Dreams: Myth, Memory and Canadian History* (Arsenal Pulp Press, 1997), 105.

Both presentations were fundamentally about national unity. However, there were never only “Anglophone” or “Francophone” visitors to the exhibit. Ironically, as J.M.S. Careless first articulated, people were not limited to these two identities (and indeed, other affiliations might be stronger than one’s national commitment).<sup>26</sup> The various identities held by visiting audiences would ultimately account for the multivocality of the messages in the exhibit, and the curators’ own difficulties in choosing what to include. Indeed, Canada’s “unique” cultural identity was so ambiguous that the museum was searching to *create* one, not present one. The fundamental problem of the CMC streetscape was it could not be univocal. This was why it was repeatedly tweaked, revised, added to, questioned, contested, and eventually torn down: there could never be a consensus on a representation of national cultural identity, because this was an identity entirely a result of settler colonialism (which fundamentally cannot provide an identity other than hyphenation).

However, to have the opportunity to teach visitors and “send them away enlightened and optimistic that we are progressing as human individuals and as a Nation,” the museum first need to capture their imaginations.<sup>27</sup> MacDonald believed the museum was not meant to be a mirror of the *past*; rather, it was a mirror of the *present*, to address the public’s needs, desires, and attitudes.<sup>28</sup> MacDonald decided to model the new building on open air museums, since these models appealed to the “nostalgic needs of tourists” better than indoor museums.<sup>29</sup> Planning discussions held with the Heritage Canada Foundation explored the benefits and drawbacks of what the History exhibits could look like using the streetscape approach.<sup>30</sup> This is where the

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<sup>26</sup> J.M.S. Careless, “‘Limited Identities’ in Canada,” *Canadian Historical Review* 50, no. 1 (March 1969): 1–10.

<sup>27</sup> Douglas J. Cardinal, *The National Museum of Man*, unpublished report submitted to the Canada Museums Construction Corporation, January 1983. As cited in MacDonald and Alford, *A Museum for the Global Village*, 3.

<sup>28</sup> MacDonald and Alford, *A Museum for the Global Village*, 37.

<sup>29</sup> MacDonald and Alford, *A Museum for the Global Village*, 49.

<sup>30</sup> BCA, PR-2383, box 1029, f2, pdf pp 8]

decision was made to try to construct some of exhibit's building façades from photos and plans of real historic sites as "lost examples of Canadian heritage structures."<sup>31</sup> From the beginning, then, MacDonald emphasized the importance of the physical space of the exhibit itself. The construction of the historically accurate environments was essential to crafting the sense of heritage – more so, even, than real artifacts that could populate those displays, or any sort of storyline that would give the streetscape shape. Instead, the streetscape *itself* became the message: "Canada" was an urban construction, and while it wound through both time and space, it was presented as a country built by people as ordinary as those who walked the exhibit halls.

As early as the new museum's 1983 master plan, directors discussed expanding the period rooms from earlier exhibits into full environmental reconstructions for the History Hall.<sup>32</sup> This was an expansion of what was already present in the old national museum building, where the exhibits consisted of a Victorian drawing-room, a Depression-era kitchen, and coal-mine reconstruction. Members of the New Accommodations Task Force investigated other immersive experiences internationally, taking inspiration from Epcot, the New York Met, the Jorvik Viking Centre, the York Castle Museum, the British Museum, the Milwaukee Public Museum, the Henry Ford Museum, the Abbey House Museum, the Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature, the Western Development Museum branch at Saskatoon – and, significantly, Old Town at the BCPM.<sup>33</sup>

The CMC approached "authenticity" differently from these other streetscapes, separating historical accuracy from a sense of immersion within the past. To achieve this accuracy, designers emulated period-accurate building techniques in the constructions of the façades, going

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<sup>31</sup> BCA, PR-2383, box 1029, f2, pdf pp 8]

<sup>32</sup> MacDonald and Alford, *A Museum for the Global Village*, 94.

<sup>33</sup> MacDonald and Alford, *A Museum for the Global Village*, 94-95.

so far as to sometimes use blue prints from existing heritage sites.<sup>34</sup> To achieve immersion, lights, sounds, and special effects would create “liveliness,” and theatrical performances in the space would support “an illusion of habitation.”<sup>35</sup> Overall, the dramatic vignettes in the History Hall exhibits were to act as a table of contents to the historic sites across the country (Figure 9).<sup>36</sup>

MacDonald and other museum staffers disagreed about the best way to bring this nationally focused streetscape to life. One proposal pitched that within the reconstructed buildings, real shop attendants and service providers should be hired to make visitors feel truly transported back in time.<sup>37</sup> Another idea proposed was a massive “tunnelscape,” which would have seen a single large main street, depicting time in a linear fashion.<sup>38</sup> While the exact design of the exhibit was still in limbo, two streetscape experts from the BCPM were contracted to give their opinions on the proposed designs: Jean André and Dan Gallacher.

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<sup>34</sup> MacDonald and Alsford, *A Museum for the Global Village*, 96.

<sup>35</sup> MacDonald and Alsford, *A Museum for the Global Village*, 99.

<sup>36</sup> MacDonald and Alsford, *A Museum for the Global Village*, 99.

<sup>37</sup> Roderick Huggins, Ron McRae, David T. Ruddel, *History Streetscape Exhibit: Concept Statement and Diagrams*, (National Museum of Man, January 1984). File 4, box 1029, PR-2383, André & Associates Interpretation and Design, BCA.

<sup>38</sup> Huggins, McRae, and Ruddel, *History Streetscape Exhibit*, BCA.

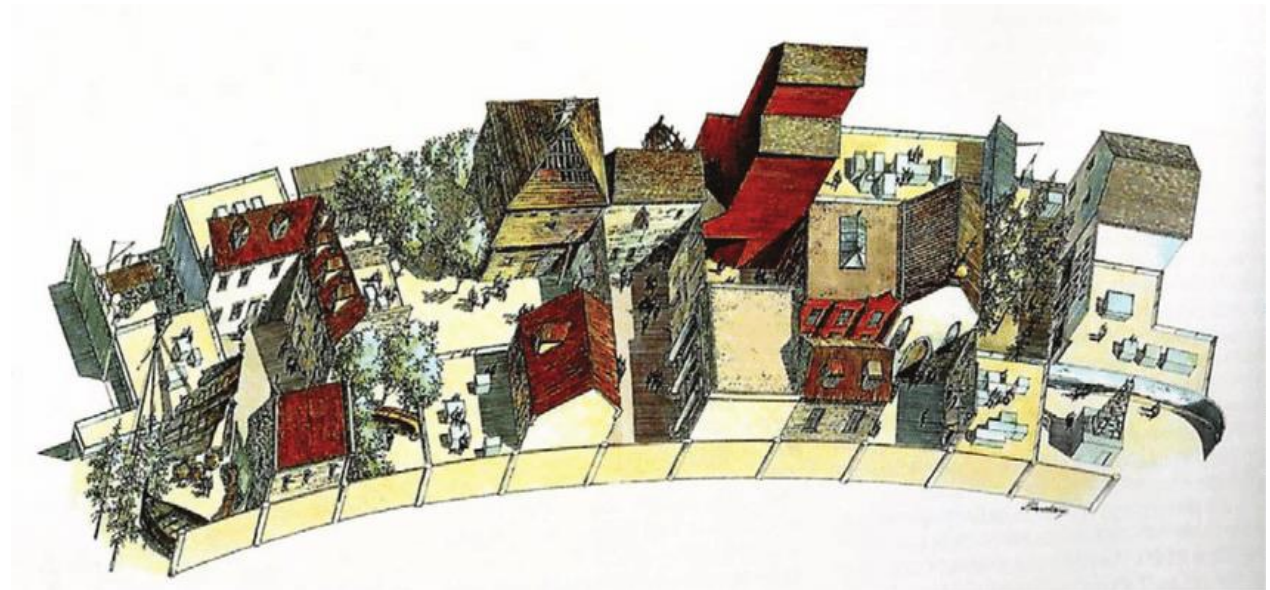


Figure 9. 1986 draft floorplan of the CMC streetscape exhibit, illustrated by P. Schwartzman.<sup>39</sup>

Rather than praising the idea for a colossal streetscape in the new national museum, André and Gallacher were markedly reserved. Gallacher remarked in his April 1984 report that while the streetscape allowed for a greater sense of periodization, its weakness was “the large amount of gallery space devoted to so narrow a historical focus.”<sup>40</sup> The CMC’s plan for a continuous, all-encompassing streetscape was therefore “too much of a good thing.”<sup>41</sup> Indeed, Gallacher observed from his own experience with Old Town that “lofty, complex themes do not come through in walk-in exhibits.” Instead, he wrote, the national museum should rely on a multipurpose exhibit space built *alongside* and *within* the streetscape to help contextualize contemporary events. This would allow curators to express their own research and give the collections exposure. If MacDonald’s goal was to craft a national cultural identity for Canadians

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<sup>39</sup> Gallacher, “The Canada Hall,” 93.

<sup>40</sup> Gallacher, *Consultant’s Report: ‘Streetscape’ Design*, BCA.

<sup>41</sup> Gallacher, *Consultant’s Report: ‘Streetscape’ Design*, BCA.

by creating a purely environmental experience, Gallacher's argument was that this could only be done with materials that also asked visitors to more deeply engage with that past.<sup>42</sup>

Consultants contracted by the CMC referred to different ways to salvage the streetscape concept as dictated by MacDonald. Rather than the normal exhibit approach of starting with a blank slate and choosing a display technique best based on the information curators wanted to provide, they instead had to work backwards and make the chosen themes work within the limitations of the streetscape.<sup>43</sup> While Gallacher believed that a multipurpose space integrated within the streetscape could mitigate the prescriptive streetscape approach, Jean André was less convinced. In his own consultant report, André criticized the "lack of a strong, powerful theme" for History Hall, going so far as to ask if the streetscape model really was "the symbol of Canada through the last three centuries? We do not think so."<sup>44</sup> André disapproved of MacDonald's pre-emptive choice for the streetscape design, asking the museum to consider how the "visitor or immigrant to Canada" is most impressed with "our huge open spaces, not the story of urbanization."<sup>45</sup> André, the same visionary behind the BCPM streetscape, believed the CMC's streetscape design was "not a complete visual interpretation of our country."<sup>46</sup> He further wondered if the exhibits would even be able to stand on themselves without the aid of audio tours, simulations, and other interactive elements.<sup>47</sup> André framed these interactive elements as

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<sup>42</sup> This was a different approach than Gallacher had taken with Old Town, seeming to indicate that the curator had learned from his BCPM experience that the purely environmental approach, by necessity, left out crucial context for visitors who potentially entered the exhibit without a clear understanding of the arc of Canadian history in the first place.

<sup>43</sup> Huggins, McRae, and Ruddel, *History Streetscape Exhibit*, BCA.

<sup>44</sup> J. J. André, *Consultant's Report, National Museum: History Hall, Grand Hall* (1985), file 14, box 1028, PR-2383, André & Associates Interpretation & Design Fonds, BCA.

<sup>45</sup> André, *Consultant's Report, National Museum*, BCA.

<sup>46</sup> André, *Consultant's Report, National Museum*, BCA.

<sup>47</sup> André, *Consultant's Report, National Museum*, BCA.

crutches that could extend the interpretation of the gallery, but they were only “the ‘silver platter’ carrying food for a feast. Obviously the food has to be prepared first!”<sup>48</sup>

Jean André also highlighted one of the core considerations for the exhibit in his prepared report: authenticity. “Museums are one of the few places where craftsmanship can blossom and be displayed. The building façades should be cases for artifacts, but finished to the greatest level of detail to become objects of study and works of art.”<sup>49</sup> André concluded that “The National Museum of man has the unique opportunity to be the long awaited trail blaser [*sic*] of innovative concepts and approaches, yet danger signals loom at present. Themes, artifacts, continuity or special requirements are not finalized.”<sup>50</sup>

Regardless of the reports warning the CMC of the issues with a themeless streetscape approach, between January and September of 1984, the general shape of the exhibit had begun to materialize: “Visitors will proceed through the five mini-environments and be encouraged to enter building interiors as well as adjacent multi-purpose areas,” read the second installment of CMC exhibit designer Rod Huggins’ report.<sup>51</sup> Huggins had persuaded MacDonald “to give a chance to develop [an] approach” different to the ones offered by the curators. But curator Peter Rider believed the project had become “a designer-led process in which history played a secondary role to the requirements of the streetscape technique.”<sup>52</sup> Instead, historians would individually offer up suggestions for “interesting structures that would touch upon historical topics.”<sup>53</sup> Rider sums up this planning period in a later interview with Gallacher by suggesting that “the best that could be done was to suggest a nice-looking building of suitable proportion,

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<sup>48</sup> André, *Consultant’s Report, National Museum*, BCA.

<sup>49</sup> André, *Consultant’s Report, National Museum*, BCA.

<sup>50</sup> André, *Consultant’s Report, National Museum*, BCA.

<sup>51</sup> R. Huggins, R. McRae, T. Ruddel, *History Streetscape Exhibit: Option #6* (National Museum of Man, September 1984). File 5, box 1029, PR-2382, André & Associates Interpretation and Design, BCA.

<sup>52</sup> Gallacher, “The Canada Hall,” 34.

<sup>53</sup> Gallacher, “The Canada Hall,” 34.

period and location to match a particular spot on the hall. There was little [room] for historical interpretation, nor did MacDonald find that a weakness.”<sup>54</sup> History Hall was to be a “design-pull” rather than a “content-push” exhibit.<sup>55</sup>

The final report summarizing the exhibit’s proposal outlined how “socio-cultural and economic themes portraying the daily activities of Canadians during different periods in five regions of the country were chosen as the organizing principles used in the choice of streetscape building.”<sup>56</sup> In the planning for the exhibit, different modules of the streetscape were assigned to represent different ethnicities and cultural groups.<sup>57</sup> In addition to each module representing a different time and place, then, each section would also be representing one or more different “cultures.” This approach showed how MacDonald and the curatorial team viewed Canadian history as one mosaic made of many different pieces, which when put together, created a single story.

The narrow and long design of the museum lent itself to a linear way of looking at history. From east to west, the streetscape spanned from 1000ad to 2000ad.<sup>58</sup> Gallacher was hired onto the CMC curatorial staff to see to the completion of the project, while Rod Huggins was to be seconded to the History Hall as exhibit designer in chief (Figure 10).<sup>59</sup> Similar to his work on Old Town, Gallacher wanted to focus on ordinary people and everyday life, but this time mostly within “successive waves of immigration, each depicting ‘new beginnings’ for those who

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<sup>54</sup> Gallacher, “The Canada Hall,” 34.

<sup>55</sup> Gallacher, “The Canada Hall,” 96.

<sup>56</sup> R. Huggins, R. McRae, T. Ruddel, *History Streetscape Exhibit: Option #6*, BCA.

<sup>57</sup> These listed groups included, among others, Indigenous peoples, Basques, French, Italians, Portuguese, British, Ukrainians, Eastern Europeans, Chinese, Japanese, Americans, and Canadians. Floorplan for History Hall, 1986, BCA.

<sup>58</sup> Gallacher, “The Canada Hall,” 37.

<sup>59</sup> Kathryn Elliott to George MacDonald, September 13, 1989, Administration, box H-1191, Dan Gallacher: Canada Hall, CMHL.

arrived.”<sup>60</sup> While it was similar to what he had attempted at the BCPM, the CMC would be on a grander scale. It would also feature live actors, and – most importantly – a nationalist construction of the making of Canada in which different cultures had come together to form one nation.



Figure 10. CMC Exhibit designer Rod Huggins (left) examining the mockup for the New France Square module.<sup>61</sup>

Other organizing principles of the museum galleries were ecological and ethnocultural history, and how the “predominant immigrant groups” shaped the wilderness, frontier, and urban

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<sup>60</sup> Gallacher, “The Canada Hall,” 41.

<sup>61</sup> MacDonald and Alsford, *A Museum for the Global Village*, 76.

environments.<sup>62</sup> Unlike in Old Town at the BCPM, where there seemed to be just one dominant “cultural” group represented (British settlers), many different “racial [and] ethno-linguistic groups” were to be depicted in the CMC’s History Hall.<sup>63</sup> And yet, these representations would be stripped of their political history. Gallacher explains this decision in his manuscript on the history of the space: “Truthfully, it is difficult for today’s historians to prepare storylines in the realm of multiculturalism, for it is a minefield of political correctness, superficiality, or past grievances, the routes through which are very narrow and often twisted.”<sup>64</sup> By avoiding the political aspects of this history, Gallacher and the other curators chose to focus on the superficial aspects of the country’s history. Indeed, this was no longer even a historical narrative; it was a survey of cultural characteristics. For example, one module of the streetscape would depict Acadian agricultural techniques but contained no signage about the Great Deportation between 1755 and 1763. Similarly, another module of the streetscape would feature a Métis mannequin and a Red River wagon with pemmican loaded in the back, but no mention of Louis Riel and the Northwest Resistance.

Gallacher’s reasoning to avoid these histories was that interpretations of politics, religion, or war in the past were “too rapidly shifting.”<sup>65</sup> Instead, the museum would relegate Canadian political history to the books, films, videos, and CDs – sold separately in the museum giftshop. Thus, included in the price of museum admission was an impression of symbols of Canada – to learn the history, visitors would need to pay extra. Even with the supplementary multimedia alcoves of the streetscape, visitors would have to remove themselves from the experience of the immersive streetscape to get anything close to a more comprehensive telling of past events.

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<sup>62</sup> Gallacher, “The Canada Hall,” 41.

<sup>63</sup> Gallacher, “The Canada Hall,” 42.

<sup>64</sup> Gallacher, “The Canada Hall,” 42.

<sup>65</sup> Gallacher, “The Canada Hall,” 43.

### *The New France Square and Ontario Street Modules*

This section of the chapter discusses two modules in particular, and their relationship to the emerging theme of multiculturalism as it was established in the galleries. These modules were New France Square and Ontario Street. Both modules opened during the first phase of the construction of the History Hall exhibit. While there were twelve modules in the original phase 1 streetscape, these modules offer the closest comparison with the BCPM Old Town streetscape because of their urban focus. As well, they are examples of modules that were both praised (Ontario Street) and criticized (New France Square) by the media and by visitors when the streetscape eventually opened in 1989. As the CMC curators would later comment upon, the linear streetscape design had already dictated the type of history that could be presented. Stretching from east to west, and proceeding chronologically through time, the streetscape followed the same direction that settler colonialism took to spread over the continent – which also matched the national timeline. Within the purview of the CMC, there was no history until the arrival of settler colonialism on the territory, with “history” spreading as colonialism spread over Indigenous “prehistory.” Thus, the “collective identity” spoken of by MacDonald was settler colonial – and implicitly Anglophone, since New France was in the past. The New France Square and Ontario Street modules are perhaps the best representations of how the multicultural nationalist narrative put forth as the streetscape’s overarching theme was in actuality a settler colonial nationalist storyline.

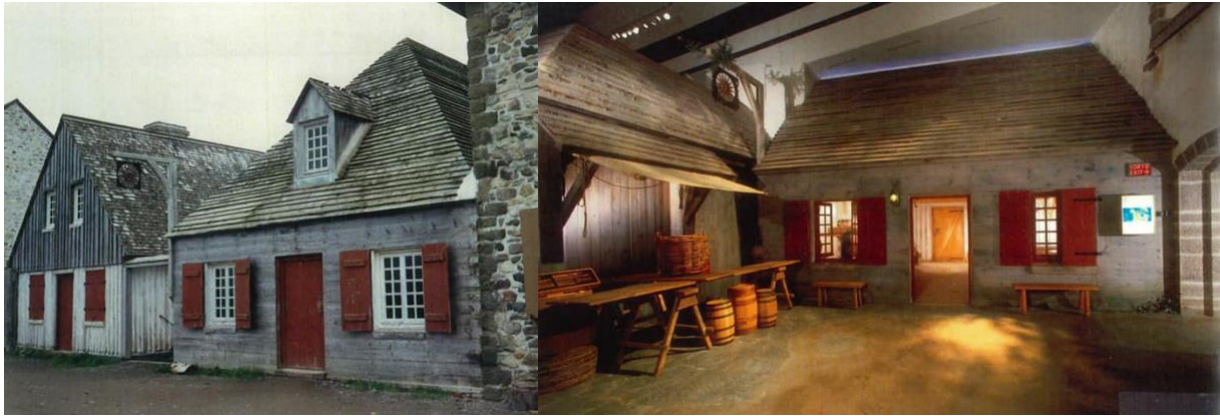


Figure 11. Comparison of the two Louisbourg Inn's. Left: reconstruction at Louisbourg National Historic Site, Nova Scotia. Right: the CMC History Hall version of the inn.<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of New France Square was to signify the urban influence of towns on the inhabitants of New France (Figure 11).<sup>66</sup> The curators believed this would be in line with “their aim of portraying formative elements in Can[adian] society.”<sup>67</sup> Visitors entered the 1750s town square module through a fortified wall. From there, they were surrounded by the sounds of sellers hawking their goods, with a church bell tolling in the distance. Themes concerning domestic life and health were emphasized in the square with a careful selection of buildings. These included an inn, a market stall, a hospital convent, a garrison, and dwellings of artisans and professionals.<sup>68</sup> Seen together, these buildings and structures portrayed “the social fabric of colonial society.”<sup>69</sup>

To ensure the visitor’s sense of the past remained uninterrupted, no interpretive signs were immediately visible in this first entry to the square. The structures were also life sized; the arched museum ceiling overhead was lit to simulate the day and night cycle, and in later years,

<sup>66</sup> Dan Gallacher, “Canada Hall: Canadian Museum of Civilization,” April 8, 1994, file 17, box H-1037, Canada Hall Phase I/Correspondence, CMHL.

<sup>67</sup> Gallacher, “Canada Hall: Display Modules Phase One,” CMHL.

<sup>68</sup> Gallacher, “Canada Hall: Display Modules Phase One,” CMHL.

<sup>69</sup> Ruddel, “Streetscape: Dead End or Signpost to the Future?,” 21.

the spire of the Ukrainian church, from another module, would be visible just beyond the wall to play a double role in representing the influence of the church in French colonial life.

While the New France Square was the first large-scale urban module in the streetscape's sequence of vignettes, several characteristics were introduced to impress upon visitors the French town's apparent smallness compared to the later depiction of English Ontario Street. One visitor pamphlet for the Square described how "Even during prosperous times, [New France] continued to be an agrarian society, with approximately eighty percent of the population living in the countryside. Québec and Montréal remained small, with a combined population of less than 10,000 people."<sup>70</sup> While it was true that Québec and Montreal were small in the eighteenth century, what was important was that the exhibit focused on conveying that smallness. By doing this, the CMC curators emphasized the folksy, rustic charm of this generalized eighteenth-century New France life. As Daniel Francis writes, the "folklorizing" of rural New France society served to infantilize it.<sup>71</sup> Within this depiction of New France, it becomes important to note that the CMC chose to eschew actual people and events, instead using generic stand-ins (in the form of the theatre troupe, acting out composite French caricatures that would primarily entertain visitors). This related to the fact that MacDonald wanted an experience that did not need interpretation, because there were no specifics to interpret – only things to experience in the moment.

While only some of these buildings were accessible to visitors, there were several spaces in the Square were open enough that interpretive actors could act out some scenes for a gathered audience. One of the characters played by the museum's theatre troupe was a barmaid who

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<sup>70</sup> *Guide to the Canada Hall* (Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1995), 14-15.

<sup>71</sup> Francis, *National Dreams*, 104.

worked in the New France tavern, named Madame Marguerite Bacon (Figure 12).<sup>72</sup> In one of the plays written for New France Square, Marguerite and Mr. Henry Price (an English administrator) “try to reach an amicable agreement regarding the size of a bed for the proposed marriage of Mr. Price to Madame Bacon’s daughter.”<sup>73</sup> Within the play, Marguerite becomes confused over the new English system of weights and measures – the uncertainty that the bed will fit into Mr. Price’s house almost results in a dissolution of the alliance, but the play happily concludes when “reason and passion reach a compromise, and love triumphs in the end.”<sup>74</sup> The folksy charm as acted out in the Square parallels what Daniel Francis has observed about English narratives of New France: that English-speaking Canadians “have been more than willing to accept and embellish this version of a rustic, deferential peasant society.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Jean Herbiet, “Measure for Mesure,” in *Theatre Programme: History Hall* (January 1992), file 17, H-1195, Dan Gallacher Fonds, CMHL.

<sup>73</sup> Herbiet, “Measure for Mesure,” CMHL.

<sup>74</sup> Herbiet, “Measure for Mesure,” CMHL.

<sup>75</sup> Francis, *National Dreams*, 98.



Figure 12. Postcard prototype from 1996 for the Louisbourg Inn.<sup>76</sup>

The desire for a multicultural message meant that a continuous narrative was needed. As one of the few constants in both French and English colonial life, the economy thus represented an ideal opportunity on which to graft a multicultural theme. Several of the shops and businesses in the New France Square were styled as specifically British – these included the lumber merchant, the ship builder, and the tinsmith shop. Considering the restricted space of the Square, it was surprising that almost half of the featured façades for the New France module were depicted to have British origins or ties. Within this context, it is important to note how the Square depicted an undefined period of the eighteenth century after the Conquest of New France. In the

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<sup>76</sup> The postcards were designed by the Commercial Enterprises Division, and submitted afterwards to the History team for approval. While Dan Gallacher liked this particular photograph for the postcard, he acknowledged that “generally the captions undercut the [scene?] or the actors’ impact.” Dan Gallacher to Victoria Henry, April 9, 1996, Publications, H-1193, History Hall, CMHL.

1980s and into the 1990s, the Conquest was portrayed in English-Canadian narratives as a positive event in which Francophones benefited from the English economy and ways of life.<sup>77</sup> Additional symbols underscoring this unequal French and British partnership populated the New France Square module. Political symbols indicating British intrusion into New France included English-language signs above the British merchants' shops, and a garrison staffed by British soldiers. Additionally, while the promotional pamphlets of the Square did not contain specific political information about the time period, Canadian politics were at least to be "indicated in the house of the lawyer who will be portrayed as a member of the legislature, as well as a professional."<sup>78</sup> Even this depiction of the evolution of political involvement was a specifically Anglophone view of Canadian history, which posited the national narrative as Whig-ish story of progress given shape by the framework of British parliamentary justice.<sup>79</sup> All these symbols were ultimately intended by the curators to "indicate Great Britain's political and economic domination of the former French colony."<sup>80</sup>

Although these symbols within New France Square gave the exhibit temporal context, its "fake-old" buildings and façades in actuality placed it within "non-time." The inn's sign in the shape of the sun called back to familiar iconography of the Sun King Louis XIV; a section in the exhibit guide about historic games clientele might play in the local inn was intended to focus on the ordinary, everyday (and any day, or non-time again) rather than specific people or specific events. History Hall was ultimately about the flow of time and the visitor's experience of the Canadian essence within this flow. Without a deeper discussion of change, difference, or true conflict, the essence of the modules became a sense that that these Canadian ancestors naturally

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<sup>77</sup> Francis, *National Dreams*, 95.

<sup>78</sup> Ruddel, "Streetscape: Dead End or Signpost to the Future?," 21.

<sup>79</sup> Francis, *National Dreams*, 105.

<sup>80</sup> Ruddel, "Streetscape: Dead End or Signpost to the Future?," 21.

got along with one another. While tension existed still with the presence of British symbols in New France, that tension was not explained – it just *existed*, perhaps reflecting contemporary simmering tension without a concerted effort by curators to dissect or question it.

Reports and memos surrounding History Hall’s construction constantly refer to a need to fashion the galleries into “a true ‘adventure.’”<sup>81</sup> This idea of an adventure or a “journey” (seen through the proposed title as one of the renaming suggestions for the exhibit) brought to mind the sense of a linear story with a desirable end – and at this adventure’s end was a harmonious multicultural present. An essential part of this journey was acknowledging so-called unpleasantries along the way. For example, Jean André comments in his 1985 report about the section that would become New France Square that “one of the unique aspects of Canadian history is that it was at one time a French colony. Not the brightest page of French history but nevertheless a fact which could be emphasized, helping us all to understand today’s politics.”<sup>82</sup> André’s comment reflected the old refrain that New France was an anti-modern autocracy, until the Conquest’s elevated the Canadiens. A final observation about New France Square fits into this narrative of rustic backwardness as put forth by the CMC. Besides the inclusion of several British merchants (and elements of the British military), the Square was not an overtly multicultural space, especially when compared to the following modules (including Ontario Street). In this sense, “Canada” was defined as once French (anti-modern) before it became multicultural (modern).

Even after traversing several other modules separating the New France Square from the Ontario Street city scenes, visitors would have noticed a stark difference between the two environments. While New France Square was small, self-contained, and exuded a sort of

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<sup>81</sup> André, *Consultant’s Report, National Museum, BCA*.

<sup>82</sup> André, *Consultant’s Report, National Museum, BCA*.

“simplicity,” Ontario Street was meant to depict technological progress and urban prosperity, and stretched out to seemingly occupy the length of a city block (Figure 13). In 1992, this difference would half-jokingly be commented on by some of the CMC curators: in the New France exhibit, it seemed that “everyone drank because there’s taverns, and everyone was sick because there’s a hospital.”<sup>83</sup> Meanwhile, in the Ontario Street, “it looks like we’ve resolved all these New France problems: nobody’s sick anymore and nobody drinks.”<sup>84</sup> This false mythologized narrative of technological (and moral) progress from French to English Canada was summarized by the original guide to the gallery in the description for the last module of the Phase 1 streetscape: “A street scene from a prosperous small town in Ontario, circa 1885, illustrates the trappings of fine Victorian living. The optimism and affluence visible in towns like this were due in part to a number of technological innovations.” The guidebook notes the many urban improvements in mid-nineteenth-century Ontario, denoting modernity and progress, including the advent of railroads to open up markets for luxury goods, and infrastructure updates such as sewage systems, running water, street lighting, and paved streets that all “raised the standard of living and enhanced municipal pride.”<sup>85</sup> This pride was apparently nowhere more apparent than among the merchant elite, using their wealth to “finance projects that contributed to the town’s prestige and the economic development of the region.”<sup>86</sup> These symbols of Anglophone prosperity and sophisticated technology were thus demonstrated to be some of the core reasons why visitors to the streetscape should have a nationalist pride in (English) Canada’s history.

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<sup>83</sup> “Historians’ Retreat,” December 9, 1992, tape 2, box A2012-0280, CMHL.

<sup>84</sup> “Historians’ Retreat,” tape 2, CMHL.

<sup>85</sup> *Guide to the Canada Hall*, 34.

<sup>86</sup> *Guide to the Canada Hall*, 34.

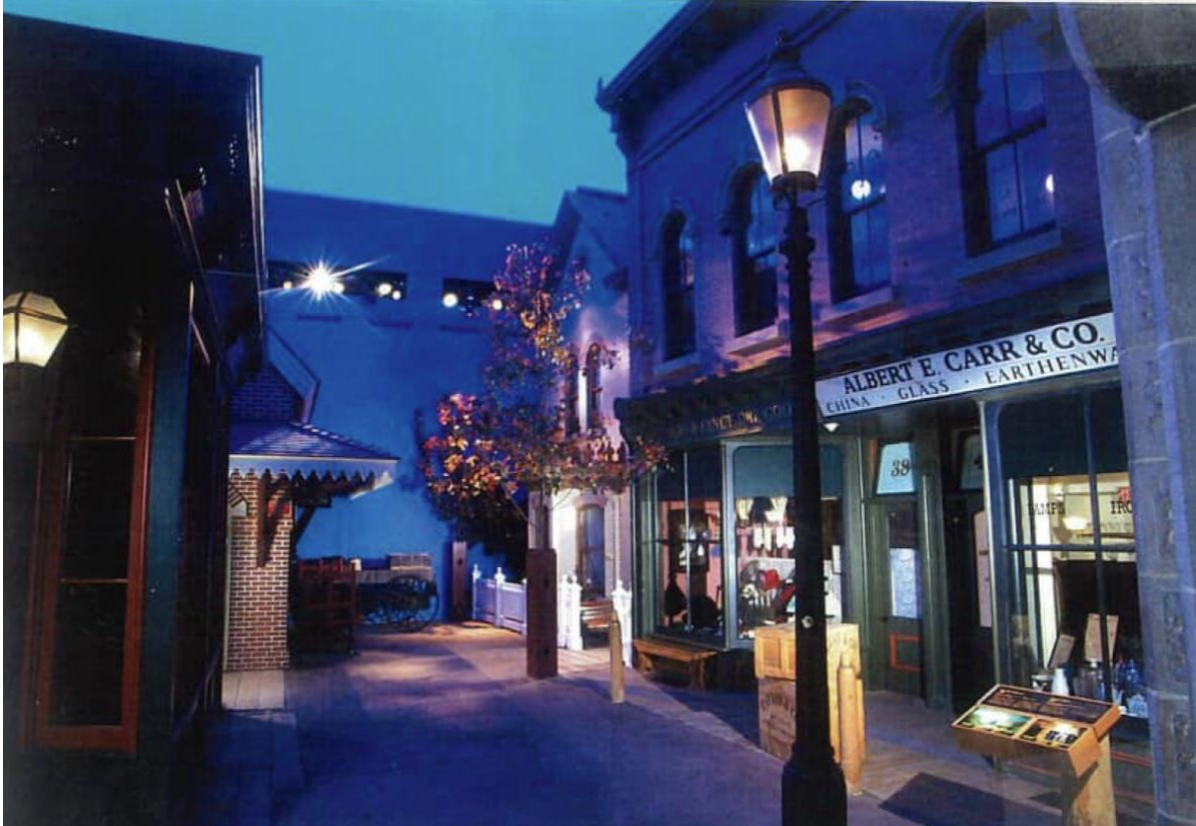


Figure 13. View of Ontario Street from module entrance.<sup>87</sup>

Unlike the New France Square streetscape module, Ontario Street was designed to show life in a modern and prosperous town – a direct contrast to the rustic and precarious nature of the Square. Ontario Street’s buildings were oriented towards a commercial nature, with retail outlets, government offices, a merchant’s house, and a railway station.<sup>88</sup> The stores lining Ontario Street were a millinery and a glass and earthenware shop, and emphasized English Canada’s imperial connections with their displays of objects imported from Britain and Europe.<sup>89</sup> Featured in these shops were artifacts, such as fine dinnerware including a meat platter with an image of Niagara Falls, and decorative items such as a bust of Prime Minister Sir John A. MacDonald. Meanwhile,

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<sup>87</sup> Gallacher, “The Canada Hall,” 90.

<sup>88</sup> Gallacher, “Canada Hall: Canadian Museum of Civilization,” April 8, 1994, CMHL.

<sup>89</sup> *Guide to the Canada Hall*, 35.

the millinery displayed lavishly decorated hats (with imported bird feathers), and machine-made lace and ribbons (available for purchase “thanks to improved distribution methods”).<sup>90</sup> Another shop was a cabinetmaker’s, which was “an example of progress in the manufacturing sector,” since a real cabinet storefront would have been positioned in front of a furniture factory. Posters and advertisements for the Orange Order and Masonic Lodges were also meant to subtly indicate that workers of this time sometimes turned to these organizations for support when they were unable to work because of the dangerous factory conditions.<sup>91</sup> Yet without interpretation of these posters, the racism and anti-immigrant discourse promoted by these organizations was made casually normal in the streetscape. Overall, MacDonald said the Ontario Street would depict “the joys and fears of new immigrants, the courage and determination of the pioneers and the hopes and frustrations of nineteenth century factory workers coping with a bleak harsh world will all come strikingly to life.”<sup>92</sup>

The merchant’s house on the Ontario Street further illustrated “the comfort and affluence enjoyed by the town’s elite.”<sup>93</sup> This building was one of the only enterable structures in the Ontario Street module. Going inside the house revealed a period parlour, dining room, study, and staircase that led to more displays (including the multimedia portion of this module). The guide says that “the lady of the house took her duties seriously – managing the household, raising children, and creating a beautiful home.” Objects in the home reflected the family’s social status and their “degree of cultivation and education.” With no equivalent of the wealthy house existing in the New France Square, the Ontario Street module was further confirmed as supposed proof of

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<sup>90</sup> *Guide to the Canada Hall*, 35.

<sup>91</sup> *Guide to the Canada Hall*, 36.

<sup>92</sup> *Canadian Museum of Civilization* vol. 1 no. 2 (1989), promotional material for the opening of the Canadian Museum of Civilization, box I-654, CMHL.

<sup>93</sup> *Guide to the Canada Hall*, 37.

the correlation between English Canada and prosperous modernity. Indeed, the sense of nationalist optimism permeating the Ontario Street module made the scene one of the most popular parts of the streetscape. Curators wanted to enhance these effects after the exhibit's opening by "injecting more life into the scene."<sup>94</sup> They would do this by: adding objects to the millinery to make the store "look busy and successful;" make the merchant's house "more appealing and authentic" by adding a new fence; putting some tea on display; exhibiting a pump organ to bring music to the parlor; and exhibiting nineteenth-century technology by installing gas lamps in the merchant's study.<sup>95</sup> The perpetual adjustments to embellish Ontario Street are but one more example of the streetscape's hegemonic nature.

While the end result of the Ontario Street module was heavily weighted towards depictions of a wealthy elite, this was not always the original plan for the exhibit. Rather, the Ontario portion of the streetscape as imagined in Huggins' report was more focused on showcasing a diversity of classes. For example, a visitor would be able to find an abundance of "socio-cultural symbols" in the depiction of the Ontario city block:

...the luxury store, upper-class house, rooming house, union office, textile sweatshop, and small 'hang-outs' (barber shop/pool hall) symbolize the variety of social classes within the city. The distance between classes under industrialization is symbolized by the roles of women: the chatelaine of the upper-class house, the woman running the rooming house, the workers employed in the textile industry.<sup>96</sup>

However, one reviewer of the exhibit would write that there was "no information... on the background of Ontario before this time period... How and Why did the province change (grow) from the turn of the century..."<sup>97</sup> Without an explanation of the relationship between the French

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<sup>94</sup> "History Hall Meeting Agenda," May 27, 1993, file 8, box H-1037, Canada Hall Phase I/Correspondence, CMHL.

<sup>95</sup> "History Hall Meeting Agenda," May 27, 1993, CMHL.

<sup>96</sup> R. Huggins, R. McRae, T. Ruddel, *History Streetscape Exhibit: Option #6*, BCA.

<sup>97</sup> James O'Healy, "A Quick Visit to the History Hall: Critical Observation Comments Only," June 17, 1991, Canada Hall evaluation activities, H-1192, CMHL.

colonies and the British colonies, the reviewer commented on the sense of loss and confusion that permeated the streetscapes. While the streetscape had “the flavour of a living museum,” without a storyline, the exhibits as a whole felt disconnected from one another.<sup>98</sup>

One key feature of Ontario Street that gave it this living museum flavour was the theatrical plays aiming to “intensify the experience of entering the past” by creating “the illusion of habitation, with evidence of daily lives and occupations.”<sup>99</sup> The live theatre troupe personified historical figures, conducted short plays, or demonstrations with how everyday historical objects were used in the time periods that the modules were set.<sup>100</sup> Indeed, this theatre troupe at the CMC was the only one of its kind in Canada; no other Canadian museum employed a full-time interactive theatre company to staff its displays.<sup>101</sup> The purpose of the CMC’s theatre troupe was to “interpret aspects of heritage... more effectively than static objects are able.”<sup>102</sup> Since the CMC’s opening in June of 1989, the on-staff theatre troupe staged an average of about 90 performances per month in the exhibits.<sup>103</sup> The vignettes ranged from 15 to 30 minutes, and were emplotted with a variety of moods – some as comedic sketches, others as serious character profiles. In Alsford and Parry’s article, they write that “museums are not really about objects,” instead impressing that they are instead about “the people who created, used or were affected by

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<sup>98</sup> O’Healy, “A Quick Visit to the History Hall,” CMHL.

<sup>99</sup> *Canadian Museum of Civilization* vol. 1 no. 2 (1989), promotional material for the opening of the Canadian Museum of Civilization, box I-654, CMHL.

<sup>100</sup> In Ontario Street, the play that was performed was called *The Travails of Travel* and was intended to explore the themes of rail, road, and water transportation in Ontario, as well as the “interaction of small-town and cosmopolitan cultures.” Lib Spry, “The Travails of Travel,” in *Theatre Programme: History Hall* (January 1992), file 17, H-1195, Dan Gallacher Fonds, CMHL.

<sup>101</sup> *Opening Ceremonies Programme* (Canadian Museum of Civilization: June 29 – July 2, 1989), promotional material for the opening of the Canadian Museum of Civilization, box I-654, CMHL.

<sup>102</sup> Stephen Alsford and David Parry, “Interpretive Theatre: A Role in Museums?” *Museum Management and Curatorship* 10 (1991): 11.

<sup>103</sup> Alsford and Parry, “Interpretive Theatre,” 12.

those objects.”<sup>104</sup> The authors argued that interpretive theatre was built on visitors’ empathy, asking them to connect the plays they witnessed with their own lives.

*“Canada is...”: Comments, Critiques, and Curating Consensus*

As framed by George MacDonald, the Canadian Museum of Civilization’s role as a national museum was primarily to help “Canadians obtain a better sense of their collective identity.”<sup>105</sup> In MacDonald’s opinion, this role had become “more important than ever: with the country in the midst of a severe identity crisis” and “with growing cultural diversity.”<sup>106</sup>

MacDonald had precisely framed the most pertinent series of cultural questions dogging the museum in recent years: the definition of “Canada” and the place of social history within the country’s origins; multiculturalism and the Québec nationalism question; and Indigenous sovereignty and increased recognition/awareness of Nations and their place in history.

In another speech by the museum director, MacDonald outlined the museum’s vision for the next five years: “It is our job as a national museum to define this identity: to present a nationalistic perspective on what constitutes Canadian history and culture; to communicate a sense of our collective national identity.”<sup>107</sup> The question was: was this a “communication” or the museum’s own defining of Canadian national identity? It appeared that MacDonald was outlining how historians at the museum would have to make a statement about what “Canada

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<sup>104</sup> It is notable here that Stephen Alsford was the co-author with George MacDonald for *Museum for a Global Village*; it can therefore be assumed that the two shared similar views on “enlivening” museum exhibits. Alsford and Parry, “Interpretive Theatre,” 17.

<sup>105</sup> George MacDonald, “The Canadian Museum of Civilization: A Museum for the Global Village, Three Years After Opening,” speech to the Arkansas Museums Association Conference, March 1993, liaison museal institutions, box H-1192, Dan Gallacher: Canada Hall, CMHL.

<sup>106</sup> MacDonald, “The Canadian Museum of Civilization: A Museum for the Global Village, Three Years After Opening,” CMHL.

<sup>107</sup> George MacDonald, “The Next Five Years: An Address by the Executive Director to the Managers of the Canadian Museum of Civilization Corporation,” February 4, 1993, strategic planning, box H-1193, History Hall, CMHL.

is...” rather than just letting the exhibits be themselves. MacDonald went on in the speech to say that this was especially crucial in the wake of the constitutional crisis; the CMC had been challenged to represent “all Canadians” and help people understand cultural diversity.<sup>108</sup> Those depicted in the exhibit therefore needed to be people who had “forged out the Canadian identity,” according to MacDonald. To be ‘Canadian’ then, within this definition, was to be a participant in the country’s settler colonial history. This was important – the key was that according to MacDonald, identity was formed through the creation of a common culture, as practiced by successive waves of immigrants. However, as the Historians’ Retreat in late 1992 would reveal, defining that Canadian identity was still a problem. It was an identity of “nots” – not American, and not wholly British or French. As Ian McKay argues, Canada has been haunted for centuries by the insubstantiality of its sovereignty.<sup>109</sup>

Those from beyond the walls of the CMH have also grappled with this question of what “is” Canada, and who “are” Canadians. The construction of the streetscape occurred against the backdrop of growing critiques of multiculturalism. In 1994, Neil Bissoondath published his explosive book *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism*, in which he argued that multiculturalism turns people into politically useful tools through the use of stereotypes. The official policy of multiculturalism, as encouraged by the federal government (and put into practice by its heritage institutions) defined people solely by their ethnicities, prescribing these identities regardless of people’s consent. Ultimately, Bissoondath suggested that the federal government’s Multiculturalism Act assumed “that personalities and ways of doing things, ways

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<sup>108</sup> MacDonald did not define who necessarily counted within this definition of “Canadian.” MacDonald, “The Next Five Years: An Address by the Executive Director to the Managers of the Canadian Museum of Civilization Corporation,” CMHL.

<sup>109</sup> Ian McKay, “The Liberal Order Framework: A Prospectus for a Reconnaissance of Canadian History,” *The Canadian Historical Review* 102, no. 8 (2022): s1138.

of looking at the world, can be frozen in time.”<sup>110</sup> Bissoondath further argued that “culture, manipulated into social and political usefulness, becomes folklore... lightened and simplified, stripped of the weight of the past.”<sup>111</sup> The essentialization of the past as it had occurred in History Hall reflected Bissoondath’s observation that culture had become a commodity and divorced from its historical context.

The History Hall was not just an in-house operation. Numerous historians were contracted from across the country for input on the exhibit. Dale Standen, a historian from Trent University, was one figure who helped to research and plan History Hall. In 1991, after years of collaborations, he wrote a letter praising that, while the environment approach of the History Division’s mandate was visually effective, the major problem with the exhibit was what they “actually [said.]”<sup>112</sup> Standon noted how Gallacher had expressed his frustration with how the “different peoples” theme, which was originally intended to be central, had instead morphed into an outdated theme of resource development and exploitation. Standon also made note of how the exhibit was “strikingly Eurocentric. Everything is seen through European eyes – discovery, fishing and whaling, settlement, commerce, resource exploitation generally – with no evidence of Amerindians until the fur trade exhibit, which adopts nevertheless a European approach to the trade.”<sup>113</sup>

In the fall of 1992, the CMC commissioned a survey to gauge public reactions to the History Hall. The History Division conducted the survey to obtain visitors’ suggestions for improvements to Phase I of the streetscape, along with guiding the design of Phase II. While the

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<sup>110</sup> Neil Bissoondath, *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada* (Penguin Canada, 1994), 39.

<sup>111</sup> Bissoondath, *Seeing Illusions*, 81.

<sup>112</sup> Dale Standen to Jean-Pierre Chrestien, August 2, 1991, Canada Hall evaluation activities, box H-1192, Dan Gallacher: Canada Hall, CMHL.

<sup>113</sup> Standen to Chrestien, August 2, 1991, CMHL.

Division indicated their interest in learning more about visitors' reactions to the structure of the exhibit, most of the comments did not address these areas (i.e., orientation, signage, exhibit labels, and lighting). Over four weeks, 615 notes were received. 65.5% of these were "unreservedly positive," with a further 10.7% being generally positive (containing either one or two negative comments or suggestions for improvements). 13.7% of the notes were negative, describing only critiques or suggestions for improvements. 10.1% of the notes contained comments that "made it impossible to determine the visitor's general attitude."<sup>114</sup> Of the positive comments 60.7% referred directly to the streetscape, frequently citing the feeling of traveling back in time. From the compiled results, the surveyors concluded that "the high proportion of visitors who commented positively on the streetscapes suggests the continued appropriateness of this method of communicating aspects of Canadian history to CMC's visitors," and that "this approach should be strengthened and continued into Phase II."<sup>115</sup> The selected comment cards below give a bit of a clearer picture on the questioning of the authenticity of the history as displayed in the streetscape, as well as how this grappling with reality fit within larger conversations about national identity.

The authenticity of the streetscape and its verisimilitude to the past were some of the key preoccupations of visitors. Dozens of comments noted how the History Hall was "very realistic," allowing visitors to be "transport[ed] back in time... as it must have been then."<sup>116</sup> In particular, visitors praised the realism of the Ontario Street, including the merchant's house, along with the hospital in the New France Square. Authenticity is ultimately a negotiation between visitors and

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<sup>114</sup> Audit and Evaluation Division, *Survey of Visitors to the History Hall: October 30, 1992 – November 22, 1992* (Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1992), Chris Kitzen Collection, box H-390, CMHL.

<sup>115</sup> Audit and Evaluation Division, *Survey of Visitors to the History Hall*, CMHL.

<sup>116</sup> Audit and Evaluation Division, *Survey of Visitors to the History Hall*, CMHL.

curators.<sup>117</sup> Although most of authenticity comes from the supposed originality of an object within a museum (despite the depiction only ever existing as a simulacrum), an important part of it is its essence is transmitted from individuals to objects. This is a mode of magical thinking in which the contagion of objects (from being touched or handled by people in the past) bestows meaning on artifacts in the present.<sup>118</sup> For one visitor, a visit to the streetscape was “une petite ballade [*sic*] à trouver l’histoire des moments passés, perdus mais retrouvés, grâce à vous” [a little walk to find the history of moments past, lost but found, thanks to you].<sup>119</sup> The act of visiting the streetscape was therefore also an act of active collective remembrance, a sense that the past could not be recovered by visitors unless it was reconstructed first by curators. By thanking the curators directly, the museum was centered as a crucial – if not exclusive – tool for this kind of essence transmission.

When visitors enter the museum, they enter a pact with curators, expecting that museum staff (who maintain narrative authority in the exhibit space) will not misconstrue the past. And yet, this negotiation leaves room for authenticity to be imagined as “a guiding principle to achieve a feeling the appearance of a room is in balance... [evoking] a picture of the past, and [offering] an impression of historicity.”<sup>120</sup> This means that in the special space of the streetscape, which is neither a traditional museum (filled with glass cases) nor a historic house museum (claiming to offer a snapshot in time of the abode of a famous person of the past), authenticity can be interpreted as capturing the magic of a particular historical scene, making it, as one visitor

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<sup>117</sup> Aurora Venturini, “Constructions of Authenticity at Scottish Historic House Museums,” *Collections* 16, no. 2 (2020): 158, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1550190620903310>.

<sup>118</sup> Venturini, “Constructions of Authenticity at Scottish Historic House Museums,” 141.

<sup>119</sup> Translations are the author’s own. Audit and Evaluation Division, *Survey of Visitors to the History Hall*, CMHL.

<sup>120</sup> Gabriele Horn and Samuel Wittwer, “The ‘Seventh Sense’: Authenticity—Or What Are the Consequences for the ‘Gesamkunstwerk Neues Palais’ in Potsdam?” in *Proceedings of the ICOM DEMHIST-ARRE International Conference “Authenticity in the Conservation of Historic Houses and Palace-Museums” (7-11 October 2014)*, eds. Elena Alliaudi, John Barnes, Céline Delmar, Juliette Rémy, Bertrand Rondot, Ayüen Savaü and Ann Scheid (Versailles: 2014), 122.

noted, “easy to imagine how life in former times had been.”<sup>121</sup> However, not every visitor interpreted History Hall in this same way; some claimed that the streetscape needed “more original artifacts, more live dance & music to... make it older looking” since the exhibit appeared as if “it came out of a movie set.”<sup>122</sup> For these visitors, the streetscape failed to fulfill its promise of authenticity.

One visitor commented that the streetscape buildings were “très belles reconstructions de notre histoire” [very beautiful reconstructions of our history]. Here, the visitor’s use of the “notre” indicated a sense of communal identity, one that was echoed by the previous comment. For these visitors, the streetscape seemed to offer the opportunity to guard against historical erasure of this collective history. Visitors chose to use the word “beautiful” or “belle” to describe the streetscape displays numerous times in their comments on the exhibit, indicating that the aesthetics of the streetscape appealed to audiences across the languages. While these same visitors praised the exhibit for offering an authentic view of Canada’s past (some jokingly asking if they could stay and live inside the meticulously constructed historical buildings), by claiming ownership over the history (with the use of “our”), the modules were idealizations of the past as remembered through a white, settler colonial perspectives. As Mitch Combs describes in his work on frontier authenticity and collective memory, themes of the frontier myth (such as “rugged-individualism, resisting state power, and conquering the wilderness”) shape the construction of a national identity that privileges white settlers.<sup>123</sup> Combs further notes how further commodification in the museum exploits collective memories for a white audience

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<sup>121</sup> Audit and Evaluation Division, *Survey of Visitors to the History Hall*, CMHL.

<sup>122</sup> Audit and Evaluation Division, *Survey of Visitors to the History Hall*, CMHL.

<sup>123</sup> Mitch Combs, “Consuming a Settler Colonial History: Frontier Authenticity and the Collective Memory of the Fort,” *Western Journal of Communication* 85, no. 5 (2021): 715.

“desiring to learn about *their* past.”<sup>124</sup> Museums therefore preserve, control, and sell these idealized narratives, legitimizing them through their institutional statuses – and in the case of the CMC, because of its national status.

A select number of visitors questioned if the history being presented was the full and complete past. While only a few of the 600+ comments collected in the 1992 survey expressed concern with absences in the streetscape itself, they offer important insight into those who questioned the “authenticity” on display. “Could there be more on women and not just put off in a corner?” read one note; another visitor praised the museum “pour la reconstruction histoires” [for the historic reconstruction] but also wrote that “je pensais trouver plus de choses sur les autochtones” [I thought I would find more things on Indigenous peoples]. Finally, another visitor wondered if “more mention could be made of the same events as ‘invasion’ and its negative results on the First Nations.”<sup>125</sup> These comments were written in 1992, the year of the Columbus quincentennial. Canada itself did not officially commemorate the event, but there were high-profile protests across the continent against sites that did.<sup>126</sup> At the CMC in the same year, curators Lee-Ann Martin and Gerald McMaster planned an art exhibit – not within History Hall – that would be a national project to “de-celebrate” the quincentennial.<sup>127</sup> “INDIGENA: Perspectives of Indigenous Peoples on Five Hundred Years” was the first entirely Indigenous-curated internationally touring exhibit organized by a national institution, with an advertising campaign that read “Perhaps if they’d stolen your land, your culture and your spirit, you’d paint

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<sup>124</sup> Combs, “Consuming a Settler Colonial History,” 715-716.

<sup>125</sup> Audit and Evaluation Division, *Survey of Visitors to the History Hall*, CMHL.

<sup>126</sup> Lee-Ann Martin, “Anger and Reconciliation: A Very Brief History of Exhibiting Contemporary Indigenous Art in Canada,” *Afterall* 43 (Spring/Summer 2017), <https://www.afterall.org/articles/anger-and-reconciliation-a-very-brief-history-of-exhibiting-contemporary-indigenous-art-in-canada/>.

<sup>127</sup> Martin, “Anger and Reconciliation.”

a different picture of history too.”<sup>128</sup> For visitors walking into the CMC’s permanent exhibit of History Hall, after seeing INDIGENA in the museum’s temporary gallery, the shift in perspective for presenting 500 years of history would have been extremely abrupt.

1992 was a notable year for another reason: Canada’s 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary (an event the government did choose to celebrate in the form of commemorative coins, medals, and festivities). Visitors’ patriotic pride in the national history museum’s exhibits informed several comments. One visitor stated, “I wish all Canadians could have the privilege of visiting here.”<sup>129</sup> Another loved “the fact that we the viewers could actually walk through *our* heritage [my emphasis].”<sup>130</sup> In addition to these visitors’ comments, outside reviewers of History Hall also noted how the exhibit should be pitched to make people positively identify with a national identity. “The visitor should feel proud to be Canadian,” wrote Kenneth Munro in his report to the History Division to suggest improvements for the exhibit.<sup>131</sup> However, some visitors decidedly did *not* see themselves as belonging to this broader national identity: “Vive le Québec libre! Hourra!!!” reads one comment.<sup>132</sup>

These various visitor encounters with History Hall are best encapsulated by one short note: “Est-ce la vraie histoire?” [is this real history?]. The promotional material for the exhibit certainly the buildings’ historical accuracy, and others believed that the exhibit as a whole was “très réaliste” [very realistic], but perhaps this visitor was not referring to whether the content was real or false. Instead, maybe the visitor was asking if the exhibit were actually historical – did a series of modules, absent of signage and events or people, constitute a telling of the

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<sup>128</sup> Richard William Hill, “9 Group Exhibitions that Defined Contemporary Indigenous Art,” Essays, *Canadianart*, July 28, 2016, <https://canadianart.ca/essays/9-group-exhibitions-that-defined-contemporary-indigenous-art/>.

<sup>129</sup> Audit and Evaluation Division, *Survey of Visitors to the History Hall*, CMHL.

<sup>130</sup> Audit and Evaluation Division, *Survey of Visitors to the History Hall*, CMHL.

<sup>131</sup> Kenneth Munro, *Report on the Canadian Political History Project for the Canadian Museum of Civilization* (Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1999), 14.

<sup>132</sup> Audit and Evaluation Division, *Survey of Visitors to the History Hall*, CMHL.

country's history? Had the illusion of the exhibit been broken, or were visitors starting to sense the streetscape simulacrum?

With some visitors unable to tell the difference between what was real or not real in the displays, curators finally decided that the exhibit needed clearer messaging. It was not enough to use the streetscape to prompt visitors to question the historical past. The curators needed to finally present a definition of "Canada." After the November 1992 comment collections, the History Division held a series of meetings from December 9 to December 11, 1992, as a part of a "historians' retreat" organized by the CMC. Prior to the retreat, Dan Gallacher had organized a package of readings for the curators and other members of the History Division; this included a critical report prepared by Jean André as an outside consultant, criticizing the lack of storyline in the streetscape.<sup>133</sup> The purpose of the retreat was to rethink the first phase of the History streetscape, and to plan how those improvements could inform development of the second phase of the exhibit. The struggles of the curators at this retreat (recorded over several cassette tapes over a period of three days; and with only the first day transcribed) demonstrate the tension between creating evocative dioramas of the past while communicating complex historical scholarship. Studying the conversations from these three days provides important insights into how the curators viewed the exhibit away from the public eye and administration.

Repeatedly, curators at the retreat described how they were "dealing with the uniqueness of Canada" and that leaving History Hall should give visitors a sense of their own identity or identities.<sup>134</sup> Importantly, these identities needed to be shaped by creating a sense of Canadian progress through time. The curators noted how this was one of the major problems of the exhibit,

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<sup>133</sup> Jean André, *Review of the Permanent History Gallery Exhibits* (Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1991).

<sup>134</sup> "Historians' Retreat," December 9, 1992, tape 1, box A2012-0280, CMHL.

since the 1000-year timespan of the streetscape prevented an easy storyline; while there was much change, there was little continuity.

Within these talks, curators emphasized how politics were consistently skirted in the exhibit and that the nation was different on “this side of the river.”<sup>135</sup> The curators felt expectations to address politics, especially because of critics’ concerns that the exhibit lacked information about the country’s past politics. Yet, some curators argued that “the whole issue of politics” was “a minor one.”<sup>136</sup> In addition, one curator noted how “the debate seems to be culture or history” and that the museum had decided that the exhibits would depict “history quite clearly.”<sup>137</sup> The chair of the retreat remarked on how “people are looking for minorities...” and that the History Hall needed to connect these groups within the larger national history, whether they constituted women, family or Indigenous peoples. One curator noted how the History Division had tried to do this by introducing people into the displays, but it had been clumsy; many of the problems stemmed from the fact that modules were developed by different historians, with sometimes different designers involved too.

One of the critiques at the retreat was that the exhibit’s designer, Rod Huggins, was “anti-diorama.”<sup>138</sup> This meant that because of his abstract designs, the natural environment format (which was paramount for the success of the exhibit) was not made recognizable to people. The History Division claimed that they needed to “[be] a museum first” by exhibiting objects with direct connections to Canadian history – dioramas that were more abstract did not resonate with visitors.<sup>139</sup> One curator mentioned how the History Division had previously discussed the

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<sup>135</sup> “Historians’ Retreat,” tape 1, CMHL.

<sup>136</sup> “Historians’ Retreat,” tape 1, CMHL.

<sup>137</sup> “Historians’ Retreat,” tape 1, CMHL.

<sup>138</sup> “Historians’ Retreat,” tape 1, CMHL.

<sup>139</sup> “Historians’ Retreat,” tape 2, CMHL.

possibility of thematic modules. Within these, social change could be depicted; for example, the New France Square and Ontario Street presented an “urban motif” that needed to be “synthesized somewhere.” As it appeared in the current streetscape, these modules were frozen in time.

Another curator noted that the present themes of the exhibit were mostly economic, and focusing on fishing, whaling, commerce, and ship building. By their very nature, they excluded women to some degree, despite women’s involvement in these economies too.<sup>140</sup> While the exhibit presented a “very romantic” picture of the past, it did not deal with “the realities of those women.” Other themes, such as religion, or family, or work in the home, were suggested as ways to put women at the heart of the exhibit and include women in the story of Canada’s development.

And yet, this very idea of progress or development was itself problematic. The curators argued that they needed to show not just continuity but also tensions within Canadian society. Visitors should leave with a sense of some of the inequalities and discontinuities within Canada’s past. Curators noted that they could not just talk about “today’s diversity,” but also needed to discuss the past’s diversity. At the same time, they needed to do this “without enshrining today’s” divides.<sup>141</sup> At the core of the issues of the exhibit was the question of beginnings, and the question of rootedness – this uncertainty, in the eyes of the curators, put the whole interpretation of Canada’s past on “a tentative basis.”

Ultimately, the curators argued that the streetscape’s strength was not the permanence it implied, but rather its representation of Canada as a symbol; it was to be a “shrine” of what Canada is, or had been.<sup>142</sup> Some of the curators railed against the sweeping vision implemented

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<sup>140</sup> “Historians’ Retreat,” tape 2, CMHL.

<sup>141</sup> “Historians’ Retreat,” tape 1, CMHL.

<sup>142</sup> “Historians’ Retreat,” tape 2, CMHL.

by George MacDonald, including how the director had advocated for a purely emotive experience.<sup>143</sup> With this overt focus on experience, curators were worried that much of the criticism had to do with a lack of information otherwise available in the display cases, or the limits of what the actors from the museum's theatre troupe were able to communicate.

Dan Gallacher, who by this time was the Chief of the CMC History Division, steered much of the retreat's conversation to one main question: "What is Canada?"<sup>144</sup> The concern of the curators was that unless they adopted their own interpretation of Canadian history, they would have to create one; a challenge, considering the shifting nature of narrations of Canadian history.<sup>145</sup> The problem with framing the exhibit as an answer to the question "Canada is" was that, up until 1867 (and arguably, much beyond that), being "Canadian" was not the primary identity of the people living within these borders. Gallacher recognized that once the museum began doing true social history, then the exhibits would quickly become more focused on the community or individual history, at the expense of an overarching national history. Because the museum spoke from a national platform, Gallacher argued that the curators needed "to separate [their] on particular interests" to accomplish this newly sharpened national story.<sup>146</sup>

Keeping the title of the streetscape as History Hall was an "admission of failure" to tell the story of Canada according to curator Peter Rider.<sup>147</sup> The curators therefore brainstormed to identify a different title for the streetscape, eventually settling on "A Canadian Journey," with the following introduction to summarize the meaning of the streetscape's modules:

Welcome to a Canadian Journey, depicting our cultures and peoples. This northern country was originally the home of many different aboriginal peoples. It was colonized by the French and British, settled eventually by peoples of many lands, but no single

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<sup>143</sup> "Historians' Retreat," tape 2, CMHL.

<sup>144</sup> "Historians' Retreat," tape 2, CMHL.

<sup>145</sup> "Historians' Retreat," December 9, 1992, tape 3, box A2012-0280, CMHL.

<sup>146</sup> "Historians' Retreat," tape 3, CMHL.

<sup>147</sup> "Historians' Retreat," tape 2, CMHL.

identity imposed itself on this diversity. Rather, a rich blend of cultural traditions, institutions, and inherited skills gave the emerging new nation innovative vitality and its unique character.

The curators of the streetscape formerly known as History Hall had decided that the exhibit needed a unifying narrative at a time when individual histories were especially divisive. Their struggles with the streetscape's storyline demonstrate the tension between creating evocative dioramas of the past while making those dioramas conform to a story of national unity.

### *Conclusion*

The CMC's 1989 History Hall streetscape adopted an ambitious scope in its attempted portrayal of a united, multicultural Canada. Inspired by the immersive streetscapes built across Canada in the previous decades, museum director George MacDonald firmly believed in the experiential potential of walking through one thousand years of Canada's history. By commodifying the different cultures that had contributed to Canada's settler colonial project within the global village of the museum, MacDonald believed the History Hall could not only present a national identity, but rather, create it.

However, as analysis of the New France Square and Ontario Street modules reveal, the narrative told within the museum was one based upon Anglophone myths of the Canadian nation, one that hid – or muted – histories and movements that could threaten the constructed image of national unity. In the streetscape itself, this manifested as depictions of New France as anti-modern and backward, while Ontario was equated with prosperity and progress. Operating as a backdrop to the streetscape's opening were various sovereignty flashpoints that directly challenged the notion of a united Canada. Indeed, as later scholars have observed, the national

narrative told by the exhibit was “purely a story of colonization through a western and northern movement of expansion. Indigenous voices were hauntingly absent.”<sup>148</sup>

One visitor to the exhibit in 1991 wrote to the curators of the museum. She identified herself as a fourth generation Black Canadian from Nova Scotia, the descendant of an escaped slave, who was hurt by the absence of ancestors in the CMC’s depictions of Canada’s history.<sup>149</sup> The visitor implored the curators to depict Canada’s role in slavery because other Canadians needed “to understand how one group of people were disadvantaged by the policies of the entire system.”<sup>150</sup> The visitor’s comment represents a fundamentally different understanding for what the purpose of Canada’s national history museum should be: to “present history fully, our mistakes as well as accomplishments” so that future Canadians could “learn not to repeat” those mistakes.<sup>151</sup> The History Hall streetscape, however, had not been designed in the first place to “teach” its visitors about Canada’s past; indeed, as the internal debates among the curators of the History Division revealed, museum staff struggled to even define what the idea of “Canada” meant to such a diverse and fragmented population, let alone how to grapple with challenges to the cooperative multicultural unity promoted by the displays.

History Hall continued to receive additions and amendments to its streetscape until 1999. Despite the millions of dollars spent making the displays as historically accurate as possible, the years of adjusting and tweaking storylines, and the repeated reassurances that the streetscape could be corrected with the incorporation of just the right theme, History Hall’s closure was announced in 2013. By 2017, the museum had undergone another name change, this time to the

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<sup>148</sup> Wallace-Casey, “Constructing Patriotism,” 300.

<sup>149</sup> Visitor to Ed Laine, November 12, 1991, media and general public, box H-1192, Dan Gallacher: Canada Hall, CMHL.

<sup>150</sup> Visitor to Ed Laine, November 12, 1991, CMHL.

<sup>151</sup> Visitor to Ed Laine, November 12, 1991, CMHL.

Canadian Museum of History. History Hall – now Canada Hall – was transformed from the series of immersive streetscape environments into today’s multimedia exhibit.

While I never had the chance to see the History Hall streetscape in-person, I am lucky to have friends who did experience the original version of the exhibit. They fondly, or perhaps nostalgically, recall weaving between the life-sized buildings, and walking through time from one end of Canada to the other. However, when asked to recall specifics, they cannot, just like how the exhibit itself was unable to offer concrete events, places, or people from which a framework of history could hang. Perhaps this was the essence conveyed by the streetscape: a ghostly projection of “Canada,” made real again and again by the individual’s own negotiations with the pasts they chose to experience.

## Conclusion

In the shadowland of the streetscape, the past exists as neither illusion nor reality. Instead, the streetscape itself is a simulacrum. It is a copy of a time – of an idea of a time – that never truly existed. Within this shadowland, the murky concepts of “heritage” and “authenticity” permeate the twilight building façades. Here, heritage may play out as a social process, constructing collective memory from the familiar iconography populating the vignettes for nostalgic visitors. Meanwhile, “authentic” structures and artifacts serve to convince visitors of the essence of nation embodied by these components working together. Streetscape exhibits ultimately encourage members of the public to see themselves within the displays, letting these visitors perceive themselves as part of a larger group – what Benedict Anderson has famously called an “imagined community.”<sup>1</sup>

The streetscapes built at the British Columbia Provincial Museum (BCPM) in 1972 and the Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC) in 1989 offer two complementary perspectives on the framing of settler nationalist histories. While both exhibits claimed to offer “authentic” representations of the past, these exhibits constructed narratives latticed by lacunae. Each streetscape was informed by the dominant strands of historical discourse at the time. At the BCPM, the streetscape was tuned to J.M.S. Careless’ scholarship on the ties between the frontier and the metropolis. At the CMC, the streetscape was informed by the federal government’s multiculturalism policy. Both streetscapes remained devoid of particular politics, events, and people, instead claiming to depict everyday, ordinary life within their chosen snippets of time. While the streetscape approach asked people to empathize with the past by immersing visitors in historical, built environments, the supposed “everyday” was itself an imaginary construct.

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<sup>1</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, 1983), 25.

Challenges to the ordinary, or stories that could unsettle the displays, were omitted by Old Town and History Hall. Invocation of the particular could threaten the hazy, ill-defined shadowland in which visitors' fantasies roamed free to populate the streetscape with pasts of their own imaginings.

In each of these Canadian streetscapes, history was fashioned to begin with the arrival of settlers. The very design of the streetscape made it near impossible to depict anything but the story of settler colonial expansion in Canada; the street represented the city, the city represented modernity, and modernity represented the supposed dominance of Anglophone Canadians over a history of so-called national progress. This story seemed essential to tell in the provincial and national museums, not because it was real, but because it *felt* real, and because it encouraged visitors to identify with a modern present that had benefited from this history of improvement. Most visitors to these exhibits seemingly did not question these inflections. Instead, they repeatedly commented (whether in surveys, articles, or notes to curators) on the details that made this past feel real, whether it was the used oily rags hanging in Old Town's city garage or the Orange Order posters pasted around Ontario Street in History Hall. Yet the debate over realism in the streetscapes obscured the more important question: who benefited from these presentations of the past? And what "imagined community" did they strengthen?

Over the years that these streetscapes existed, they became core features of a public historical consciousness. That they became fixtures in people's memories is what makes these exhibits such powerful objects of history in their own right. Old Town made people feel nostalgic for a past that had never truly existed. Curators' choice of explicit imperialist ties – whether through the names of storefronts or the conversations recorded for the rooms of the Grand Hotel – conjured a fantastical Victorian-era town that was both a representation of modernity and an

escape from true modernity. While fashioned as a nebulous British Columbian town undefined by a specific time, the BCPM took inspiration from common tourism tropes that embedded local history within an exaggerated sense of “British-ness.”<sup>2</sup> By borrowing an “Old England” image within the streetscape, Old Town maintained an “invented tradition” in which the colony’s history was made to encompass only settler history, with little reference to Indigenous peoples or minorities. Almost twenty years later, History Hall played on narrative tropes familiar to audiences who traversed the galleries. Having grown up consuming media that folklorized Québec culture that depicted New France history as anti-modern, rural, and filled with rustic games and folk songs, visitors found the same presentation of the past in the New France Square. This narrative was further reinforced by entry into the Ontario Street module, in which English space was equated with modernity and prosperity through displays emphasizing the town’s trade-interconnectedness and wealth of the local elite. Ontario Street was frequently cited as visitors’ favorite module of the streetscape – an unsurprising result of the self-congratulatory, optimistic projection onto Canada’s past.

Because of the popularity of both deambulatory narratives, discussion of either of these spaces invariably inspired a second feeling of nostalgia in visitors, not just for the stories or histories portrayed within the former and present streetscapes, but for the streetscapes themselves. When Old Town partially reopened in 2023, the RBCM was quick to highlight that the apple pie smell from the Grand Hotel kitchen would indeed be back. For some visitors, this immersive element had defined their memories of the exhibit for the last fifty years.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, in a video of a walkthrough of the former History Hall, YouTube commenters wrote how “it

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<sup>2</sup> David A. Smith, “Imagining Victoria: Tourism and the English Image of British Columbia’s Capital,” *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, 103, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 67.

<sup>3</sup> “Old Town, New Approach,” Exhibits, *Royal BC Museum*, <https://www.royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/visit/exhibitions/old-town-new-approach>. Accessed June 19, 2025.

makes me sick to my stomach that my kids will never experience this,” or that they hoped the museum would “decide to commemorate this area, and bring it back to [its former] glory.”<sup>4</sup>

Nostalgia for the streetscapes overcame reasoning for why they had closed or changed.

As examination of these immersive exhibits shows, these presentations of the past have remained appealing because people are ultimately encouraged to imagine themselves in the displays. The urban focus of the streetscape – the environment most familiar to the majority of visitors – further prompts the audience to connect their own presents with the pasts on display. Streetscapes’ general focus on the Victorian era additionally highlights the leaps in technological advancements and burgeoning modernity that underscore the pride people are encouraged to take in their nation’s past. Old Town’s and History Hall’s beneficiaries are the very people whom they implicitly represent.

The streetscape exhibit model peaked in popularity in the 1970s and 1980s as a mode for museums to present the past. While some of these streetscapes have been replaced with new exhibits (such as at the CMC, now renamed the Canadian Museum of History), many museums are searching for ways to re-interpret the galleries – or, in the case of one museum, to expand the streetscape instead. At the Milwaukee Public Museum (one of the key inspirations for the BCPM’s Old Town) a new gallery floor is planned for 2027 that will be the “spiritual successor” to the Streets of Old Milwaukee exhibit.<sup>5</sup> Called “Milwaukee Revealed,” the new streetscape will expand the exhibit’s current coverage of one decade to instead cover 300 years of the city’s

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<sup>4</sup> @kendrawardenaauthor, comment on “Old Canada Hall Walkthrough, Canadian Museum of History,” YouTube video, 2015, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=he\\_a\\_m-QyX4&ab\\_channel=MuseumDreams](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=he_a_m-QyX4&ab_channel=MuseumDreams);

@notparticularlywellmixedpu1916, comment on “Old Canada Hall Walkthrough, Canadian Museum of History,” YouTube video, 2015, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=he\\_a\\_m-QyX4&ab\\_channel=MuseumDreams](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=he_a_m-QyX4&ab_channel=MuseumDreams).

<sup>5</sup> Matt Wild, “Another Peek at Milwaukee Revealed, the Spiritual Successor to MPM’s Streets of Old Milwaukee,” *Milwaukee Record*, April 14, 2025, <https://milwaukeearecord.com/arts/another-peek-at-milwaukee-revealed-the-spiritual-successor-to-mpms-streets-of-old-milwaukee/>.

history.<sup>6</sup> While it will feature new buildings and stories – such as a beer hall meant to “explore how German and Polish migration, labor, and access to natural resources... led to Milwaukee’s rise as a beer capital” – it will also bring back potent elements of nostalgia from the old exhibit.<sup>7</sup> This includes the re-introduction of a mannequin nicknamed “Granny” who has sat in a rocking chair on a porch in Streets of Old Milwaukee since the 1980s. Granny even received her own X/Twitter account, @MPMGranny, in 2015. Granny has often posted “On this day in history” tweets, furthering her role as an ambassador for learning at the museum, but her image is also invoked in memes. One post sees her likeness superimposed onto the *Barbie* movie poster, connecting Granny to Greta Gerwig’s 2023 film about women’s empowerment (Figure 14).



Figure 14. X/Twitter repost by Granny (@MPMGranny).<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> @MKEPublicMuseum, “Milwaukee Revealed – Gallery Reveal,” YouTube Video, April 14, 2023, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eMuV4b62GhY&t=68s&ab\\_channel=MilwaukeePublicMuseum](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eMuV4b62GhY&t=68s&ab_channel=MilwaukeePublicMuseum).

<sup>7</sup> Wild, “Another Peek at Milwaukee Revealed.”

<sup>8</sup> Repost by Granny (@MPMGranny). Milwaukee Public Museum (@MKEPublicMuseum), “Always rockin’,” X/Twitter, April 5, 2023, <https://x.com/MKEPublicMuseum/status/1643701400168284160>.

While silly, the popularity of Granny and other elements of the Milwaukee exhibit point to the intense feelings of nostalgia visitors have, not just for stories depicted by the streetscape, but for the streetscape itself.<sup>9</sup> Streetscapes convey the impression that they are places stuck in time, a feeling positively encouraged by visitors yearning to “return” to an idealized past depicted by the deceptive simulacrum. Memes such as those from Granny’s X/Twitter account show how nostalgia is made both mundane and fashioned into an uncritically affirmative self-image. More seriously, this nostalgia has the power to block change or limit amendment in narratives about the past. When the RBCM announced the closure of Old Town in 2022 for the decolonization of its galleries, a flurry of letters sent by members of the public claimed the renovation amounted to an erasure of the province’s history.<sup>10</sup> This was supposedly a double erasure, not just of British Columbia’s (or rather, settlers’) history as depicted in the streetscape, but additionally, an erasure of Old Town which had *become* an object of history in its own right. Untangling these strands of “double nostalgia,” I argue, may be key to furthering understanding of the relationship between the public and their sense of the past in Canadian museums. The first layer of this double nostalgia is based on positive associations with a collective past, triggering an initial, collective sense of an irreconcilable past and present.<sup>11</sup> In addition to this first layer, there is also a second layer of nostalgia felt by visitors who have childhood memories of the immersive streetscape environments. Further research on these twisted strands of double nostalgia in streetscape exhibits will reveal how these immersive spaces activate visitors’ cultural memories of the past while constructing new, personal memories associated with the exhibits.

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<sup>9</sup> For more on museums as objects of nostalgia in their own right, see: Silke Arnold-de Simine, *Mediating Memory in the Museum: Trauma, Empathy, Nostalgia* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013), 54.

<sup>10</sup> Lucas Aykroyd, “Dismantling the Royal B.C. Museum’s Old Town is the Wrong Choice,” *Globe and Mail*, November 30, 2021. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-dismantling-the-royal-bc-museums-old-town-is-the-wrong-choice/>.

<sup>11</sup> Alastair Bonnett, *Left in the Past: Radicalism and the Politics of Nostalgia* (Continuum, 2010), 5.

Additionally, exploring why this double nostalgia continues to linger long after the visitors leave the streetscapes will demonstrate how the exhibit itself becomes a powerful object of memory.

While this thesis has laid the groundwork for understanding the historical frameworks underpinning two of Canada's most historically popular streetscapes, more work remains to study the presentations of the past within other immersive exhibits. This includes a greater focus on the narratives told within local museums, in which the communities themselves play larger roles in determining what versions of the past become immortalized. This future research may reveal why alterations to streetscape exhibits by politicians, academics, or even representatives of the museum establishment, are seen by some members of the public as unforgivable alterations to history itself. Often, the public does not appreciate the narrow focus of streetscapes and their exclusive nature. Making museums more inclusive places in the future means understanding how memories of exhibits and their historical narratives feed into the perception of who holds authority over history.<sup>12</sup> Visitors' nostalgic feelings for the long-existing exhibits often are stronger than memories of the lessons they intend to convey.

Double nostalgia results from museums' encouragement of visitors to see themselves in exhibit spaces, to artificially relive events, and to emotionally invest in a shared imagined past.<sup>13</sup> Future research on streetscape exhibits should thus answer the call for a better comprehension of how nostalgia is used to hold fast the past and assert authority over a collective history. Deconstructing the double nostalgia in streetscapes will make room for new representations of history, showing that museum modernization and decolonization are not erasures of the past – they are expansions for the future.

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<sup>12</sup> Arjun Appadurai, "The Past as a Scarce Resource," *Man* 16, no. 2 (June 1981): 203, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2801395>.

<sup>13</sup> Arnold-de Simone, *Mediating Memory in the Museum*, 28.

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