

TELL ME A STORY

THE LEGEND OF THE TOTEM

OF THE NATION'S INFANCY, SYMBOL OF A PROUD
EARLY NATIVE ART, PROOF OF A UNITED COMMUNITY
AND THE PUREST FORM OF CANADIAN ART.

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TELL ME A STORY

SITUATION BRIEF # 55

Contributors: G. Miller, M. Segger

“Victoria: an historic port and trading hub on the Indo-Pacific over 10,000 years.” (UNESCO Victoria World Heritage Project)

Victoria has branded itself variously over the years: “Little bit of Old England”, “City of Gardens”, “Follow the birds to Victoria”. But branding is not a story that roots a community in its place. If the City has a story about itself it is fractionalized. Popular local cultural sites provide episodic moments, often maddeningly superficial. Some historic house museums hint at the Hudsons Bay Company fort; HSMB plaques on Wharf Street reference the heroics of frontier gold rushe; the Royal BC Museum focuses on the Northern coastal First Nations and presents a vague nowhere-ville ‘Old Town’; numerous scattered monuments memorialize victims of nearly forgotten wars. Civics studies school curricula reveal a parade of elderly white men who plod through an increasing contested continental history in search of our manifest destiny, Confederation. We look to our historic urban landscape to provide glimpses of a mostly fantasized past: exotic Chinatown, Victorian economic boom-times leaving a romantic picturesque legacy of elaborate rooflines, garden suburbs laced with

middle-class tudor cottages and robber-baron manor houses. All a dislocated and incomprehensible palimpsest of exclusion and entitlement, from an elitist viewpoint and an icing of racism and class privilege.

All the while we have overlooked the obvious: the region's rootedness in a thousand miles of adjacent coastline and a geopolitical reality that embraces the world's largest ocean, its adjoining lands, its peoples and myriad other stories.

For an opener on what needs to be a wide community discussion of reimagined Victoria, Gene Miller, one of Victoria's premier public intellectuals, sets the stage for thinking differently about the "story".

M. Segger

Tell Me A Story

Situation Brief #55

Contributor: G. Miller



As we build some picture of our times, free of the conceit that “this is Canada and we’re different,” we must be sure to include:

- the significant and enduring social trauma, far beyond health impacts, imposed globally by the Covid pandemic;
- economist Mohammed A. El-Erian’s widely circulated contention that

the roiling global economy signals that globalization as a way of understanding civilizational evolution and the aspirations of governance is changing, maybe passing; and that national postures appear to be more territorial, more defensive;

- a world-wide movement asserts Indigenous rights, land and natural heritage ownership;
- the demographics of aging and stresses of mass migration as Canada seeks 500,000 immigrants per year;
- the folly of faith in a 'return' to previous economic, social, or political states of relative or seeming stability;
- the rootless physical and emotional geography of the digital space, and our quickly shifting protocols for social interaction;
- an emergent 'Age of Worry' based in emanations and transmissions of pending collapse of the natural world.



Such conditions (likely, among others) are exerting enormous pressure on social memory and turning the past into an amorphous yesteryear. The ‘neighbourhood’ is now in many ways electronic and it has permitted or imposed a very new and often dislocating set of adjacencies, different scales, different social frameworks. All of this is both exciting and terrifying. Consciousness is crowded by ‘nows’ packaged as social ideologies that compete for attention and adherence. This alters and reduces custom, continuity, tradition, habit, stability, security. It makes people less certain, more vulnerable and manipulable. It is no wonder that the appeal of extreme political positions is increasing and that soft dictatorship and autocracy are growing throughout the world.

In numerous FOCUS Magazine columns, I have suggested that when a civic (or even a national) community loses, or runs out of, ‘story’ or defining and broadly shared narrative, it puts its identity—its ‘us’—at risk. Citizens (people who think of themselves as citizens, as civic stakeholders) can more easily turn into an undefined and unmoored public and, lacking story or purpose, place or affiliation, leave themselves open to bombast and a range of social threats – not least, anxiety about where things are headed.

By ‘story,’ I mean not just contemporary characteristics—the residue of legacy—but also the ‘third dimension’: some of the history, the how and the why, of a place. The facades of charming; buildings are just a start and certainly a help, but buildings, even with plaques, don’t have voices.

If this seems like an unusual way to launch a support letter for the Victoria, BC, appeal to UNESCO for nomination as a world heritage site , it is simply my way of suggesting that any influential and carefully designed programme—cultural, architectural, social narrative, whatever—that can help a public with the act of citizenship, and to more clearly experience the connection between its heritage, what it was, and the cultural and social forces pressing on

(or distorting) the present is a crucially important project right now. As you will have observed, the world is at risk of coming apart, and at such times, places that still operate with a social gyroscope – even those that make the effort and work with whatever tools and resources they have – take on a particular importance.



The reach for World Heritage Site listing opens up both a risk and opportunity. A risk of leaving to professionals to paint over the landscape with yet another rosy come-hither narrative. Or an opportunity to grab a new canvas for a totally new picture. An opportunity to seize the moment and over-invest so that the we can undertake not just physical restoration, but also a widespread and sustained communication initiative to inform and educate the public about the values that lie behind . In other words to think in terms of this as a massive public communication and education project rather than filling in the blanks of a set of nomination documents.

Somehow, if the connections can be made, the Victoria public must be affected, empowered, via the agency of World Heritage Site designation. This is not fundamentally a museological or institutional challenge, but a cultural challenge to conceive and insert new forms of local cultural transmission. Really, the lessons of the past and the messages of heritage are implicitly and explicitly about authorship. That—authorship, and its cousin-word, authenticity—seem to me to be central to a future that works.

There are people, in Victoria and elsewhere, who are expert at designing communications programmes to enrich and amplify various cultural initiatives, to spread the impacts and benefits widely. I would not only urge support for UNESCO World Heritage Site Designation, but commitment by UNESCO to the kind of communications programme described above, as a way of ensuring maximum advantage to all stakeholders. After all, such an initiative might help UNESCO to refashion and add further value to its important programme of World Heritage Site listings.

OBSERVATIONS

- The Victoria “story” needs regrounding:
 - o Moving from “City of Gardens” to include our rich biodiversity of natural heritage,
 - o Adopting the recommendations outlined in *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling the Future, Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission* as a platform for including the heritage of Indigenous peoples, but also as a model for other excluded minorities: race, gender, language, nation-state.
 - o Adjusting the geopolitical context for our history to include our Indo-Pacific connections and roots.

- o Reaching beyond the Explorer, Settler, Boom-town, clichés of popular local history to embrace a more truthful and broader narrative of the accomplishments – but also the stresses, failures, mistakes (Settler – Indigenous relations, migrant political and cultural colonialism, economic privilege and privation, political and social evolution) which underpin the demographic development of the region.
- The UNESCO Victoria Heritage Project reveals a desperate need for an intensive community-wide process of discovery and dialogue to reveal a more balanced and inclusive understanding of our intangible heritage.



- Investigating the interlocking strands of community memory which comprise our unique sense of place requires the coordination of a network of local knowledge curators:
 - o First Nations elders and families, keepers of lineage and territorial knowledge,

- o Settler associations and institutions that protect and maintain the heritage of minority populations,
 - o Heritage repositories: museums, archives, art galleries, libraries that manage our cultural resources,
 - o Educational and research institutions that advance and communicate our natural and human heritage,
 - o Heritage management agencies that administer and protect our tangible heritage, from historic monuments to native habitats.
- A major community-wide effort could reinforce the well-springs of the Victoria story on the City's harbour where its wealth of tangible and intangible cultural assets are located.

To share your own comments on this article email:

victoriaworldheritage@gmail.com

RESOURCES

Focus Magazine <https://www.focusonvictoria.ca>

Mohamid A. El-Erian. Not Just Another Recession: Why the Global Economy May Never Be the Same, Foreign Affairs, November 22, 2022. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/world/not-just-another-recession-global-economy>

Dolores Hayden. The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History, Cambridge M., London, 1997.

Ned Kaufman. Place, Race, and Story: Essays on the Past and Future of Historic Preservation, New York/London, 2011.