

ĆƏSNAʔƏM, THE CITY BEFORE THE CITY

A Conversation

LEONA SPARROW, JORDAN WILSON,
AND SUSAN ROWLEY

INTRODUCTION

OPENED IN JANUARY 2015, *ćəsnaʔəm, the city before the city* is a series of three exhibitions created by the Musqueam Indian Band, the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia (MOA), the Museum of Vancouver (MOV), and the University of Waterloo. Through the medium of *ćəsnaʔəm*, an ancient Musqueam village and cemetery, these exhibitions work to right history by enabling Musqueam to share their history in their own words. Through gentle unsettling and language shifts, visitors are encouraged to reflect critically on received histories and the erasure of Indigenous presence. The exhibitions demonstrate Musqueam people's connection to their traditional territory, and how this community, enveloped by Greater Vancouver, continues the ways of their ancestors.

Leona Sparrow, Jordan Wilson, and Susan Rowley were part of the curatorial team for *ćəsnaʔəm, the city before the city*. This team also included Viviane Gosselin (MOV), Susan Roy (University of Waterloo), Jason Woolman (Musqueam), and Larissa Grant (Musqueam). The Musqueam Advisory Group for the exhibition project included Larry Grant, Mary Roberts, Wendy Grant-John, Howard E. Grant, Howard J. Grant, and Johnny Louis.

What follows is an excerpt of a longer conversation among Leona, Jordan, and Sue when we met to discuss the exhibition process and its impacts, with a particular focus on documenting Leona's perspectives on working with museums. Leona Sparrow is director of treaty, lands, and resources for the Musqueam Indian Band, the Musqueam liaison for UBC and MOA, and has worked for over forty years with museums to help these institutions reflect on their practices and responsibilities to

Musqueam and Indigenous peoples in general. She has always stressed the importance of relationships and process over product or institutional deadlines. Jordan Wilson is a Musqueam Indian Band member and emerging curator. Susan Rowley is a curator at the Museum of Anthropology and an associate professor of anthropology at UBC. This conversation took place on 17 October 2017.

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Sue Rowley (SR): It's really interesting to me because there's so much work that you've done for museums and things like that, I'm just wondering, what do you see is the role for museums in changing dialogues? Or, you've put a lot of effort into museums. Why have you chosen to put that effort into museums? What role do you see them playing?

Leona Sparrow (LS): It's not putting my energy into museums, it's putting my energy into doing things the right way for the Musqueam people and for the belongings that come from the Musqueam people. It's to make sure that's all looked after in a good way. If it means informing museum folks about alternative ways to think and to do things, then I guess that's the right way to do it. Any questions?

SR: I have lots of questions because I think that it comes back to *c'əsnaʔəm*, because you can talk to museums and help museums to learn to do things in a different way. But for *c'əsnaʔəm*, what was the reason you saw that exhibition as being necessary? You could just say, "Okay, the museums have changed their practice of how they're caring for these belongings." Or they could return the belongings. There's lots of other options, but you chose to put a huge amount of effort and time into doing these exhibitions.

LS: The *c'əsnaʔəm* exhibitions were really important ... Well, it's like a coming together of forces. You had the excavation, the stopped excavation, the long vigil staged by community members. The semi-responsiveness of the province, semi-responsiveness by me by standing aside and letting discussions between the band and the city and the developer take place without interference from the province. Those were all positive things.

Then to help inform the community that the Museum of Vancouver had this vast collection of belongings that had been taken from *c'əsnaʔəm* incited them, incited the community. They were agitated. Why does that museum have all of those things? Why don't we know that? Why haven't

they told us? That was really an important concept to wrap the mind around, and the band's chief and council were also very agitated. They wanted to see something educational come out of this whole conflict. The jockeying back and forth between Musqueam, the city, the province, developers. They wanted to see something come out that was positive.

I don't really know the moment or the exact timing of how it evolved, but it became really important for the items, belongings that were at the Museum of Vancouver, to become visible. How do you do that when you don't really have a good working relationship with that museum?

There had previously been an ongoing effort by the Museum of Vancouver to get Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh to work together on an exhibition, and whatever concept they came up with would not work. They tried several different ways to get the three communities together. Only one worked and that was a small basketry exhibition. But beyond that, it just would not gel. The necessary preliminary consultation/collaboration did not take place.

This concept of getting the *čəsnaʔəm* pieces selected, viewed, on display was easy because *čəsnaʔəm* is exclusively Musqueam. No other First Nation had to be involved in creating the vision of what this exhibition could look like. It was just Musqueam. Then, again, I was not going to be responsible, or had no desire to be the only person involved in doing this. This was a community effort for the vigil [organized to protest the destruction of *čəsnaʔəm*] and it was a community effort to create the exhibition out of all the beautiful belongings held at the Museum of Vancouver. That was a work in progress too, just to make all of that happen. And because we had Jordan [Wilson] and Sue Rowley at the Museum of Anthropology who are good friends, co-workers, why not do a three-way exhibition? Because we needed your help here at Musqueam as well, and we could help you at the Museum of Anthropology, and I think the Museum of Vancouver kind of fits somewhere in the middle.

From the Musqueam point of view, it was a real community effort. Community involvement, community engagement, and it was an extremely successful one.

Jordan Wilson (JW): In what ways was it successful from your perspective?

LS: Public education in Musqueam. Public education for the city at large. Public education for other communities, other First Nations communities, on how you can go about doing things, how to change

things, and an example for museums of how to work with and engage with First Nations communities in a good way, in a positive way, and the presentations of each of the three exhibitions, they were totally different but very engaging for all levels of society, really.

SR: Along with the successes, there were some challenges probably as well?

LS: Of course there were challenges. Many of them. One of the challenges we had really was access to the Museum of Vancouver so that we could actually handle the collections rather than just *look at* the collections. Determine for the community's own benefit, which of the belongings were actually suitable for display. To have that discussion internally and try and explain it externally to the museum people that you can't display this piece because it has different characteristics that are not for the public. These items are strictly for Musqueam and should not be seen or touched by other people. I think that was a difficult concept for the museum to wrap its mind around.

I don't know ... what else? I can't remember. You kind of put the challenges away and just look for the good. There was change over at the Museum of Vancouver. Again, it was about taking folks at the Museum of Vancouver who were unfamiliar with working with First Nations and trying to explain to them this is a good way to do things, what you're suggesting is not a good way, so can we switch over to the way we're suggesting and work with that? Build on it? Getting the pieces together for all three displays was kind of challenging too because each institution had its own mode of operating. I think the end result is fine. It showed the different views of the three institutions, but at the same time Musqueam people were sometimes, at times, scratching their heads thinking, "How can we make this evolve in that exhibition? What is it going to take to get there, and what from this exhibition maybe belongs in that exhibition, and how do we make that happen in a good way so everybody is happy and they see the positive results?"

Getting folks, at the Museum of Vancouver, to realize that working at Musqueam is a little different than working at the museum. We had to take some of our people from Musqueam down to the Museum of Vancouver and talk about setting up the displays, the exhibition, and how particular items could be displayed and getting over whatever fears the museum had. I don't know what they were really, and saying, "It's okay, we can do this and we can make it happen positively." Then some

of the technicians that were brought in were fabulous, but they took time in creating the background for the exhibition, like how to mount belongings, how to display them properly, the lighting, etc. It was all conversational. It took many, many conversations of reiterating things before everybody was happy.

SR: I think that was, for me, one of the big things with working on that exhibition was the fact that everything is a conversation. It's not just the content. It's all of the exhibitry. It's the look and feel of the space, it's the cases ... I remember really clearly, the original design for the cases at MOV where they were all slightly at an angle and all had slightly different legs because they were mimicking grass.

LS: Oh, you mean when I had my little temper tantrum?

SR: That would be the time. But you pointed out really clearly that to a visitor that design might give the impression – especially as the space was constructed to be as if you were inside a longhouse – might give the impression that people didn't know how to build in straight lines. That people were just doing things in a higgledy-piggledy kind of way. Just that whole thought process that it goes through all aspects of the exhibition process. There's not a sign-off date on which you can say collaboration is done.

LS: No. Actually, it goes right through to the dismantling of the exhibitions, and then what?

JW: I think that's something that was interesting for me to observe, being part of the project. It was from those early meetings, a conversation about what the collaboration would look like. And given Musqueam's involvement with representing itself at the Museum of Anthropology and elsewhere in the public realm, that it's our community and our administration, our leadership. And our representatives have become accustomed to being involved in all aspects of telling a story. And in this situation that means having a conversation with the design firm, or having a conversation with marketing and promotion, and conversations with programing and education. Like Sue was saying, rather than just being a supplier of content – that those experts then walk away with and make their own decisions about how to represent – that for us, when it comes to representing ourselves and our history, it entails being involved

in all that decision making, or those moments of decision making, from the very small things ...

LS: One of the real mind-fragmenting parts of this creation of the three exhibitions in conjunction with three organizing bodies was the input from all of these sources and the output that was required in order to satisfy the Museum of Anthropology, the Museum of Vancouver, the band council, the community, the numbers of people that became involved, and how to coordinate all of that. It was extremely taxing on Musqueam's team and I'm sure on MOA's and MOV's teams. Having all of those people involved kind of created a need to have some way of really communicating amongst all the people. Not just conversations back and forth, but real communication. It was difficult, and actually one of the spinoffs of that was Jordan, Jason, and Larissa from the Musqueam team actually taking hold of being leaders in creating exhibitions.

JW: That's one of the things I've been thinking about since the project, is the amount of what I see as a burden on the community in terms of engaging in a project like this – because to me it becomes clear that a project like this – which has been so successful in many different ways, could not have been done without this level of community engagement. Like we were just saying, this involvement in all these different decisions, and what was interesting listening to you talk about your experiences, that even though you're a community member and working with these institutions, you not being comfortable in being a decision maker or saying, "This is how you do it." That you can't always speak on behalf of the community. Many decisions require the input of different people who have their own areas of expertise, or their own backgrounds.

But one of the things I've been thinking about, and what I think Sue was getting at earlier, about why put the amount of energy into a project like this. And for me too, thinking about, was this burdening worthwhile? I was very fortunate to be working full-time at the museum, working full-time on the project, as opposed to Jason, Larissa, and yourself, who have a million other things on the go, on your desks down here, in regards to Musqueam's well-being in a more general way – that is, all the other work that you do for the community and on behalf of the community in your day jobs.

Is it worthwhile to carry the burden or to undertake all this work, doing all this coordination that you were just talking about? Also, do you feel that the community itself gets the same amount of recognition

as the institutions do in the public realm in terms of the awards and the viewership and the recognition? I think, it seems as though these types of projects garner a lot of attention for the museums, that they benefit in a lot of ways from engaging with these collaborative projects, especially in this day and age when there's a lot of attention being paid right now, in light of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and there's a lot of visibility right now around First Nations territory, in terms of Vancouver acknowledging its location on unceded territory.

LS: You're talking mainly about community recognition in the view of the museum world and the general population.

JW: Yeah, I'm just wondering if, at the end of the day, if the museums gain more in terms of people coming through their doors. And what does the community gain from these projects? Is there a balance in terms of the benefit and the amount of energy and what is shared? That's the other thing too. We worked with many different community members who are all very generous with sharing their knowledge and sharing their time and their energy to make this project successful. Does this project truly benefit us?

LS: There's absolutely a benefit, to all parties. The museums get their names up on the little awards, and Musqueam's name is there too. The actual filming [for the exhibition] of a lot of the community members gave them prominence, gave them their voice in the exhibitions, and gave them a voice to the public. I think that was very positive – that's not done to any great extent, I don't think, in a lot of exhibitions. I think it was very positive here and enhanced the museum's benefits. It also enhanced the community's public image, where we actually know about our own history. We presented our own history and spoke very well about it. I think, yeah, we did benefit, and there's ongoing benefit because we also created the educational kit that's going into the schools.

This was a project that just brought energy and participation from so many different areas, so many facets, that it's created this envelope of information that's available internally to the community, publicly through the museums, and publicly to the general public through the movies and the education kit. Was it worthwhile? Yes. It's worthwhile because that's how you make change happen. I wasn't the instrument of change, I was a cog in the wheel of change to have the vision and capacity, and have

the contacts, I guess, to make all of this happen. I facilitated. That's all. Facilitate.

I think the impact goes beyond the museums. People learn at different rates. Some people get it instantly when you try and send them a message, and other people get it incrementally, and I think that there's been both dramatic and incremental change in how people at both museums think and operate. Also, how outside of those domains, like in the educational field, things are changing, and they feed off each other. The museums can provide information. The schools can pick up the information, then the schools become challenging, and they want more information. It's kind of a growth atmosphere. They feed off each other. The thing that results is more complete information and better understanding. Who knows? Maybe at some point that reconciliation word really means something. People will understand the history of First Nations communities.