



## The idea of a human rights museum

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## BOOK REVIEW

**The idea of a human rights museum**, edited by K. Busby et al., Winnipeg, University of Manitoba Press, 2015, 371 pp., \$27.95 CDN (paperback), ISBN 978-0-88755-782-8

There are plural and competing reasons for what is to be done in the name of human rights. –  
Ken Norman<sup>1</sup>

Founded in Winnipeg by the late businessman Israel ('Izzy') Asper and brought to life through the fundraising efforts of his daughter Gail, the Canadian Museum for Human Rights (CMHR) embodies national ambitions and global hopes. A 2008 amendment to the Canadian Parliament's Museum Act envisioned the fledgling institution as 'a destination ... a centre of learning where Canadians and people from around the world can engage in discussion and commit to taking action against hate and oppression'.<sup>2</sup> After it opened to the public in Fall 2014, *The Toronto Star* declared CMHR an 'astounding success ... a hit'.<sup>3</sup> CMHR has surpassed attendance projections and won awards for its striking architecture, exhibitions, programs, and role in Canada's cultural tourism industry. With 11 exhibition halls, a research library, bistro, gift shop, guided tours, apps, robust programming, school curriculum and a unique building whose jutting glass spire pierces Winnipeg's skyline, *Travel and Leisure Magazine* places CMHR among the world's 'top five coolest destinations'.<sup>4</sup>

'Cool' is an curious descriptor for a museum about genocide, forced labor, violence against children and women, racism, famine, persecution, massacres and atrocity. Isn't there a more rigorous and thoughtful way to assess CMHR's impact in the struggle for human rights, one that goes beyond audience statistics, feel-good monikers and hype? In 2011–2012, as CMHR was breaking ground, University of Manitoba (UM) professors Karen Busby, Adam Muller and Andrew Woolford organized a seminar series at UM's Centre for Human Rights Research which probed this question. The building's site, design and archaeological mitigation had been controversial. Discussions over the size and placement of gallery spaces pitted Jewish, Ukrainian, Armenian and other immigrant groups against each other, sometimes bitterly. Aboriginal stakeholders were furious about the museum's stance on 'Settler-Colonial Genocide', as well as the contradiction of 'establishing on Indigenous land a museum in the "name of human rights"' (p. 172). Costs kept rising amidst staff turnover and construction delays. The Canadian government's support helped with finances but fomented doubts about curatorial freedom. The aim of the University of Manitoba seminars was to explore these concerns and unpack the ideas that inform an idea museum about a subject as vast and emotional as human rights. They accomplished this through open discussion between museologists, sociologists, historians, curators, lawyers, computer scientists, human rights activists, the university community and the public.

The seminars resulted in Busby, Muller and Woolford's co-edited book, *The Idea of a Human Rights Museum*, which astutely mines CMHR's contradictions, challenges and possibilities. The book's essays recount the complicated story of the museum's development and offer a robust bibliography of resources. This publication is important because it not only documents CMHR's genesis, but it also serves as a model for the kind of inter-disciplinary dialogue and analysis that all major museum projects – no matter what their focus is – can and should inspire.

Sixteen essays, organized into four sections, are bookended by an introduction by the book's editors and an afterward by two CHRM senior staff members, Clint Curle and Jodi Giesbrecht. Each contribution is filled with information and stands alone. Taken together, the chapters paint an even richer story because the editors took great care to encourage dialogue and

cross-referencing between the contributors. Thus, the book reads like a conversation between writers who are listening to and considering each other as they set forth their perspectives, and in some cases pointed critiques, on what it means to create and curate a human rights museum.

Some essays attempt to bridge museological theory to practice. For example, Angela Failler speculates how curators working in idea museums might go beyond their traditional authoritative roles and encourage visitors to actively engage with and learn from the material. Adam Muller, Struan Sinclair and Andrew Woolford suggest that virtual and augmented reality technology may be effective in this regard, because media can bring multiple voices and ideas into static exhibitions. They propose a digital 'storyworld' wearable technology prototype called *Embodying Empathy* that could help deepen visitors' experiences of CMHR's exhibit about Canada's abusive residential school system for Aboriginal children.

In the spirit of such a wide-ranging conversation, Ken Norman, a member of CMHR's founding Content Advisory Committee, leads the book with an essay about the project's initial public engagement process. Norman, legal scholar and principal draftsman of the Saskatchewan Human Rights code, argues that although open conversations can be uncomfortable and dissonant, they are essential to fostering a culture of human rights. Beginning in 2009, the Content Advisory Committee solicited opinions and stories about human rights in libraries, high schools and even at the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics. In some cases, these conversations informed how artifacts were collected and exhibitions were shaped. For example, CMHR researcher/curator Armando Perla describes how talking with community members, labor activists and others shaped an exhibit dedicated to Canada's seasonal agricultural migrant workers and the discrimination and poor working conditions they often face.

Historian A. Dirk Moses argues that community conversations must allow for nuances, because so many ethical, financial and political issues are at stake. One tension the museum grappled with was how to balance the stories of genocides that occurred outside of Canada's borders (e.g., the Holocaust and Holodomor) with abuses within its borders (e.g., colonization of Indigenous peoples and treatment of agricultural workers). Moses sees both discussions as imperative 'given Canada's migration history and official multiculturalism' (p. 43). Helen Fallding, a former journalist who now works at UM's Centre for Human Rights Research, brilliantly analyzes how the media spun the public debates about CMHR – especially those between Jewish and Ukrainian communities.

The book's second set of essays, *Spatialization and Design*, deals with the process of moving from ideas to the physical reality of a building and exhibitions. This section starts with five images, each representing a stage of architect Antoine Predock's design process as he fashioned a building where visitors ascend, both metaphorically and physically, from darkness to light. Likewise, co-editor Karen Busby offers a close reading of the evolution of CMHR's inaugural exhibitions. She analyzes changes in word choice and intent as the curatorial process unfolded between 2012 and 2013. According to Busby, CMHR's curators 'depoliticized' and 'decontextualized' the exhibitions' rhetoric and main messages to 'minimalize government actors' role in rights violations' (p. 120). Noting that language in the original conceptual materials she obtained was redacted, Busby closes with questions about whether the museum's Board of Governors was under pressure from the federal government to position Canada as a 'human rights champion' at the possible 'expense of dealing with the hard truths' (p. 125).

Busby's textual analysis lays the groundwork for art curator Mary Reid's chapter on exhibition signage that appears in the book's third section, titled *Curatorial Challenges*. Reid acknowledges the power of textual information in a public setting. She then describes the reality of how staff drafts, edits and writes exhibition signage, what she calls 'the onerous process of distilling

an extraordinary amount of research' into digestible 'sound bites' that allow a reader to 'connect what she has read to her own wider experience of the world, building on her knowledge base, expanding it and linking it to the object or display' (pp. 182–187). Reid concludes with a discussion of 'warning labels' that might be placed in a museum like CMHR. We normally think of warning labels as devices to squelch discomfort, perhaps alerting parents with small children that some material and images might be upsetting. But, Reid argues, a human rights museum should not be about making adults comfortable. She turns the idea of a warning label on its head, citing a provocative label suggested for CMHR by art historian Denis Longchamps: 'Entering this museum may have profound effects on you and may alter your way of thinking. You may find some images difficult, but it is in facing reality that we may change the future, your future' (p. 192).

In the final section, writers position CHRM within the worldwide phenomenon of idea museums. Jorge Nallim discusses recent efforts in Argentina to create a Space for Memory and Human Rights. Amanda Grzyb's cross-compares exhibitions about genocide at the Kigali Memorial Centre (Rwanda), the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Museo Memoria y Tolerancia (Mexico). Admirably, this section closes with the voices of two members of CHRM's senior staff who engage with the critiques that have been leveled on them by university scholars; 'the important questions raised by the contributors ... will not be easily resolved, not should they be. ... CMHR', they pledge, 'will play an ongoing role in ... productive exchange of diverse viewpoints on human rights' (p. 331).

A museum might facilitate dialogue, but can it be an appropriate place to inspire action on behalf of human rights? This book's answer is inconclusive. Christopher Powell delineates what he sees as the hard truth: the fight for human rights is a continual struggle. He posits that CMHR's narrative is 'top down', reflecting 'the interests of the sovereign and ... social elites' who founded and funded it (p. 138). 'Top down' implies that abuses against humanity are aberrant occurrences that can be transcended through enlightened institutions. Powell advocates a 'bottom up' approach that emphasizes a commitment to constant questioning and subversion of the larger system. Perhaps, Powell notes on page 141, an ongoing external critique of CMHR, such as the one presented in this valuable book, can allow the museum to become 'a vehicle for the propagation of human rights, despite itself'.

## Notes

1. Norman, K. (2015) "Grounding the Canadian Museum of Human Rights in Conversation," in Busby et al., p. 27.
2. <https://www.humanrights.ca> (accessed 9 April 2016).
3. <https://beta.thestar.com/entertainment/2015/12/12/canadian-museum-for-human-rights-is-a-hit.html>
4. <http://www.travelandleisure.com/slideshows/worlds-coolest-new-tourist-attractions-2015/2?iid=sr-link>

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