



DECOLONISING THE PUBLIC REALM

Reconciliation requires a rethinking of
business-as-usual, both personal and civic

BY LORRAINE JOHNSTON



I spent two and a half hours in the Etobicoke Civic Centre and didn't notice the official coat of arms on the wall above my head. In that light-filled, wood-paneled, modernist room — the former council chamber for the City of Etobicoke, now the seat of community engagement — there are just a few pieces of formal decoration: a portrait of the Queen, a photo wall of Etobicoke luminaries, and the coat of arms. On the left side of the coat of arms is a figure representing an Indigenous man. He is kneeling on one knee, and his right arm holds a bow. Underneath him is the word "Tradition." On the right side of the coat of arms is a figure representing the colonial settler Étienne Brûlé. He is kneeling on one knee, and his left arm holds a musket. Underneath him is the word "Progress."

This coat of arms was adopted through a municipal bylaw passed by Etobicoke City Council in July 1977. Using the arcane but revealing language of heraldic convention, the bylaw describes the Étienne Brûlé figure as being "on the sinister side" — that is, sinister as Latin for left (the viewer's right). The musket is held "in the sinister hand." The word progress is, likewise, on

the "sinister" side. Indeed, even the heraldic term used for position carries menace.

The message of Indigenous "Tradition" and colonial "Progress" is deeply ingrained in Canadian institutions but, arguably, it is rarely as visibly declarative — even celebrated — as it is in this official monument to colonialism.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's final report is silent on the issue of removing such symbolic representations — whether they are monuments, coats of arms, or plaques — but Call to Action #82 does address public monuments of a different sort, calling for the installation of "a publicly accessible, highly visible, Resi-

dential Schools Monument in each capital city to honour Survivors and all the children who were lost to their families and communities."

Toronto Council Fire Native Cultural Centre, which has been delivering cultural and social services to the Indigenous community of Toronto since 1976, is leading the response to Call to Action #82 in Toronto, through the Indian Residential School Survivors (IRSS) Legacy project, and is creating a structure in Nathan Phillips Square called the Restoration of Identity. The centrepiece is a ten-ton turtle sculpture, symbolic of Mother Earth, designed and carved out of Indiana

grey limestone by Anishinaabe artist and stone-mason Solomon King of Studio Niiwin-Stone Artisan Studios.

The structure is rich in symbolism. The 13 tiles on top of the turtle shell represent the 13 moons of the Indigenous lunar calendar, and include the names of the eleven First Nations of this region and the Inuit and Métis. The turtle shell is bordered by 28 tiles representing the number of days between the moons. With its powerful legs, clawed feet, and open mouth, the turtle is climbing over a boulder structure that includes the names of Ontario's 13 residential schools.

Snapping turtles can't help but look prehistoric and fierce, and in King's sculpture these attributes are in service of a message of resilience: the turtle's stance is one of strength, endurance, and recovery.

This theme is carried through all elements of the landscaped garden in which the sculpture stands. Designed to be a teaching, learning, sharing, and healing space, the landscape will include a voyageur canoe, teaching lodge, amphitheatre, three sisters sculpture, inukshuk, benches, gathering area, and native plants such as sweet grass. It will be a space, accord-

ing to Toronto Council Fire, “for cultural events and gatherings, including full moon ceremonies, National Indigenous Day celebrations, and specialized citizenship ceremonies,” with community programming “inclusive to all peoples that make up the diversity of Toronto.”

For Solomon King, who, along with designing the turtle sculpture, worked collectively with a team led by the Toronto Council Fire to design the space, the goal is to engage people: “I want the people who come to this space to think about and reflect on the history of residential schools. I want to get a dialogue going. I hope people will enjoy the beauty of the sculpture, and then think about why it’s there.” In other words, as Toronto Council Fire Board Designate Andrea Chrisjohn says, “it’s a living thing.”

Construction of the Restoration of Identity project is slated to begin in 2020, but a model of the turtle spent three days at Nathan Phillips Square in October 2018 as part of an IRSS Legacy celebration and unveiling. The event was, for me, cultural competency training in action. There were more than a dozen teepees, each hosting a different Indigenous organization, and visitors were invited to enter, talk, learn, and build relationships. And visible from the entrance to each teepee, in a position of prominence, a reminder, a presence, an assertion, a declaration: the turtle, rising up from the boulders, front and centre at City Hall.

While the legacy structure is rich in symbolism, the process of getting that ten-ton turtle into Nathan Phillips Square goes far beyond symbol. It is an act of making reconciliation visible, and everything about this process of recon-

ciliation — verb not noun — requires a rethinking of business-as-usual, both personal and civic.

I experienced the personal side of beginning to rethink reconciliation when I approached Toronto Council Fire a year and a half ago to learn more about the Restoration of Identity project, and was invited by Andrea Chrisjohn, the dynamic force leading the project, to attend a planning meeting. As I sat around the table, welcomed but self-conscious about speaking up, we watched a video about the project. Feeling moved and inspired by the video’s vision, I expressed my desire “to help.” My intentions might have been good, but I was missing the point, and I felt it in my gut. For non-Indigenous Canadians such as myself, is reconciliation about helping?

My discomfort forced me to acknowledge the simple and inherent all-wrongness of “I want to help you create a legacy structure.” A truly transformed relationship in the spirit of reconciliation? “I am a part of why this legacy structure is necessary and I want to be a part of restitution.”

I returned to the Etobicoke Civic Centre in late November for a public consultation the City was hosting — a chance to learn about proposed changes to the urban design policies of the Official Plan and, specifically, the section of the Official Plan that deals with the public realm. What better place for the City to address reconciliation and to promote and engage in more projects like the Restoration of Identity, I thought, than in its public realm policies?

As I looked at the slides projected onto the screen (a screen suspended on the wall, to the sinister side of that Etobicoke

coat of arms), I watched image after image illustrating good ideas about walkability, pedestrian safety, sunlight, tree canopy, parks, laneways...and a complete silence on anything related to how public realm policies might advance the goals of reconciliation.

During the question period, I asked about this and was told that reconciliation is addressed in the “heritage” section of the revisions to the Official Plan. However, if you look there, what you’ll find are references to archaeology and artifacts: nothing about reconciliation as a living, active process, nothing about Indigenous presence and visibility informing the public realm or defining the identity and physical character of the city. There are more words in this section of the draft Official Plan about protecting the heritage view of the Etobicoke Civic Centre’s clock tower from the intersection of Highway 427 and the off-ramp of Burnhamthorpe Road than there are about how the imperative of reconciliation might shape, inform and influence the public realm or enhance community and belonging.

Call to Action #82 is about a structure in a place — in the case of Toronto, a ten-ton turtle and landscaped garden in Nathan Phillips Square that will create a space for reconciliation at the symbolic heart of civic governance, City Hall. But as the Etobicoke coat of arms, still hanging on the wall, and the proposed changes to the Official Plan make clear, the city’s path to reconciliation will require the transformation of all structures in place. †

*artist rendering courtesy
Toronto Council Fire Native Cultural Centre*



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