

FIRED-UP MUSEUM!

3039 words

May 4th 2003 a pleasant, sunny Sunday in Nelson British Columbia. A young gas station attendant, working across from the Heritage City's distinctively muralled cinder-block Museum, noticed smoke rising behind the building. Within seconds two trucks emerged from Nelson's Victorian red-brick Firehall. Sirens blaring, engines roaring, the vehicles sped through the residential neighbourhood. Museum curator Sarah Lang was enjoying a quiet time in her garden when interrupted by the rumble and shriek of the engines. A gray plume directed Sarah to the intersection of Nelson and Anderson where smoke billowed from the steep backyard of the Museum property and encircled the flat-roofed building.

Two fire engines, twelve firefighters and a hassle of neighbours – among them anxious members of the Nelson and District Museum, Archives, Art Gallery and Historical Society (MAAG) – witnessed the scene. The cinder-block structure was undamaged, but flames threatened the vulnerable flat roof.

Highly flammable, historically valuable wooden boats that had travelled Kootenay Lake were the early victims of the blaze. The pride of this little fleet was the 1925 Forest Service boat, *Amabilis II*. Over the past 10 years, private and government grants enabled a local shipwright to meticulously restore the 40-foot wooden boat. Flames were controlled within an hour of the conflagration but only charred hulls remained. Inside the building irreplaceable artifacts suffered smoke and possible water damage.

MAAG Board and staff – the official mourners – accepted the sympathies of Nelsonites and museum folk throughout BC. Locals, who seldom ventured through the doorway of the curiously-painted building, fearing its musty contents, were suddenly

concerned. Perhaps over the past several years one should have heeded the controversies around the need for a better Museum, an Archives (a what?) and an Art Gallery? After all, these art folk and heritage hounds were changing Nelson's image from a community of rough and ready loggers, miners and sportsmen to a community with diverse, even eclectic interests and occupations.

The Directors were not strangers to working against complicated, conflicting odds. Since the late 1990s the Museum's needs and 'inappropriate location' were an embarrassment to Nelson, the self-proclaimed 'Heritage Capital of BC.' The descriptor 'Canada's best little Art Town' bestowed on Nelson in 1998 by an American journalist, was difficult to live up to.

When the embers cooled the Directors gathered in somber consideration. A Restoration company and an insurance adjuster outlined a 30-day relocation, inventory and decontamination process. Every piece of paper, fabric, film and furnishing was examined and restored. The building would be repaired, cleaned and painted. Re-Opening was set for August. The theme 'Forward to the Past' advertised the Society's determination to stay in business.

The 'political' implications of the fire and the Phoenix-like follow-up were far-reaching. Would interminable negotiations with the City for a new location be affected? Back in 1998, following the good spirits engendered by celebrations surrounding the Centennial of the City's incorporation, the Society declared it would work with all parties toward achievement of a "centrally-located, suitable and properly funded Museum/Gallery and Archives".

That the fortunes and future of an Art/Culture Facility was irrevocably wedded to those of an equally needed Recreation Facility were obvious. Studies for a Recreation

Facility were underway. In a city the size of Nelson it was difficult to separate two initiatives or to avoid pitting one group against the other. Fragmenting the community's financial and human resources must be avoided.

Meanwhile the determined Culture folk drew up Wish Lists of desirable locations, casting covetous eyes on the 50-year-old Gray Building (Post Office), a solid, spacious, if not particularly attractive edifice adjacent to the 100-year-old City Hall.

In anticipation of an unacceptable 'single-multi-complex' recommendation from the City, the Society in January 1999 took a bold step. A Resolution prefaced by five succinct 'Whereas' committed the Society to "...actively pursue the establishment of a Museum/Archives/Art Gallery facility separate from any other recreational facility or multi-use...complex." The Society would pursue "...a separate, existing, downtown site as a more economic, more functional option than the multi-complex structure."

As predicted, the City-commissioned Report recommended the incorporation of a Museum/Gallery within a Recreational complex. Culture advocates suffered considerable bad press which averred the Recreation Complex couldn't be realized without inclusion of the Culture facility. It was an unpleasant time for both 'sides' proponents. Tenacious art and heritage folk resented being cast as 'spoilers' capable of dashing the aspirations of the recreationalists.

Hence, the Museum Society engaged a consultant to advise on the suitability of the Gray Building. His Report envisioned a rather ambitious renovation, but also established standards essential for a Museum, Archives, Art Gallery. The consultant agreed a single, multi-purpose Complex was untenable.

April/May 2000 key Culture players were in a quandary. The Secretary's notes from intense planning sessions record an undertone of conciliation. "MAAG has agreed in principle to be included in facility planning. However, it was agreed to exercise the option...to continue to discuss the Gray Building. It is still premature to commit entirely or to compromise on an unknown one-site proposal."

However hope to transform the Post Office crashed May 23rd. A letter from the City decreed, "The City will not purchase the Gray Building." The plain-speaking, unimaginative Administrator cited a depressing list of reasons why the City was not interested. It didn't need administrative space nor did it relish being a landlord for MAAG. There were environmental issues. The City was firmly committed to its top priority – a Recreational Facility.

2000 was a hot summer of documents and discussion. The Facility Committee and other stake-holders heard final Culture faction arguments. In November MAAG learned that in shared-complex plans, MAAG was allotted essentially half the space required. Nonetheless the City determined to hold a Referendum on a Civic Centre Community Complex. With a show of responsibility, but not a high degree of enthusiasm, the united Culture forces campaigned in favour of the 2001 Referendum.

The Referendum was defeated. Sport enthusiasts were disappointed. Some Councillors were incredulous voters had not 'understood' benefits the Complex would bring. MAAG and friends sighed and resolved to set the Museum and Gallery more visibly before the community.

Eagle-eyed Board members prowled the streets and derelict buildings of Nelson, seeking a Museum-and-Gallery-in-waiting. The Sites Wish List expanded: School District Office, a half-block 'hole' on Vernon St., car lots, grocery store, office

buildings and Civic Centre areas around the Arena. Meanwhile, an Economic Development Commission impact study that would provide valuable data was underway. Energetic backers of a vastly improved or new Recreation Facility were equally committed to their goal and had returned to their drawing boards.

Everyone involved strove to retain a semblance of objectivity. Nelson could not be divided into camps with conflicting goals. History-loving grandmothers also love their Hockey-playing grandchildren. Hockey players can love Exhibitions (especially those about Hockey). Artists lead double lives as fitness freaks. What about cultural tourists or sports tourists?

By December 2001 the situation brightened. MAAG optimistically recorded “There is a growing recognition that Sporting and Cultural Facilities need not be in same location”. January, a new cross-section-of-the-community Facilities Planning Committee was formed. However, the FPC still viewed a Cultural Facility as Phase 2. A Recreational Facility was Phase 1. Public surveys were inconclusive, especially regarding what tax burden the voter would accept. Friends were hard to make at \$65 per \$100,000 assessed property value.

With the Gray Building off the List, the Queen’s, an elderly Hotel/ strip-club sandwiched into the middle of Baker Street became MAAG’s next choice. Location on Nelson’s popular main street was a bonus but its past history was questionable. Nonetheless, drawings and calculations were done. The Queen’s option remained hopeful until spring 2003 when....

The most surprising, intriguing, inspiring, offer yet (un)imagined arrived from the City! It was no secret the 1902 City Hall needed extensive restoration. The City was willing to assist – under conditions – the Society in transforming this classic building

into a Museum, Archives and Art Gallery. Let it be understood, the City Hall transfer would go ahead only IF a (2nd) Recreational Complex Referendum passed. The principle of ‘implied consent’.

Yet here was a banner around which the community could rally! The City would purchase the Provincial Building adjacent to the Court House and re-locate City Hall there. It was a financial and political puzzle but the positive attitude evoked in the beleaguered Society was miraculous. Other than jokingly contemplating an armed take-over of the famous Rattenbury-designed Court House, MAAG’s sleuths had overlooked one of Nelson’s signature heritage buildings – the venerable City Hall!

The Canadian Conservation Institute is mandated to “support the heritage community in preserving Canada’s heritage collections....” On invitation from the FPC, Ottawa-based CCI senior consultants visited Nelson to advise on the suitability of the old City Hall for Gallery/Museum purposes and offer marketing strategies for such an eventuality.

The Summer 2003 visit of CCI consultants Rousseau and Lowrey was a Very Important Event in the evolution of heritage, art and tourism in the city. Nelson players overwhelmed the consultants with data but mostly with enthusiasm for the notion of City Hall as Culture Centre. Rousseau, a decidedly husky individual, ascended a rickety ladder and disappeared with his flashlight into the rafters and darkness of the 100-year-old building. Staff and Board members watched nervously from below for signs and sounds of plaster and splinters descending, along with Rousseau, onto the uneven floor below.

Initially, these experts were not convinced the building was sound enough to undergo the transformation envisaged, nor did the compact building lend itself to

functioning as a triple-purpose building. It just wasn't done. They foresaw multiple problems, including Nelson's commitment to utilize local suppliers and contractors. Two more trouble-shooting visits elicited approval for the old City Hall/New MAAG project.

Meanwhile, at Town Hall meetings FPC outlined plans for a re-worked Complex. MAAG, along with seven recreation organizations, urged voters support the (2nd) Referendum. The lingering 'what-if-the-Referendum-doesn't-pass?' fear vanished Oct. 18th when it received voter approval. Real work for creating a Community Recreation Complex AND a Community cultural centre would begin.

MAAG Board and staff prepared stacks of documents. Sheila, the prime architectural expert on board, frequently tripped over her bundle of binders. She also utilized two dictionaries to fully appreciate the insightful comments of (self-declared) curmudgeonly Alexander. Others simply faked comprehension and nodded in solemn, quizzical agreement to Alexander's observations. Secretary, Florence frequently succumbed to heavy-file fatigue. Deputy Sheriff Irene, who regularly appeared wearing a flak jacket and toting either a gun or a baby, commanded instant attention. Arthur, Board member for 50 years (!), educated his cohorts with reflections on Nelson's earlier days. How was Chairman Dan, affable, jack-of-all-trades (succeeded by By-law man Terence) to cope with this crew of committed but diverse shipmates?

Those weighty Documents included: a complete make-over time-line, fresh themes for historical exhibitions and Strategic Development and Business Plans. Through what Financial Chairman Eric called "inspired reallocation of existing dollars," a long-range financial plan evolved. The City boasted 'no new municipal taxes' would finance the facility. However ... all affirmed that MAAG would rely heavily on initial and on-going support and volunteerism of the citizens, businesses and organizations of Nelson.

February 2004. A Joint Building Committee of Councillors, City staffers, Project Manager Sheila and MAAG Chairman was now the chief decision-maker. Grants from all levels of government, corporations, NGOs, founding families and angels of all descriptions were rigorously pursued. Speakers charmed Club luncheon-goers, the Press and anyone with slight interest in Nelson's heritage or culture. The guileless promoters visualized climate-controlled galleries, exhibitions from major centres, comely reception hall, art and gift shop and a PME telling the Story of Nelson from an entirely vital, new perspective. The PME committee 're-wrote' Nelson's history!

MAAG's army expanded. Local experts, interested, interesting people enlisted. Throughout 2005, ten Committees reported. Chairman Terence negotiated a formal lease on the 'former City Hall at 502 Vernon'. Energetic Eric reported on grants and donations received, pending, applied-for and soon-to-be-applied-for. He strategized a Capital Building Fund Campaign challenging \$150,000 be raised privately and locally. (This target was nearly doubled by August 2006!)

Mid-April MAAG took possession and invited everyone to an 'Empty House Open House.' Nearly 400 Nelsonites bid a nostalgic farewell to the building where for generations they grudgingly paid taxes and parking tickets or climbed the creaky staircase to Council meetings. Stripped of furnishing and cheerful Staff, the damp, deteriorating state of the panelling, floors and plaster was evident. Pleas to "Save the staircase – the windows!" were diplomatically addressed.

June 2005 the Board finally named this venture – *Touchstones Nelson, Museum of Art and History*. A logo symbolizing the somewhat controversial Touchstones name, while capturing the imagination of artists, historians, tourists and donors was next. The Board was adamant on one point – no undulating 'swoops' (as were in vogue). A

Nelson company created a stylized basalt-like ‘touchstone’ used by early miners to identify the presence of gold in an ore. Not everyone immediately warmed to the image, but the grey and rusty gold colours were melded into the logo. Lorna Brown, capable assistant curator of a major Canadian Art Gallery, was hired as Executive Director.

The PME occupying the entire second floor was coming together as an amalgam of themes assembled by talented writers, video-creation artists, architects, artistic designers and a host of Kootenay construction designers, electronic, woodworking and photographic wizards.

The year was also marked by budget overruns and a labour stoppage. Initial work, such as manually-excavating a deep pit for the edifice’s elevator, seemed to take forever, with little to show to the scrutinizing public. The operation was further complicated by funding reliant on erratic sources of gifts and grants. Nonetheless, the Society threw a 50th anniversary party at the historic Hume Hotel (a loyal supporter). With a civic election near and Touchstones the ‘flavour of the month’, spirits remained high.

MAAG Directors felt like politicians or heroes. Photo-ops of smiling Directors accepting cheques from corporations, organizations and individuals became almost weekly newspaper features. Most gratifying was the outstanding generosity of Nelson’s founding families. Four and five generational families gave back to the their City.

April 2006 MAAG’s fund-raising talent was recognized by the Canadian Museum Association. Touchstones was declared of ‘national significance’ and given a National Award for Outstanding Achievement in Philanthropy. The Project initiated with a \$1 m grant from the City which the Society parlayed into nearly \$3.5 m.

The End & The Opening were now in sight. Every volunteer, tradesperson, supplier, donor or detractor had an opinion on what ‘they’ should feature in the PME, Art Galleries, Gift Shop and washrooms. Even CCI’s Rousseau dropped by. Another hot summer brought deadlines and devilish details, not the least of which were strategies to deter pigeons from defacing the portico.

Opening Events of October 11th-15th were the most exciting to occur in Nelson in a long time. The building was ablaze (oops!) for several nights and days preceding the Opening marathon. Board members polished windows, railings and bathrooms. No dust settled. Coat hangers untangled, coffee consumed.

An Honouring ceremony by the Aboriginal peoples of the Kootenays was followed by a Reception welcoming Media and Donors. Guests in their classiest go-to-Gala attire queued up Ward Street. Major donors received four-inch cubes of Kootenay granite, etched with the Touchstones logo. Friday evening set the standard for future Exhibition Openings. The Ark Project, unveiled in 2,000 square foot Gallery A, was a cross-section of works by regional artists. The din and clink of good cheer flowed onto Vernon Street.

Serious excitement however was contained until Saturday – a gloriously crisp and brilliant morn. Dignitaries assembled in Touchstones’ foyer. Speakers practiced their addresses. Kootenay Kiltie piper Alexander, tuned his instrument. High School volunteers playfully practiced their curtsies. The Lieutenant Governor of British Columbia was on her way. Her Honour Iona Campagnolo left Government House Victoria at 6:30 a.m. and would soon arrive at Castlegar Airport. Until: “Her Honour’s plane, due to fog, can’t leave Vancouver.” This was no Cancelgar joke. Vancouver was to blame! The Mayor gamely re-positioned Nelson’s Chain of Office on his trusty shoulders and spake the words intended by Her Honour.

The Ribbon-cutting, national anthem, even the speeches and history personified by administrator, art lover, historian Sarah Lang were emotional moments. The familiar doors of the old City Hall were opened. Hundreds of Nelsonites flooded in. Several times during the day, the elevator, unaccustomed to exaggerated use, refused to function. The staircase became so congested access to the building was curtailed. There was singing, games and crafts. The frequent comment – “It’s too much. We’ll come back!”

The greatest transformation in the Touchstones venture was in the attitude of the beholder – the Press. Bob Hall, Editor of the *Nelson Daily News*, had been lukewarm on MAAG/Touchstones. He identified with the Recreation Complex project and avidly supported the Referendum envisaging a mega-structure for both recreational and cultural options. Hall now admitted disappointment with his sporting pals who abandoned their culture sector neighbours once the Recreation Complex was realized. Mr. Editor’s ruminations (and about-face conversion) were revealed in the *NDN* following his sneak preview. “I was simply blown away.” He heaped praise on all involved. Touchstones was “something the entire community should be extremely proud of.” By the way, fellows “This isn’t a facility for historical scholars and art snobs.” Not all reports were as goose-bumpy as Hall’s, but Touchstones’ success was extremely well received. Lorna prepared for ‘how-did-you-do-it?’ inquiries.

The challenge was to maintain Nelson’s newest ‘business’. A reasonable fee enabled 1000 individuals to become instant members of the Society and therefore passholders. Retired educators, bookkeepers, marketeers, writers, carpenters, designers, handymen and those with experience in personnel, sales, catering, cleaning, children and stuffing envelopes signed on as Volunteers.

Editor Bob's concerns about dividing the culture and recreation communities were given the boot January 2007 when the Stanley Cup appeared in the foyer of Touchstones. Kids touched, caressed and posed with the nation's Holy Grail. Nelson was hosting CBC's Hockey Day in Canada at the Community Complex. Over 500 young hockey players and parents jammed Touchstones in pursuit of Lord Stanley's Cup. For many this was their first, definitely not their last, visit to Touchstones.

Touchstones' story is remarkable

- fire
- Phoenix
- Finances
- and
- 'Forward to the Past'

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