

THE MUSEUM AS THE NEW AGORA

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Like individuals, corporations and countries, cities go through cycles in their development – cycles characterized by ambition or complacency, creative focus, wounded caution or maybe just naivete. Toronto is an example of this, and it is my contention today that Toronto is now into another cycle of somewhat confident creativity – although risks remain – a subject for another day.

Let us consider the generation of the 1950s – the so-called “Leave it to Beaver” generation – the parents of the Baby Boomers. This generation is often disparaged as overly conventional and conservative – “Father Knows Best” - an unflattering and inaccurate portrait painted, of course, by its own Baby Boomer children, who broke into the 1960s with such “counter-cultural” energy. Everything about their parents’ generation looked ordinary and unimaginative from the vantage of those summers of love, women’s liberation, Woodstock and demonstrations against the war in Vietnam. It was time to re-invent the world.

There was truth in some of that. But that generational lens obscures much about the 1950s that was innovative and brave – not least, decisions taken then about the City of Toronto.

Yes a subway was begun here in the 1950s – an act of foresight. But the most telling and inexplicable of these acts was a decision taken in 1957 to launch an international architectural competition for a new city hall in Toronto. And then came the remarkable choice here and then of a little-known Finnish architect Viljo Revell to build two facing, curved structures gathered around a domed council chamber in front of a severe, beautiful public square on Queen Street – Toronto’s new City Hall.

There was little precedent for this architecture in the late 1950s – it had nothing to do with the prevailing International Style – much less anything happening in provincial Toronto. It was an outlier, a radical personal vision by an unknown foreigner chosen by a seemingly brittle city with something stirring in its soul and imagination. (Ah, but a parallel: In that same 1957, Sydney, Australia had just chosen a little-known Danish architect to build an odd new opera house on its harbour, which took another 16 years to complete.)

By 1965 in Toronto, Revell’s vision took form on Nathan Phillips Square with marvelous effect, including the installation of a then-controversial sculpture by Henry Moore. It was the generation of the 1950s that did it – that perpetrated an entirely non-contextual act - which set off an intense period of smart and ambitious city-building by the same cohort.

Soon after, the Toronto Dominion Bank shelved plans to build “the tallest concrete structure in the Commonwealth” as its head office on King Street and, with the spark of Phyllis Lambert igniting the intelligence of Alan Lambert (no relation), the TD chose the pre-eminent architect Mies van der Rohe to design one of the world’s great examples of the International Style in the new TD Centre on King Street.

Across Bay Street, the Bank of Commerce took the cue and hired I. M. Pei to design its elegant, powerful stainless steel tower that expressed another brilliant variant of Modernism here. Toronto was reaching up in quality as well as in scale.

At the same time, Toronto became conscious of the unique value of its central city neighbourhoods and, in a move of great symbolism, stopped the Spadina Expressway and block-busting public housing projects to nurture its historic intimacy.

This felicitous combination of “tending to the garden” and embracing the “dramatic new” continued into the 1970s with Eb Ziedler’s Ontario Place and Queen’s Quay Terminal renovation, soon joined by his wonderful Eaton Centre. Then again, out of the blue, another outlier arrived on Toronto’s skyline with the CN Tower – still the most beautiful communications structure in the world.

Toronto’s city Planning Department created an effective urban design unit to focus on streetscapes and open space – the public living room of the city. By 1976, Fortune Magazine could run a cover announcing North America’s New Great City – the City of Toronto, the City that works – intimate, humane, safe, clean, creative, risk-taking, worldly, and prosperous all at the same time – a truly urban place - as Peter Ustinov famously remarked, “New York run by the Swiss.”

The foil to all this was, of course, New York itself which, like other big American cities, was falling into ruin in the 1970s.

And so Toronto reached the top of that cycle of confidence, focus and creativity in the arms of the 1950s generation, and then, under the Baby Boomers who followed, began its gentle slide.

After a decade of pleasant complacency in the 1980s, Toronto visibly retreated through the 1990s, hit by one of the worst recessions in North America, disadvantaged by poor leadership at the provincial and local levels, distracted by bureaucratic reforms and restructuring, and challenged by new patterns of technology and immigration.

By 1999, foreign media were exploring what had gone wrong with Toronto, and the citizens themselves could no longer deny the visible signs of its distress in deteriorating public spaces, services and behaviours, stalled downtown development and fractious local government.

Yes, there were points of light – the de-zoning of some central city lands and a few bright developments here and there – the Calatrava Court at BCE Place and the McKinsey Building on Charles - but North America’s new Great Cities were now south of the border again, including New York and Chicago to which Toronto was now unfavourably compared – a remarkable reversal of fortune.

This physical decline, along with a reviving economy in the latter 1990s, created the conditions for Toronto’s cycle to alter again. Complacency gave way to doubt, frustration, embarrassment and then finally anger at Toronto’s retreat. In this newly agitated context, a few vectors of revival were born, the most unlikely being our beleaguered cultural institutions.

I will not go into the miracles of Superbuild here, or the astounding support of private individuals and corporations for our large cultural projects in Toronto, including those for Renaissance ROM. It is enough to see these projects (along with the condominium boom and some developments at the Waterfront) as evidence that the cycle is once again on the upside, and that Toronto is again moved by conviction and creativity – though again I would caution against complacency.

I do say with some satisfaction that the Royal Ontario Museum has been at the forefront through this regenerating process, and is creating the most radical re-imagination of architecture, function and public space in Toronto since Revell’s new City Hall in 1965.

Daniel Libeskind's Michael Lee-Chin Crystal on Bloor Street asserts a new sense of the possible and creates a new reference point for what comes next in this city. Alan Gottlieb has said that great cities must have the capacity to astonish, and the ROM is consciously investing in that thesis on the most desirable piece of real estate in urban Canada.

Architecture is the most public of the arts, and among the most permanent. Cultural institutions have a responsibility to be vigorous patrons of architecture, pushing boundaries, empowering genius – creating art rather than simply collecting and presenting it. This will be tested at the ROM in June when Mr. Libeskind's Crystal opens to the world – and I believe the test will be passed.

But there is another aspect of the ROM's project that I want to explore today in the context of the city – not the physical creation but the role of the Museum as the New Agora in our society – the meeting place, the common ground, the town square.

In Europe and North America, the museum's functions are expanding from those of collection, research, conservation, exhibition and education to those as instruments of urban renewal and social integration. This is why I have spoken here at some length about Toronto's cycles of development – because cultural institutions such as the ROM are now playing such an important role in shaping the current cycle in this city.

In his famous book, *The Culture of Cities*, Lewis Mumford said in 1938: "Layer upon layer, past times preserve themselves in the city until life itself is finally threatened with suffocation; then in sheer defence, modern man invents the museum."

In Mumford's view, the museum hived history away from the city precisely to give the city the opportunity for life. He said: "By confining the function of preservation to the museum, we thus release space in the rest of the city for the fresh uses of the living. ... The museum gives us a means of coping with the past... without confining our own activities to the molds created by the past."

In sum, Mumford saw the museum as the city's vaccination against the dead hand of history – a useful prison.

The often forbidding architecture of museums suggested just such a mission – yes as temples to art and research – but also as fortresses to keep the layers of the past safely inside. Museums classically sat apart from the lively texture of the city, behind walls and gates, up great stairways, across moats and squares, on hills or in precincts of their own. These devices were entirely intentional.

But this is now an aging portrait of great museums – at least in the West. Museums are no longer saviours of cities because of their isolation – if that was ever one of their purposes – but because of the engagement of museums with cities – their function as common ground and agents of provocative conversation.

Since the Pompidou Centre's creation in Paris 30 years ago, museums have become defining elements of great cities – multi-faceted, layered and complex places bound up with the community in a myriad of ways, accessible and transparent on the street – thus the new Agora, the new common space, the new city square. Why?

In part, to be sure, to serve their own interests - so museums can generate their own revenue as government operating support declines – year after year, decade after decade. But the more important reason arises from something of an historical accident, which creates something of a social responsibility.

Our societies have become segmented and particularized in a world of increasing mobility and technological change. In our major cities, the Western Canon appeals to a declining plurality of the population. We no longer meet most of our neighbours in the town hall or through the common prayer book. In the multi-cultural and technologically decentralized societies of the West, adult encounters with the exploding diversity of the city tend to occur in commuter trains, shopping malls, media and to some degree, the workplace – at distance.

We may well live in a Global Village, but through immigration to our major cities, we experience the Global Village as a Globe of Villages – our own city as a physical patchwork of distinct cultures – delightful in many ways, but also a fracturing of common ground where we actually live our lives.

In this context, we need new shared space – places of encounter – a new Commons – a new Agora. (Parenthetically, this is why I so fervently support unique public funding of integrated public schools.) Museums are capable of contributing to this because, more easily than many traditional cultural forms, they can engage diverse interests on their own terms.

The ROM for example, is among the few remaining “universal” museums of culture in the world – gathering and studying the material evidence of many peoples in many places over time. In the past, these collections served to give insights to our local population into the exotic and the strange. Now they reflect the heritage of our neighbours, who live down the street in Toronto itself – as though the ROM had been created as a universal museum in 1912, to await the cosmopolitan city that eventually emerged around it.

What could have been more eloquent in this regard than the founding gift to Renaissance ROM by Michael Lee-Chin – an immigrant to Canada from Jamaica – precipitated, to be sure, by our potent Campaign Chair, the Hon. Hilary Weston? What could be more convincing than the fact that this gift has elicited such significant contributions from other so-called “new communities” – including Canadians with the heritages of South Asia, Ukraine, China, South Africa, Germany, Japan, Italy and Austria – not to mention Oakville, Montreal and Vancouver.

The ROM is also a significant museum of natural history under the same roof- another happy historical accident challenging the assumption that Man and Nature sit apart – a self-centred and naive assumption if there ever was one. Nature is entwined with humanity whatever the culture - the ultimate common ground.

Beyond great architecture and amenities, this gives the ROM a capacity for resonance in the whole city, even as the whole city evolves. Our new community centres must be cosmopolitan centres – and museums should be among the best of them.

If great cities must have the capacity to astonish, they must also offer the likelihood of encounter with wonder and pleasure in the company of others. Such encounters arise from many sources, but wonder and pleasure should certainly spill out of the halls of museums of art, culture and science, with their knowledge and curiosity rampant on a field of beautiful spaces that encourage social engagement and reflection.

As the ROM continues to unfold over the next three years, you will see the arrival of many collections and specimens that have been stranded in the museum’s vaults for generations - and new acquisitions to enrich them. You will have far more access to important research by our curators and their colleagues working around the world , both in culture and in natural history.

In the field of cultures alone, you will see new galleries for Japan, China, Korea, Canadian First Peoples, Africa, the Americas, Asia Pacific, South Asia, the Middle East, Rome, Byzantium, Modern Design, Costume and Textiles. And yes – a new gallery for Canada too – not in the basement, but off the historic rotunda in the Weston FamilyWing on Queen's Park.

You will encounter an energized Institute for Contemporary Culture at the ROM, denying any suggestion that ancient cultures are "dead," raising issues of current moment from around the world through the works of brave and visionary artists. You will meet whole new communities of people through our dynamic Young Patrons Circle – a new generation pursuing a friendly takeover of the ROM.

From the natural world, you will encounter brilliant collections of minerals and gems, fossils recording the miraculous "Big Bang of Life" 520 million years ago, dinosaurs and the threatened, delicate web of biodiversity so much at issue in our own time.

You will be invited to participate in debates, lectures, conversations, concerts and films. You will encounter jazz on Thursday evenings, the music and arts of many cultures on Friday nights, and the pleasures of conversation, song and special events for young people on Sunday afternoons.

You will have the opportunity to meet new people in an elegant setting that includes restaurants, lounges and distinctive retail. On the Bloor Street Plaza outside the Michael Lee-Chin Crystal, you will bustle through musicians, magicians, mimes and metamorphoses. You will be at the centre of Toronto's new "Museum Arts District" on Bloor, which includes the delightful Gardiner Museum of Ceramic Arts, the brilliantly reiterated Royal Conservatory of Music, the unique Bata Shoe Museum and a host of new amenities in awakening Yorkville.

In Daniel Libeskind's architecture, you will learn a new and moving language of space and form – and come to know another face of beauty, playing with light across the hours and seasons in one of Canada's most romantic buildings. On the street, you will not walk past a fortress, but rather gaze through glass apertures into galleries of Africa and haute couture, even as you meet your friends for a ROMtini on the rooftop bar.

In all this – in the Museum as the New Agora – we hope you will also find your own personal quiet spaces where you return for pleasure, contemplation and solace. This is what great cities must offer, and what the ROM aspires to provide.

Yes, we need another \$50-million in capital contributions to complete the project – in addition to the wonderful \$253-million we have raised so far - and yes, we need something more than 15 years of cuts to our annual operating budget from government to sustain our mandate . But Toronto is restive with retreat and, I think, insistent on advance – and the ROM is determined to be a significant part of making this new cycle real.

You need only know the members of our Board of Governors and Board of Trustees and Heritage Governors and Honorary Trustees and Campaign Cabinet and staff and members and donors to know how much conviction exists within our walls.

The ROM belongs to you. More pointedly, the ROM belongs to everyone. We look forward to greeting you there, to exploring the arts of life and the life of nature. And please don't be shy about ordering that ROMtini in Crystal Five – Toronto's amazing new rooftop restaurant and bar. What Agora would be complete without one?