

How do you curate a museum of human rights?

The much ballyhooed Canadian one opens in Winnipeg this weekend, amid boycotts and noses out of joint across the land. Does all the protest mean it falls short in an impossible task? Or that it may actually be the brave and pioneering experiment intended?



DEBRA BLACK / TORONTO STAR

Bridge to the Antoine Predock-designed Canadian Museum of Human Rights at Winnipeg's Forks, an area where the Red and Assiniboine rivers meet that was once home to Métis and Peguis First Nation.

By: Debra Black Immigration Reporter, Published on Sat Sep 20 2014

“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.” — UN Declaration of Human Rights.

WINNIPEG—It is a Herculean task — the building of a museum, especially one that is dedicated to an idea such as the Canadian Museum for Human Rights.

From the very moment it was conceived by the late media mogul Izzy Asper, the idea of a Canadian Museum for Human Rights has been a lightning rod for discussion and criticism.

Human rights advocates, legal experts, academics and communities as diverse as Ukrainian Canadians, the First Nations, the Métis, Japanese and Chinese Canadians have all weighed in, and others who have had their human rights violated here or abroad.

The Manitoba Métis Federation boycotted the opening ceremonies and the museum because of what they called “censorship.”

The museum announced Thursday that the indigenous band A Tribe Called Red was pulling out of its planned appearance at a Saturday concert, “over concern around the way Indigenous issues are presented.”

MORE AT THESTAR.COM: [Museum timeline](#)

Ever since its inception the real challenge has been just how does one curate a museum that deals with such an amorphous idea as human rights?

Even Canadian and international human rights experts have differing ideas on how to frame the narrative of a human rights museum and what to include.

One cautioned the museum could be “human rights lite” while another disputed the whole notion of a such museum in Canada.

According to the CEO of the museum, Stuart Murray, there was a very clear vision and mandate.

The Canadian Museum of Human Rights was never intended as a memorial museum, said Murray, nor was it intended as a genocide museum.

Its mission, he said, is to educate and spark a “new generation of human rights defenders.”

The museum hopes to take people on a journey that may change their perspective and make them think about their own actions.

Across the river from where Louis Riel, the Métis leader who founded Manitoba, lies buried, the Canadian Museum for Human Rights sits at the mouth of what is known as the Forks in Winnipeg — the spot where the Assiniboine and Red rivers meet. It was once the home of the Métis and Peguis First Nation. Any sign of their proud nations is long gone to the casual observer.

But within the halls of the Antoine Predock’s geometrically designed building of Manitoba limestone, German glass and Spanish alabaster, there is plenty to find that is inspirational. Digital and cinematic interactive experiences abound. The museum was designed with the digital generation in mind, said Corey Timpson, director of exhibitions and digital media. Interactive games, digital information stations, digital screens, video way stations and phone apps are part of the experience.

The pressure to have the museum ready for opening weekend and previews has been intense. A few days before the Friday’s opening ceremonies, many exhibits were were still under construction, and workers were busy tinkering with those in place. . The museum opens to the public Sept. 27.

The museum’s 11 galleries are designed thematically. In the first gallery called “What are Human Rights?” a visitor finds an inspirational timeline that relates the ideas of great thinkers, philosophers and human rights activists over the ages, including Buddha, Jesus, John Locke, Karl Marx, Gandhi, Raphael Lemkin (a Polish lawyer who coined the phrase genocide), Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Gloria Steinem, Canada’s Louise Arbour and Romeo Dallaire.

There are also darker stories from Canada and around the world. One gallery analyzes the Holocaust and uses it as framework to discuss, in another gallery, genocide. Subject matter includes the five genocides recognized by Canada, which include the Holocaust, the Holodomor (the Ukrainian famine), the Armenian genocide, the Rwandan genocide and the Bosnian ethnic cleansing.

Many other atrocities and injustices are explored, including the story of missing and murdered indigenous women across Canada and the residential school policy.

Not forgotten is the Canadian who wrote the first draft of the UN Declaration of Human Rights — John Peters Humphrey.

The Canadian Journeys Gallery includes the stories of the internment of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War, plus exhibits on disabilities from Ryerson University, on the Chinese head tax, the Underground Railroad, and the Winnipeg General Strike.

The Canadian gallery also tells the story of the Komagata Maru. In 1914, several hundred Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus came to Vancouver on a steamship, seeking entry to Canada. Most of them were British subjects, but only 24 passengers were allowed to stay.

A separate Indigenous Perspectives Gallery includes a circular movie about First Nations concepts of rights and responsibilities to each other and the land.

So how does one build a museum that hopes to change the world — to create a new generation of human rights defenders? “The curatorial aspect is very complex,” admits Gail Lord, head of Lord Cultural Resources, the firm that developed a master plan for the Canadian Museum of Human Rights and helped run cross-Canada consultations on the content of the museum in 19 cities.

“The museum falls into a category called an idea museum,” said Lord. “Curating an idea museum is not the same as curating an object or art museum . . . It’s the ideas that drag you forward.”

And therein lies the problem. Everyone had or has a different idea of what should be in the museum — academics, human rights experts, historians, interested communities, stakeholders. “I think there were a lot of expectations among different regional and ethnic groups that they wanted to have their stories given a lot of space,” said Lord.

“Our story has never been told properly,” said Chief Glen Hudson of the Peguis First Nation. “When you have human rights atrocities like you’ve had in our history, they need to open up and hear the truth and allow for reconciliation . . . It’s shameful that there is this human rights museum and we’re not able to tell our stories.”

“The vision of Israel Asper was a great one — of bringing the human rights issues forward and the creation of the museum. But certainly those who are organizing and doing all the planning have a lot to learn in respecting human rights and allowing stories being told without being censored.”

Adds Ghislain Picard, interim national chief for the Assembly of First Nations: “Obviously there are still concerns to us in limiting how the stories are presented or reflected, in terms of what happened to our peoples doesn’t portray the whole truth as we see it.”

The Manitoba Métis Federation, which represents about 120,000 Métis province-wide, says it will boycott the museum because of a dust-up over the opening ceremonies. “They haven’t told us if the Métis people’s story will be in the museum,” said David Chartrand, president of the federation. “Our cabinet met in late August and unanimously decided we would not go to the opening ceremonies or attend the museum.”

They weren’t alone in their discontent. Some of the most vocal criticism came from the Ukrainian community, who were concerned about the way the Holodomor of 1932-33 would be treated. And how the presentation would compare to the treatment of the Holocaust. It was a case of what some academics have described as competing victimhoods. “What happened is that the temperature around the Ukrainian-

Jewish conflict rose to such a degree that the museum started to hunker down,” said Michael Marrus, professor emeritus of Holocaust Studies at University of Toronto.

Murray’s response to the concerns and criticism is careful and controlled. He is as adept as head of the museum as he was a politician and one-time head of the Manitoba Progressive Conservative Party. He challenges those who fear their stories haven’t been told correctly to come to the museum and see for themselves.

Late Thursday, in a statement, the museum issued a public invitation to members of A Tribe Called Red “to tour the CMHR at their convenience to experience for themselves the full breadth of exhibit content dedicated to Indigenous perspectives and issues.”

Communities and individuals “are very, very passionate about their issue on human rights,” said Murray. “This museum is the only museum in the world that looks at the broad perspective of human rights. Yet it’s distinctly Canadian. We have reached out to the Canadian community through public engagement and through numerous meetings to make sure when we tell a story that it is factually and foundationally correct. But I think one of the challenges with this start-up project as I said: Nobody sent us a manual and said here’s how to build a museum.”

Adds Jodi Giesbrecht, manager of research at the CMHR: “The first thing you want to say is come see the museum and see what we’ve done. There are so many stories we could tell. We are telling hundreds. There’s always more we can do and we know that. We don’t want our galleries to turn into spaces of conflict over how much square footage or how much space is devoted to this or that story.”

The museum journey is a “narrative of hope,” said Giesbrecht. “I think one of the common themes is common humanity — trying to get visitors to understand the connections between the different stories. So even when they’re going through the Holocaust museum there are certain ideas that connect to the stories of other galleries.”

But is that enough to hold a museum for human rights together? “Frankly, there is a concern that this will be human rights lite,” Marrus told the Star. Others like Harvard law professor and historian of human rights Samuel Moyn worry that the original intent of the UN Declaration of Human Rights has been lost in the modern era.

His views, he says, are controversial. It’s important to remember that the UN Declaration of Human Rights is not about atrocities so much as it is a charter of how a state should act — in a sense creating a new social contract. “The declaration is not about atrocity,” he said. “It’s about helping us redefine our own citizenship.” And that view should shape a human rights museum, he believes.

For Doris Bergen, professor of history and chair of Holocaust Studies at University of Toronto a human rights museum should not be about providing answers. “It’s about stimulating people to think and ask questions.” She, too, questions the amorphous nature of a museum for human rights. “What is human rights? It’s completely different now from the way we used the phrase decades ago.”

“It’s an incredibly ambitious project,” said Dominique Clement, an associate professor of sociology at the University of Alberta. “If you’re a war museum, a civilization, science museum, you have a mandate. With human rights, what’s your focus? Everything.”

In the end, “you can’t deal with every human rights violation” in a museum such as this, said William Schabas, a Canadian professor of law, specializing in human rights at Middlesex University, England and author of a three-volume book about the UN Declaration of Human Rights.

“One of the challenges of the museum you can look at it like the Royal Ontario Museum where you’re studying dinosaur bones or a living institution confronting contemporary challenges. That means it should be painful a bit. One way or another people are going to be upset. It’s a good thing people walk out troubled and angered about certain things. Maybe if it does that it will serve its purpose.”

But he remains troubled by the idea of a human rights museum in Canada. “Canada’s profile over human rights has changed over the decade since it was conceived,” he said. “Since that time Canada has retreated into the darkness at the international level. When you have a museum like this which is ultimately under the government of Canada there are problems.”

But Murray and others disagree. “We want to engage people in a conversation,” said Murray. “But if they think we have a partisan tip or bent, that’s not what we’re about. We’re about bringing balance.”