

PRESENTATION FOR HERITAGE TORONTO AWARDS

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Building Heritage with Innovation

By Gail Dexter Lord, Co-President, Lord Cultural Resources

It is a great honour to be invited to speak on this happy occasion. Thank you so much Elizabeth for your warm introduction. Bill [Kilbourn] was an inspiration to me and to my generation and particularly to my husband and partner Barry Lord who studied medieval history with Bill at McMaster. Bill exemplified what today we call civic engagement – I don't think we had a name for it then – but that value of “civic engagement” is what drives Heritage Toronto, and drives all of you in this beautiful hall and all of us who work in the museum and cultural sector.

Following a tradition that began last year with the historic presentation by Chief Brian Laforme, I'd like to acknowledge that we are settlers on the traditional lands of the Mississauga of the New Credit – and that we

owe much to indigenous Canadians especially in Toronto which is home to 80,000 indigenous people.

In line with the theme of tonight's event, I am focusing my remarks on the theme of innovation -- and what heritage and museums have to do with it.

Toronto has emerged as a major global city.

We continue to be among the top 10 cities in the world in terms of quality of life. Now, there are almost as many different surveys as there are cities -- but this data is from the Economist Intelligence Unit which is pretty respectable. It measures green space, natural and cultural assets, connectivity and cleanliness. Toronto is #8 in the world and is the only city in North America that makes it into the top 10. London does not make the cut, Paris does.

Toronto is 12th in a category called "Global competitiveness" which measures the business environment. Here American cities really dominate the field -- New York is #1. Washington, Boston and Chicago surpass us. But #12 is very good.

Toronto is number 3 in North America as an appealing destination for international visitors (after New York and LA) – and we are the fastest growing – at a rate of 7% a year. So a positive future for international tourism.

So far so good – but there is a troubling result from a Toronto source (perhaps not surprising since we are always our own worst critics) -- The Martin Prosperity Institute at the University of Toronto has developed a methodology to rank international cities based on Richard Florida's three Ts of economic development – Technology, Talent and Tolerance plus "Quality of Place". Toronto ranks a disappointing 26 out of 61 global cities. Our high points are public education (but we are not spending enough) the percentage of knowledge workers (we're the highest in North America), tolerance and safety (we're through the roof). We get an A for heritage properties (6,000 sites).

But in the highly competitive world of global cities, it is our lack of bike paths, our aging infrastructure, inadequate public transit, lackluster performance on patents and venture capital, and weak financial

support for smaller non-profits that pulled us down from the top ten to the upper middle. Basically this study says we are a great place to live, to create, to work and to study BUT weakness in innovation can pose problems for the future.

Well what's heritage got to do with it? It turns out, quite a lot!

For one thing, creative people who start new businesses prefer to work in old buildings. They cluster in places like the Distillery District, 401 Richmond, 80 Spadina and in The Centre for Social Innovation founded about 10 years ago.

Here is the CSI Annex location at Bathurst and Bloor.



It's an incubator model. The 500 people working in the three Toronto CSI buildings use shared work spaces, hot desks, and thrive on the free flow of ideas to create new ideas.



According to Tonya Surman, CSI's CEO, old buildings work for new ideas because people can relax in them and be authentic.



“If you’re not authentic,” she says, “you can’t create new ideas” And then she said “The Voices of History are in the walls”.

The Voices of History in the walls is not something you can patent -- but it’s an idea you can export. So when a New York investor decided to redevelop the historic Starrett-Lehigh building on the Hudson River –



one of the largest commercial spaces in Manhattan -- he made a pilgrimage to CSI in Toronto to recruit CSI to operate 24,000 square feet of his building as an incubator for social entrepreneurs. In just a few months – CSI has attracted more than 130 New York social entrepreneurs to its unique eco-friendly space.

I heard a similar story from the inspired coordinators of OCADU's student gallery.



It's an old building, not very distinguished, but the art looks great and the students love it. Art and design students are potential entrepreneurs – a remarkable percentage of them end up starting their own businesses.



“There’s a difference in energy. Students respond more to natural materials and natural light. They feel like they are connected to artistic heritage. It’s romantic”.

The building, located beside a beautiful parking lot



will soon be torn down to make way for a large condo development.

It's the opposite of Joni Mitchell's song. It's not a significant building but it's one of thousands such as depicted in "Full Frontal TO" (one of the nominees tonite) that make our city so very human and hospitable to new ideas. Prior to OCADU this building was home to Manifesto, the artist collective that came up with the great innovation – the billboard tax.

This notion that new ideas need old buildings was famously expressed in 1961 by Jane Jacobs in her “Death and Life of Great American Cities”. Her thinking was that people with new ideas couldn’t afford new buildings – so inevitably you needed affordable old buildings for people to take risks on starting new businesses based on new ideas. She firmly believed that there needs to be a balance of old buildings, refurbished buildings and new buildings to ensure a diversity of economic activity and therefore diversity of people too.

New ideas today have to do with the economics of co-working, green design, comfortable furniture and good coffee. They also have to do with public transit and bicycles – 99% of CSI tenants do not drive cars to work. There’s the link between heritage and innovation that goes back to Jane Jacobs.

The heritage movement really should focus on furniture as well as the built form; I was really delighted that Mars (the innovation space located in an old hospital building) displays the desk of Frederick Banting who won the Nobel Prize for discovering insulin.



Recently, heritage furniture was the subject of a public apology by our Mayor (which surely demonstrates the importance of furniture). Our City Hall, which is a masterpiece of design that transformed Toronto to become what we are becoming, was furnished with modernist chairs, benches and desks including 30 chairs by the late Warren Platner in the member's lounge.



Photo by Huffington Post.

The photo shows replicas and Councillor Minnan-Wong on an ordinary chair. These chairs lasted for a remarkable 50 years. Someone (who the Mayor has said is “no longer here”) replaced the worn chairs with replicas at a cost of \$2,500 each, which is said to have been cheaper than repairing them. It is important to preserve not just our heritage buildings, but also the furnishings – which are very much part of the story of innovation – the interior spaces where people work and come

up with ideas on how, for example, Toronto became the City that Works.

Museums are most often the repositories for the contents of older buildings when their use has changed. And it always looks very sad. I'm sure you will agree that it is much more exciting to experience the furniture in the actual space for which it was designed than to see it isolated in a gallery. Banting's desk is thrilling in the context of a 21st century place of innovation like Mars.



And it's important to experience our City Hall as the transformative space it was originally designed to be. It's time to preserve the contents of our heritage buildings – including our modern heritage.

One of the most exciting aspects of the heritage world today is its transformation from a top down to a grass roots approach. Used to be that the only heritage worth preserving was the distinguished building with European (preferably English) stylistic qualities. Today Heritage Toronto recognizes that it is the human stories that define heritage and that one person's island of calm is another person's memory of discrimination and exclusion. The launch of Heritage Toronto's mapping website gives everybody a chance to say what in the city is meaningful to them. This is especially important in Toronto, the world's most multi-cultural city, where meanings of place and space are ever-changing.

Another way that old buildings nurture new ideas and new communities is to accept some of the innovative uses the public invents for them.



London's South Bank Centre, a masterpiece of post-war design, turned out to be a great place for skateboarders for the past 3 decades. Jude Kelly, the CEO, has committed to maintaining a space for skateboarders but moving it about 100 yards from its current location as part of the refurbishment and expansion of the 1950s building on the grounds that everyone should feel part of this cultural centre – and that arts institutions should validate the culture of all social groups.

Engaging the cultures of our diverse society is a challenge for museums and heritage sites. How many of us have designed public spaces specifically to discourage skate boarders and other subcultures that we just don't understand? And then we wonder why young people don't voluntarily participate in our cultural institutions.

Or we ignore the places that matter to others because the story has been erased. For example, there is a big conversation happening about the future of the area around Honest Eds.



In the 1850s, that area was home to about 5,000 escaped slaves who could no longer be safe in northern US states because of the fugitive slave law. A hundred years later, a house nearby on the North side of Lennox Street was home to Contrast magazine, one of Canada's first publications dedicated to the culture and politics of African Canadians. When we ignore this heritage, we are sending a message of exclusion to talented people who have so much to contribute to innovation. A plaque is not enough at this point.

The Museum and heritage communities all over the world are starting to step up to these issues of exclusion and inclusion.



In Johannesburg we worked with the Development Agency to transform the former historic Fort Prison (which incarcerated Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela at different times) into “Constitution Hill”, a place that both celebrates the new South African Constitution and commemorates the suffering that occurred there as a result of colonialism and apartheid.



This slide shows how an exhibition in one of the cells, designed by former prisoners working with a professional evokes memory and hope.

Here in Toronto, we have a similarly innovative opportunity with Campbell House.



Moved to the corner of Queen West and University in 1972, the home of the first chief Justice of Upper Canada is now in the heart of what's known as the Justice Precinct. We are helping the Advocates Society to transform the House into a "Justice Museum" which will interrogate the meaning of justice in our society and address such issues as the wrongfully convicted. One of the goals of the Advocates Society is to encourage young people to take up careers in the law and to educate all of us our rights and responsibilities in Canadian law. At last a place to

tell the Toronto stories of Hurricane Carter story and the more recent story of Adam Nobody.

Museums and heritage places are what I call “cultural accelerators”. By bringing together objects from different historical eras, from disparate places and people they speed up our sense of time and place and stimulate our minds to create new meaning and innovative ideas.

The Internet functions in quite the opposite way – guiding us sequentially from one idea to the next; reinforcing our views and values rather than challenging them.

Juxtapositions of old, not so old and new in our neighbourhoods can be surprising, disturbing and thought provoking. Sameness is the enemy of innovation. Diversity is its best friend!



The success of Tate Modern in London, with whom we worked for a decade on visitor research, demonstrates the power of heritage space to stimulate innovation. A decommissioned power plant is a home for modern and contemporary art. Nothing new. Our Powerplant in Toronto was founded decades before. The new idea has to do with scale and multi-disciplinarity – especially the former turbine hall, which is used for huge art commissions like this “Sun” slide by Olafur Eliasson.



And yes those are visitors lying on the cement floor. At this scale visitors become actors. The success of the Turbine Hall stimulated Paris to renovate two historic buildings to display gigantic works of art, The Grand Palais and Cent Quatre the former City mortuary.



New York recently restored the 52nd Street Armoury to present enormous works tht combine visual art and performance. This has been a client of ours. Glasgow has the Tramway (a refurbished streetcar shed). Toronto lacks this important heritage building type for large scale art innovation space.

Two years ago, we were challenged by the 37-year old Mayor of Florence Italy to find a new use for a Baroque building in the City's historic centre. San Firenze had been used by the courts for the past 200

years and now they were in the process of moving to new buildings elsewhere. The ground rule –it must not be a museum.



There are already hundreds of them in Florence. We talked to people, especially young people, and students worked with a multi-disciplinary team including architect Italo Rota and developed an innovative use – a centre for Science, Art and New Technology. It would provide leasable space for universities that want to establish programs in digital technology in this beautiful Renaissance city. In the ground floor oratory, which had been used as the main courtroom, there would be a “maker space” and technology labs. We found interest from universities in China and India. The local community loved the idea. . . They’re still waiting for the courts to move.

That reminds me . . . In Toronto, we’re still waiting for the courts to move out of old city hall so we can have a museum that tells the Toronto stories and becomes a cultural accelerator for creative place making and innovative city building. The most multi-cultural city in the world needs this place to help us recover the past that has been erased so that we can continue city-building together.

Besides – if we don't have a city museum, what will become of this?

