

2021 OHS AGM Keynote Address Transcript

Dr. Robin Nelson

“The Democratization of Culture: Reflecting on Similarities and Differences in Community Museums’ Development in Ontario and Yukon”

Michel Beaulieu: So it's with great pleasure that I'd like to welcome and introduce Dr. Robin Nelson. Dr. Robin Nelson is an assistant professor in arts and cultural management at McEwen University on Treaty Six Territory in Edmonton, Alberta. Their research considers sub-national community museum policy, service organizations, and heritage commemoration policy.

In 2021, Robin completed their PhD on Ontario community museum policy which included research on the Ontario Historical Society and its members, which many of you have probably [read in the latest issue of *Ontario History*](#). A wonderful article.

They are currently working on, and I'm going to say this wrong, [Museoception](#) and the Dawson City Museum project, which actually sounds very very fascinating. So Robin, welcome to the Ontario Historical Society's 132nd annual general meeting, and take it away with your keynote address.

Robin Nelson: Great! I can't see that I've... oh yeah, I am unmuted, great!

Okay, so I want to just start by saying thank you so much for inviting me to speak today. When I was invited to speak, I was excited to get the opportunity to reflect on my research more holistically. I started to research community museums in relation to government policy because when I was doing my degree, my master's in museum studies, people didn't really have answers when I asked questions.

So I would ask about the history of museum policy and I'd ask about community museums and I would always be told some version of, you know, the UK plus the USA and split the difference is what happened here. But then I read this lovely book, *Beyond Four Walls*. It talks about the history of museum development up until 1972, and I saw that that simply wasn't true.

So today I'm going to draw on my past research and really focus more so on my dissertation on Ontario community museum policy. At least two people who are here today were interviewed as part of that work, so it's probably familiar to some of you. And then my current project, the Dawson City Museum project, where I'm working with the museum to do an oral history looking at the development of that institution in relation to policy and community action.

And I do want to preface this all by saying it's really hard when you're writing a presentation for professionals because you don't know everybody's existing knowledge and where you might sound patronizing and where you might have to give more information. So please know I'm really happy to answer any questions that anybody has and expand on any points if I haven't made them clear.

I also want to say that these are more so reflections. Putting that in the title was on purpose. This is an ongoing reflection that I hope to expand on as I talk to more museum professionals and also look at more jurisdictions and more kinds of museums.

So today I'll start by giving some definitions to make sure we're all on the same page. And then I'll talk about four similarities and two differences. And then there's a bit of a "what next" section, both for me but also within the context of the presentation for those wanting to take a more cultural democracy approach to museums.

Okay, so definitions. I am talking about community museums. So most of you are in the field and likely know non-profit or municipal institutions that engage in museum functions like collection, exhibition, public programs, relating to the cultural heritage of a relatively limited region or an identity group. So that does include people receiving the Community Museum Operating Grant, but also a lot of the institutions receiving the Heritage Organizational Development Grant, or not receiving any funding at all.

I do want to note I haven't included First Nations within this definition because I think First Nations cultural centers have a distinct history that should be considered as distinct. I will, however, make reference to First Nations cultural centers, as I do go through.

All right, so the two terms. My title of this presentation is a bit of a misnomer from an academic sense. It does describe things descriptively, but within cultural policy research there are these two concepts that are important to comparing community museum development and that relationship to policy as we go through time. And those are cultural democracy and the democratization of culture.

So cultural democracy is an approach to supporting museum development. Or, I mean, it's broadly used within cultural policy, not just in reference to museums. But it supports cultural diversity, active participation, fair and equitable access. It's more of that grassroots approach. So it is providing the infrastructure to enable groups to preserve their own culture, let's say, to organize, and so we'll have more cultural diversity in what gets funded and supported.

In comparison, we have the democratization of culture, which is about making the so-called legitimate culture more accessible. So that sort of approach has a centralized conception of what's good and then we work towards supporting the dissemination of that culture.

And we do see both of these concepts really play out across community museum development in relation to government policy.

So, the similarities and differences that I have come across. So the first is really how important this concept of cultural democracy is to community museums within what is now called Canada. So museums really originated as community and locally run societies. At times, they had that

initial relationship to municipalities, but even museums we know now as municipal community museums often started through this community action.

And that was true in New Brunswick, in Ontario, in Yukon. It seems to be broadly true. That's how we have, you know, 2,700 museums and related institutions within what is now Canada.

In the article that keeps being mentioned, I talk about the Ontario Historical Society's role in this, and it really had an important role. So Rob did a little bit of the work for me. He talked about incorporation and the fact that that is an old piece of legislation. So providing that legitimacy and capacity building was an important role that the OHS played, and that is part of cultural policy. It's part of museum policy and the structure that enables museums to develop.

But also maybe a lesser known fact is the OHS did more than just enable. They also encouraged museums. So they would go to groups that were thinking about starting historical societies, especially after 1912 when the Royal Ontario Museum was established as a provincial museum that doesn't tell a provincial story.

OHS representatives would go to these groups forming historical societies, let them know, you know, there's no provincial museum, so there are certain museum functions you might want to consider doing. And they did.

So that's an important role of the OHS. And even by 1953, there was a Museums Committee, which did some of the first training for community museums in Ontario.

So why is this relevant? So it's relevant because community museums are fundamentally more democratic than provincial ones. Neither Ontario nor the Yukon have provincial museums telling a provincial story. So there, the story of that space is told by many institutions, reflecting priorities from local organizations. This is the role community museums play across the country.

There's a Canadian Museums Association standing committee report that refers to it as a tapestry of collective memory, and I think that's a really beautiful way of describing it. But I do want to nuance this a bit because it makes it seem like there's an ideal form of museum development that was occurring in Canada from the late 1800s to the 1970s. That's not really true.

So museums, community museums, are in some ways more democratic. But not everybody had access to the resources and capacity needed to establish community museums. So there are a lot of similarities across my research. We see that institutions established before the 1970s are really heavily related to white settlement, industrialization, and municipal structures.

The relevance of this is going to become a little bit more clear when I start to talk about what happened in the 1970s and government support for community museum development.

So in this early period, again in all three subnational governments I've looked at, we see local groups forming community museums, being encouraged by some form of association, and that there were some forms of government support for this in terms of maybe a small operational grant or project grant, etc.

The difference that I've seen is who prompts the grassroots movement. So in Ontario, I've talked about the Ontario Historical Society, the OHS, and with that there's a rationale that museums need to be established for preservation purposes. Connected to preservation is this idea of education. So preservation and education are really these primary goals.

In comparison, in Yukon we don't see a historical society doing this work because the Yukon Historical and Museums Association wasn't even established until 1977. What we see is a tourism organization. So there is a tourism bureau broadly in the territory in Dawson City, the museum I'm looking at. It was the Klondike Visitors Association or I guess at that time the Klondike Tourism Bureau. And so it's explicitly a tourism organization encouraging the development of museums.

And that's not to say there isn't a tourism goal within early community museum development in Ontario, but that that became more prevalent in 1959, after the grant program changed from an education department to a tourism department, and we see advisors, community museum advisors. But in Yukon, right from the beginning, it's... so the Dawson City Museum was established in the early 1950s and it's about tourism.

So why is this relevant? I don't really know? Maybe it's not. I think it is though and that's because – let's actually look at my notes here – from a policy perspective, the connection to tourism versus education seems to matter.

So Yukon community museums don't have a strong relationship to curriculum or an education department. In Ontario I heard a lot that there wasn't much of a relationship, or people thought it should be stronger, but it does exist. So the grant started under Education, the Community Museum Operating Grant, became a category of a community grant.

And then when the program moved again to Colleges and Universities, that's when you saw the expansion of the museum advisory services. And then the only other expansion of the museum program that occurred without an associated accountability measure, so the creation of standards or other mechanisms, happened under the Department of Tourism.

So I've heard again and again that the department matters, and I think it might be true, but I would need to look at more jurisdictions to really make that a conclusion.

Another ongoing consideration is the idea of repetition in themes. Ontario has a lot of very similar institutions telling the story of a particular region, but maybe a lot of different pioneer villages and schoolhouse museums. Whereas in Yukon, where the development was more

strongly associated with tourism, people were actively encouraged against founding museums that resembled other museums.

So that's how we get instead of having, for example, a Keno Museum, it's the Keno Mining Museum specifically. And even the Dawson City Museum that I looked at, they were established before this encouragement happened, but they were often strongly encouraged to be more focused on the gold rush.

So now before I talk about another similarity that I want to bring up, it's important to have some context. In the late 1960s, the federal government announced a cultural policy of democracy and decentralization. And as part of this cultural policy Gerard Peltier, who was the Secretary of State, wanted to create subsectoral policies.

So he wanted to create a museum policy. And at that time when it was first being discussed, it was really about the circulation of the national collections. So if you remember back to the idea of cultural democracy, some more grassroots, versus the democratization of culture, which is about circulating a centrally defined culture, the federal approach was about the democratization of culture.

And it did change a little bit after a 1971 consultation that was held with members of the museum community. But it still had that remnants of the early idea that this policy was about circulating federal collections because there was, you know, the early versions of MAP (Museum Assistance Program). This is when it started and it really focused on increasing the quality of community museums, because they weren't seen as good enough to be able to host national collections.

It's the same with there was a lot of funding for training. That's partly what prompted the Ontario Museum Association was discussions about this new policy that was coming and the funding that would be available. So there was a lot of funding for training and to increase museums' quality. So that was the focus because they wanted to democratize the national collections.

So this is where we get to our second similarity and that's there seems to be very common themes across subnational, so provincial or territorial, community museum policy. So after the federal articulation of policy, we see Ontario, we see other provinces, changing from a community museum policy and support program that encouraged the development of new museums to one that focused on the professionalization of existing institutions.

And the federal policy is not the only causal factor we see there, but it is definitely one. And it seems to be a pretty important one because I'm seeing the same thing happen in New Brunswick, in Ontario, in Yukon, and I'm really excited to see if I see it elsewhere.

So in Ontario, the museum advisor was pre-existing, but we see the creation of provincial conservators, the Ontario Museum Association, the definition of an articulated museum policy.

We see project funding, though that was actually lottery funding, so it was a little bit different, the creation of the standards.

We see the same things in the Yukon except it happened a little later and it was kind of funny. There's legislative assembly minutes you can read where it's very clear they're upset that the Northwest Territories got money for a territorial museum and they had to figure their stuff out so they could get the money too.

So it's usually a little less explicit than that but I did find that amusing, both when I looked at Yukon and New Brunswick. There are minutes of government officials very clearly saying, "We need to get more of the federal funding and that's why we need a museum policy. And we need to help our museums improve in order to access that money."

Another similarity that really enables this professionalization – so we're seeing the professionalization of the museum sector, community museum sector, in what is now called Canada in the 70s and 80s – and that's the employment programs. So when I say employment programs, a lot of people are probably thinking of Young Canada Works, and that's totally one. But the employment programs really have their roots in the Local Initiatives Program from the 1970s, and you can trace Young Canada Works actually right back to that one through programs that evolved from it.

And at that time, the concern was that there was an increase in the number of boomers entering the job market. Boomer workers were appearing and needed jobs, particularly in the summer but also at other times of the year. And at this time, there were many areas of the country that were suffering high unemployment due to de-industrialization.

So this is a list of the employment programs the Dawson City Museum accessed only in the 1980s, and it isn't even all of them. It's just from looking at the titles on their archive, their institutional archives, so they're actually more. So there were a real range of employment programs that weren't simply student programs and weren't simply for the summer, right?

There were lots of different programs museums were accessing. They could hire, you know, a carpenter to develop the institution and help them build capacity, perhaps to meet the standards.

Okay, so why is this relevant? This is relevant because this focus on professionalization really provided the impetus for capacity building. Municipal museums in Ontario in particular were huge beneficiaries of this. They were able to leverage the different forms of support that were available to them and develop more capacity. And all of that capacity means they're able to get more funding and develop more capacity, and it grows from there.

So the second difference that I've really identified is the standards. And I do want to acknowledge before I say negative things about them that they were really positive in a lot of ways. I mentioned municipal museums. Municipal museums were really able to take these

standards to their municipalities and say look, if we don't meet these, our provincial government isn't going to give us funding anymore. Maybe we should have an employee.

And same with at the non-profit level. One of the museum advisors that I talked to for my research pointed out that when they were doing a review of the program, they were confused. They were like what is this moment when all of these museums seem to have improved? And they really linked it to them leveraging something like the standards in order to get that employee in the institution.

So that is the main difference, is the tying of the standards to operational funding, is very distinctively an Ontario thing. We do see some forms of standards in other provinces but they're a little less robust or there'll be a standards document but the ones tied to the funding are less robust.

So why is this relevant? It's relevant because the standards have evolved as a barrier to funding. So I mentioned earlier that community museums we saw being established in the 20th century related to white settlement, to industry, to municipalities. And these are the organizations that really most benefited from the professionalization to develop capacity.

So as an example, when the standards were introduced in 1984 but really 1981 is when the standards weren't quite written, but the expectations started. The museums already receiving support had ten years to meet those standards and this was at a time when project funding was more available. It was at a time when employment funding was more available. And it was at a time when there were lots of museum advisors compared to the one that exists now. And there were also conservators, those provincial conservators.

New museums had to be compliant before they accessed the support. This is relevant when we look at what standards actually are. So in 2000 the standards were updated and there was a meeting with Franco-Ontarian people who were thinking of starting museums in the Ottawa region.

And it was really interesting reading the notes from this meeting because one of the things that came up is that the standards reflect a particular value. They reflect a particular value of collecting that these Franco-Ontarian groups did not share because they were more focused on the preservation of intangible heritage and culture. And so the values embedded within the standards reflect a particular conception of what museum work should be done and is valuable.

And it's interesting to really compare Ontario and Yukon on this issue because when I read the CMOG applications, this was one of those things that took a long time. I was reading applications from the 80s and 90s. I came across this note on one of the files and in the note – the file was for a museum associated with a First Nation, a cultural center, and they weren't meeting the standards at that time. And the advisor was arguing very passionately for them to still get the funding anyway because there were extenuating circumstances relating to its different structure that had to be taken into account.

And it really made me reflect on how many institutions were doing good work that weren't able to access the funding because they didn't get into the program at a time when it was open or they didn't get into the program at a time where there weren't these standard barriers.

And I mentioned Yukon and that's because in Yukon after Yukon First Nations had the final umbrella agreement, I believe it's chapter 13, there's a chapter in there that talks about catching up and keeping up. So it provided the language about the First Nations should have the capacity to preserve and present their own heritage.

So they were actually added to the Museum Contribution Program. And it's really cool because instead of seeing, okay, they're added, they'll get the exact same low amount of funding that these other museums are getting – it was something like \$25,000 – this addition strengthened the program. So through this more culturally democratic approach you actually saw the advocacy position of museums and First Nations cultural centers improve and they were able to successfully advocate for increases in that program and it has increased in the 21st century significantly.

Okay, so that brings me to the fourth similarity. And I call this a similarity maybe, because I'm not quite sure how I would connect this to the Yukon territorial government, but it's certainly reflective of what's happening at the federal level in Yukon. And that governments are not willing to maintain their support. They're not willing to follow through on the promises made as part of this democratization of culture approach in the 70s and 80s.

So they contributed to the proliferation of museums. They had programs that encouraged their development. Then the federal government wanted to improve their quality. It made promises in 1971 and 1990 and it has never followed through on most, it didn't follow through on its promises.

Subnationally, we see an unwillingness to, as they contribute to a proliferation of museums, an unwillingness to expand the program. And in Ontario what that looks like is, for example, less funding for projects for museums. So instead of having specific museum funding, we see museum operational funding. But museums are expected to go to these larger pots which aren't specifically designed for them for project funding.

We see a decrease in the number of museum advisors. And functionally speaking, we see a decrease in operational funding as that amount does not keep pace with inflation.

In Yukon, we see federally there's a lot of divestment happening particularly when we look at Parks Canada. Dawson City was a Parks Canada town and they're currently actively selling their resources.

And Yukon, I mentioned before, the museum grant increased. But there are other ways that we see a decrease. So there was a huge expansion in the number of museums and cultural centers

funded through their museum funding, but their advisory service never actually grew. So you have all of these institutions that have one or no staff or very few staff and the support that's being offered to them is greatly diminished. Yeah, so there's this divestment of resources and increased expectations for local organizations.

So to summarize what I've said, the foundations of community museum development across what is now known as Canada seemed to reflect a cultural democracy approach. It's very grassroots, and then it was encouraged by associations facilitated in some ways by government funding.

In the 70s and 80s they shifted towards supporting cultural democracy and the emergence of new organizations, towards supporting professionalization. And that is through an explicit museum policy, but also implicitly through employment programs.

I've written an article about this situation in New Brunswick before. It's something I'm really hoping to be able to explore more because I do find the way the sector seems to really be underpinned by employment programs to be very interesting. You know, employees, that's the greatest resources institutions have. And it seems to be one of the best forms of support, after of course operational support without restrictions, that is given to community museums.

And then the fourth there is the perceived government disinterest. Because even in Yukon where that support had increased, now there's a bit of a wariness about how committed the government actually is. But they're currently undergoing a review, so that's why there's the maybe. I'm not quite sure how it fits in there.

And then that difference is the focus on historical versus tourism and those standards which were a great tool but in my opinion are now a barrier, a structural barrier, to cultural democracy.

Okay, so you know the Ontario Historical Society really reflects the values of cultural democracy in a lot of ways. So I wanted to end on that consideration. Is community museum policy in its relation to museum development an example of cultural democracy? Yes and no.

So there is currently support for cultural democracy. So we see that in support for associations like the OHS. The OHS has a really important role to play, and thank you so much for digitizing your articles. When I started my research on Ontario in 2015, I sat on the floor of the library and had to flip through all of the tables of contents and then move on to the next one, and it was quite the process.

So there's also operational funding. There's support for employment, and in some ways divestment is kind of a cultural democracy approach because it's the government going, "We don't care. If you care you have to take it up."

So there's a way that that is reflective of cultural democracy, whereas there are a lot of barriers to cultural democracy and the first being this hierarchy of institutions that exist. There's a hierarchy of capacity which determines access to support, in a lot of ways. There's project funding. So when the government decides what's being commemorated and then funds project that engages in those commemorations, that's really more of a democratization of culture.

It's the central government defining what's important rather than maybe providing operational funding to those organizations, addressing gaps left by the early founders, community museums that were founded.

Professionalization and standardization. So the continued existence of certain expectations of professionalism when accessing certain funding resources, and a lack of support in order to scaffold and allow museums to build up, to get to a point. Student and summer employment versus employment programs that provide more diversity in the types of employment being provided.

And then also this divestment. There's only so much that people can do at a local level, and it places a really big burden on institutions that exist. So for me I'm engaged in the Dawson City Museum project. I have a funding proposal in right now to look at an archive that has preserved museum records from the 50s to today, looking at exactly which government programs were used and how they intersected.

And then museoception.ca, I like to call it a museum of museums and cultural policy. It's a blog. That's just me being fancy, a fancy academic. But I do hope to grow. It's a place where I'm putting my resources for my students. But I'm also talking about my research and hoping to engage in continued conversations with professionals.

So thank you very much.

Michel Beaulieu: Thank you very much, Robin, for a fantastic presentation. So at this time, I'm gonna open it up to the floor. If there's any questions, please do use the chat function.

And yeah, while we're waiting for individuals to type in questions, I would like to say, I mean, I do miss – and I know Mike Dove, also a fellow board member pointed out – do miss those days sitting on the floor of libraries going through tables of contents of journals. There is something to say about it.

Robin Nelson: I did it with the *Bulletin* too though, and that was a lot harder because I actually had to scan all of the titles.

Michel Beaulieu: Oh, that's too funny.

And Mike, I still do it as well too, I have to admit. That's kind of... I hide in the stacks in the library. It's nice. Again, if you have any questions, please do enter them into the chat function.

So I have one. I mean, if you were to pick one challenge that you have found trying to do the analysis you're doing, I mean what would you find would be the largest?

Robin Nelson: Museums not keeping their own records.

Michel Beaulieu: I was wondering...

Robin Nelson: I came to that very quickly. So the project I was mentioning with cultural policy crossroads, I've been trying every time, not every time... I often ask museums, you know, can I have access to records to look at. And in Ontario, municipal museums seem to follow the rule of throwing things out every seven years.

And then non-profit museums, I've sometimes gotten the response, even for annual reports, that they exist in somebody's basement somewhere. I often have to rely on interview data where I would like to have archival data to support it, because I can't access the information.

Michel Beaulieu: I imagine it's probably even harder for, the smaller the organization and the more volunteer dependent, probably the harder it is in terms of those records to kind of make it from individual to individual as they move on.

So there is, Heather Anderson has put something in here and I'll just read it out, so just in case those who don't have chat. "But not to undermine your point, Robin, which is very well made, but there is a new stream of MAP funding for digital projects that I'll be sharing with our institutional members later this week."

And then Mike Dove has asked, is there any progress with our government's providing a stable funding model for our cultural institutions?

Robin Nelson: I mean, to an extent, the museum operational funding is an extremely stable funding source, if you were able to get access to it in the 1980s. Right? The model that exists. If you were able to get in early and that's even, we're seeing that's true in Yukon as well that newer institutions, yeah. So I'm not sure that I have a great answer to you, other than in some ways the museum funding that does exist is quite stable, at least compared to, for example, project funding.

Michel Beaulieu: Any other further questions for Robin?

Robin Nelson: If any come up later, feel free to email me. Museoception.ca. It has all my contact information as well as existing work that I'm doing. If you have records, I would love to talk to you. I would love to partner with more museums and do this work on a more institutional level.

But as I responded, I often have trouble accessing that information. So I'm available, and if you want to counter any of the points I made and argue with me or give me more information and educate me, I'd love to hear that as well.

Michel Beaulieu: Well thanks for that, Robin.

So on behalf of the Ontario Historical Society, all those present, and our members and affiliates, thank you for a wonderful keynote address to cap off our 133rd annual general meeting.

And to everyone else here this evening, thank you for coming out. Thank you for participating. Thank you for supporting the Ontario Historical Society in all of the activities we do across the province. Please do support your local societies and museums, as always.

Stay safe, stay healthy, and we hopefully will be talking to all of you soon. So enjoy the rest of your evening, everyone. And this ends the 133rd annual general meeting of the Ontario Historical Society. Thank you.