

RECONCILIATION THROUGH PLACEMAKING

By Perry Stein, Jillian Bracken, and Andrew Malcolm



“The Indigenization of public spaces is a strength-based process that relies on empowered Indigenous voices and seeks to reaffirm the deep history of Indigenous landscapes”

Processes around truth and reconciliation in Canada are challenging planners and the multidisciplinary colleagues we work with to conceptualize the decolonization, Indigenization, and reconciliation of urban spaces. Four ongoing initiatives at the City of Lethbridge embed both reconciliation and placemaking philosophies into the public realm. These initiatives – each of which is at a different stage of planning, design, or implementation – offer approaches to reconciliation that may be useful for smaller cities where resources are often limited.

Les efforts de vérité et de réconciliation au Canada mettent les urbanistes et leurs collègues multidisciplinaires au défi de conceptualiser la décolonisation, l’autochtonisation et la réconciliation des espaces urbains. Quatre initiatives en cours à la ville de Lethbridge intègrent des principes de réconciliation et de création de lieux au sein du domaine public. Ces projets, chacun à un stade différent d’élaboration, de conception ou de mise en œuvre, proposent des approches de réconciliation susceptibles de se révéler utiles pour les petites localités disposant souvent de ressources limitées.

The Indigenization of public spaces is a strength-based process that relies on empowered Indigenous voices and seeks to reaffirm the deep history of Indigenous landscapes. Indigenization can also take the form of embedding traditional knowledge, values, and protocols within engagement, planning, design, and decision-making.

Placemaking is both a framework and an approach that strives to improve, reimagine, and reinvent public spaces by facilitating creative patterns of use while paying particular attention to the physical, cultural, and social identities that define a place and support its ongoing evolution. Understood in that way, placemaking has the potential to be used as a tool to Indigenize public spaces to:

- Facilitate Indigenous and non-Indigenous relationship-building (including through education).
- Create stronger attachments between residents and spaces.
- (Re)define or (re)activate public spaces to ensure all people feel safe and welcome.
- Promote opportunities for physical, cultural, social, and economic wellness.

Placemaking is also an opportunity to conceptualize reconciliation differently, by physically reflecting Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Calls to Action and National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (National Inquiry) Calls for Justice in the public realm. This includes calls to protect and recognize Indigenous languages and cultures, improve education for non-Indigenous peoples, commemorate victims and survivors of genocide, and create space as well as time for relationship-building.¹

Four initiatives in Lethbridge offer a glimpse about how to embed reconciliation and placemaking philosophies into the public realm. Individually, each offers an innovative approach useful for smaller cities where resources are often limited. Collectively, they suggest new possibilities to rethink colonial spaces, narratives, and processes, as well as the subsequent Indigenization of the same.

FACILITY LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project incorporates Indigenous acknowledgements at various public facilities. The intent is that site-specific “places” will emerge that seek to dually acknowledge territory and bring people together through the showcasing of Indigenous languages and cultures (i.e., landscape design, murals, and wayfinding). This approach is currently being piloted at City Hall, where the Siksikaititapi flag will be permanently flown, and at a new fire station, where murals by Blackfoot artists Hali Heavy Shield and Rudy Black Plume will be installed beside a new regional pathway system that incorporates culturally significant plants.





Utility box wrapping in Galt Gardens, with a work entitled "Keystone Species of the Prairie" by Kainai artist Rudy Black Plume.

GALT GARDENS INDIGENOUS LANDSCAPE DESIGN

Galt Gardens holds a complicated place within the collective imagination of Lethbridge residents. Many view it as a downtown park that supports large events while others see it as a source of less than desirable social interactions (often overlaid with racial tensions) between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. To ensure all park users feel safe and welcome, this project attempts to transform the energy of the space through the use of culturally significant plants as well as by including stories about Blackfoot culture. To do so, Blackfoot artist Marjie Crop Eared Wolf has been hired to liaise between Kainai Elders and a landscape designer to create a new conceptual design for the space. The conceptual design is complete and capital funding for implementation is currently being secured.

INDIGENOUS PLACEMAKING STRATEGY

Numerous TRC and National Inquiry Calls push for greater acknowledgment, representation, and protection of Indigenous languages and cultures. The strategy will "audit" the names of public spaces to ensure they align with the values of truth, reconciliation, and inclusion. It will also generate a list of placemaking opportunities where future investments can be made. This work will be principally led by Siksikaitapi representatives (Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and youth) and will build upon recent heritage planning projects where the City has hired Blackfoot Confederacy First Nations to lead the work, rather than hiring non-Indigenous consultants. A list of placemaking and renaming recommendations is expected in early 2022 with placemaking investments planned for 2022–2025.

INDIGENOUS LEGACY COMMEMORATION PROJECT (ENGAGEMENT PHASE)

This project responds to TRC and National Inquiry Calls for public commemoration of victims, survivors, and families. Led by Blackfoot artist Hali Heavy Shield, the project will use placemaking as a framework for engaging the community on what public commemoration should look like. This approach will ensure that opportunities for wellness, relationship building, public education, and programming are considered and integrated into final recommendations. This project also Indigenizes project management processes by using Blackfoot cultural values as a framework to evaluate consultant proposals and to design engagement methodologies. Community engagement is set to begin in the Fall of 2021, with findings presented early in 2022.

These four on-going City of Lethbridge projects use placemaking as a theoretical and hands-on tool to show how reconciliation can be reflected within public spaces. They deliver on broader reconciliatory Calls identified by the TRC and National Inquiry to acknowledge, reflect, and protect Indigenous language and culture. Examples like these constitute pathways for education and relationship-building between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. ■

Perry Stein is the Indigenous Relations Advisor for the City of Lethbridge.

His background includes land use planning, community engagement, and Indigenous relations in urban, regional, and Indigenous communities across western Canada.

Jillian Bracken is the Community Arts and Culture Manager for the City of Lethbridge where she brings experience as a non-profit arts administrator and volunteer coordinator.

Andrew Malcolm RPP, MCIP is the Urban Revitalization Manager for the City of Lethbridge. With a background in redevelopment, economic development, and urban place management, he applies placemaking as a tool to strengthen connections between places, experiences, and people.

¹ See Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action 43, 47, 62(i) and 82, and National Inquiry Calls for Justice, 1.2, 2.1, 2.3, 2.7, 11.1, 15.2 and 15.7.