

MONOVA: Museum and Archives of North Vancouver

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At MONOVA: Museum and Archives of North Vancouver, we respectfully acknowledge that we operate on the traditional, unceded lands of the Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and sə́lilwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) First Nations, whose ancestors have stewarded these lands for millennia. We are profoundly grateful for the opportunity to live, work, and learn in partnership with these communities on Coast Salish Territory, acknowledging their enduring connection to the land, water, and all living things.



Fig. 1. Traditional Welcome at a MONOVA Event. © Alison Boulter

Collaboration is Essential to Museum Work

MONOVA sits on land that has been stewarded by the Skwxwú7mesh and sə́lilwətał Nations since time immemorial. Nestled between the mountains and the sea, this land is renowned for its stunning beauty and enriched lifestyle. However, like many parts of Canada, it has a complex and difficult history—a history that has often been challenging for museums to acknowledge and

engage with authentically and truthfully. Based in two distinct locations and across two local municipalities—the Museum of North Vancouver in The Shipyards and the Archives of North Vancouver in Lynn Valley—they share a common goal: reflecting on the land's history, connecting it to the present, and envisioning a collective future. Through these efforts, we aim to foster a deeper sense of belonging and connection across the diverse communities that call this land home.

The synergy between the Museum and Archives forms the cornerstone of MONOVA's work. Our exhibits serve as a gateway to understanding the complex relationships

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Fig. 2. MONOVA Indigenous Cultural Programmer Tsawaysia Spukwus Welcoming Guests. © Alison Boulter

between humans and the natural world, encouraging visitors to explore these interconnections in new and thoughtful ways. Collaboration between the Museum and Archives is fundamental to this, with archival materials providing a rich foundation for the creation of exhibits. By integrating authentic historical documents, photographs, and artifacts from the Archives, MONOVA ensures that each exhibit is both informative and engaging, fostering meaningful dialogue, and offering a multi-storied and layered view of North Vancouver's past and its ongoing narrative. In doing this, we honor the rich cultural identities, heritage, and languages of the communities we serve – documenting their stories through written records and oral histories. This collaboration is powerful, with archival materials fueling the creation of exhibits and communities inspiring the growth of our collections.

Though each site offers unique experiences, both locations share a common purpose: to spark meaningful conversations through learning and research. Our archival materials are publicly accessible, and we actively invite residents and visitors to explore the evolving cultural legacy of the North Shore, gaining a deeper understanding of the region's past and its trajectory.

As an educational institution, we embrace an interactive and reciprocal approach that values both the materials we present and the passions of our diverse communities. MONOVA welcomes people of all ages, backgrounds, and interests to engage with our collections and contribute their own stories and knowledge. We offer a variety of school and public programs, allowing participants to learn, share, and gain insights into the histories of North Vancouver communities.

Framework for Community Museums

A fundamental aspect of all our work, especially within the Canadian context, is our unwavering commitment to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Report with its 94 Calls to Action. UNDRIP stands as a global human rights beacon, while the Calls to Action address the profound impacts of Canada's residential school system. We actively invite and encourage visitors to uncover these historical truths, using them as a catalyst to take their own steps toward reconciliation.

The Commission's Report and the Calls to Action provide museums and archives with the knowledge and tools needed to understand and foster reconciliation. The outlined principles and practices serve as a framework that guides decisions, processes, and the prioritization of projects and partnerships. Under this commitment, MONOVA plays a crucial role in fostering reconciliation by sharing difficult truths. One way we do this is by including a section on Residential Schools in our permanent galleries, where we share oral histories from survivors of the Residential School in North Vancouver.

Decolonizing as an Ongoing Process

A decade ago, as MONOVA planned for organizational changes and the construction of a new museum, an Indigenous Voice Advisory Committee (IVAC) was established to provide Indigenous perspectives on content, messaging, event protocol, and program development. In collaboration with the Skwxwú7mesh and sə́lilwətaʔ Nations, MONOVA and IVAC agreed to create and sign Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) between MONOVA and the Skwxwú7mesh and sə́lilwətaʔ Nations. The core principle of these agreements is to work collaboratively with the Skwxwú7mesh and sə́lilwətaʔ communities to incorporate their worldviews, perspectives, cultures, and the truth about our shared history into all MONOVA activities.

Today, the Indigenous Voices Advisory Committee is co-chaired by Chief Dr. Janice George of the Skwxwú7mesh Nation and Carleen Thomas of the sə́lilwətaʔ Nation. IVAC is in place to help ensure MONOVA is meeting the goals and commitments as laid out in the MOUs, and that we are working together and establishing open relationships with Nation members. Through this relationship, MONOVA can share cultural histories, teaching methods, traditions, and practices in ways that honor customs, provide authentic engagement, and respect protocol. Instrumental to this are two Indigenous Cultural Programmers on



Fig.3. MONOVA Indigenous Cultural Programmers Tsawaysia Spukwus and Jordan Dawson of the Squamish Nation. © Alison Boulier

our staff who bring their personal perspectives and experiences to their work. We are very grateful to our current Indigenous Cultural Programmers Tsawaysia Spukwus (Alice Guss) and Jordan Dawson who generously share their knowledge and culture through their work. Creating space for *Skwxwú7mesh* and *səlílwətał* culture sharing and incorporating Coast Salish perspectives into our activities allows MONOVA visitors (and staff) to appreciate the diverse context we live in, embrace it, and continue seeking dialogue and learning opportunities.

Why are MOUs important from a Nation's perspective? Why do the Nations want to be engaged with the Museum and Archives? Co-Chair of our Indigenous Voices Advisory Committee, Chief Dr. Janice George from *Skwxwú7mesh* *Úxwumixw*, shares:

"From my personal perspective, I grew up learning the history of my people and was very proud of what my ancestors did. All people have something in history that they look back on with pride. It's hard to describe how it feels to be in a museum where you are working on things that your ancestors made, that your grandparents made, and how much pride that brings you."

From her conversation with us, it is clear that one of the most important elements of this collaboration is to showcase items that instill pride in the youth—such as their ancestors' teachings and belongings—helping

youth develop a deeper appreciation for their culture. *"We can try and surround our children with the teachings everywhere they go."*

Additionally, this collaboration teaches non-Indigenous people about the contributions Indigenous people have made. Chief Dr. Janice George:

"Until recently, Coast Salish communities have held their culture very close, fearing it would be used in the wrong way—commercialized or misrepresented. But Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw has done a lot of work in cultural healing. The community has participated in many programs, and we are ready to share, but we need confidence in knowing what to share and what to hold sacred while passing on valuable teachings."

MONOVA recognizes that museums play a vital role in supporting the ongoing process of reconciliation. By creating space for dialogue around difficult subjects—such as the legacy of residential schools— and working in partnership with local Coast Salish communities to ensure they are involved in how and when their stories are told, we aim to inform and inspire, fostering understanding and healing.

The Changing Role of Museums

Museums have never been neutral. Originating from colonialist endeavors with often one-sided stories, muse-

ums must now evolve to meet the needs of our time. They should not be passive entities that simply store history—they must be active participants in shaping the future. Museums offer a platform for telling uncomfortable truths and confronting difficult pasts, allowing communities to come together, reflect, and move forward in a spirit of inclusion and respect.

It is worth remembering that the word “museum” originates from the Ancient Greek word “mouseion,” meaning “seat of the Muses,” which refers to conversations rather than exhibitions. Since their inception, museums have been spaces for discussion, research, and knowledge. Museums have always been physical institutions for organizing collections, but they have also been places of narratives. Traditionally, these narratives have often told a single story. However, as part of the decolonization process, we are incorporating voices and perspectives that have been historically underrepresented and need to be included in new narratives.

This shift requires museums to take a stand. While doing so may expose us to criticism—especially from those who believe museums should remain neutral—we assert that neutrality often equates to failing to serve the needs of underrepresented communities and human realities. By



Fig. 4. MONOVA Museum & Archives of North Vancouver, Educational Programmer Sarah Mosher. © Alison Boulier

creating space for understanding, dialogue, and even disagreement, museums fulfill their responsibility to society. They must be places of action, not merely repositories of the past.

At MONOVA, we are committed to decolonizing—shifting from a model that prioritizes collection-building to one that focuses on community engagement, collaboration, and co-creation. We are actively engaged in the processes of repatriation – what we now refer to internally as “returning belongings”. We are updating the language in our database and exhibition texts, ensuring that all records include the necessary background stories to enhance understanding of our collections. We are initiating conversations with IVAC and our Indigenous Cultural Programmers to develop a policy and strategy for the restorative process of returning belongings to communities. Additionally, we aim to learn how to discuss this subject with other Nations to foster partnerships and collaborations. MONOVA is thinking from the present to the future, not only repeating facts from the past.

In an article for Museum International in 2024, Sakiru Adebayo notes, *“We must begin to build, from scratch, institutions of memory, heritage and arts that are not exploitative, carceral, or colonial, but life-affirming for all human, non-human and object beings”* (Adebayo, 2024)¹. This call-to-action challenges us to rethink our practices and envision museums as transformative, inclusive spaces that reflect a broad spectrum of lived experiences. Those in the museum sector who had the chance to participate in and review the changes to the ICOM museum definition in 2022 discussed how to define museum spaces and the importance of reflecting the evolving needs of the world. Ultimately, the following definition was adopted:

*“A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets, and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection, and knowledge sharing.”*²

While there must be respect and continuity for traditional perspectives—acknowledging the fundamental respon-

¹ Aljas, A., & Cai, Y. (2024). Re-Imagining the Museum. *Museum International*, 76(1–2), vi–ix. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13500775.2024.2422737>

² International Council of Museums. (2022). *ICOM Extraordinary General Assembly 2022: Museum definition working document*. https://icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/EN_EGA2022_MuseumDefinition_WDoc_Final-2.pdf

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sibilities of museums in preservation, conservation, and security—there must also be room for change, as societal needs continue to evolve. How do we find that balance? The revised definition was necessary because it establishes boundaries, provides a framework, and solidifies career paths within the sector. With a shared definition, we—as institutions, museum professionals, consultants, partners, and researchers—become a community, united by a common purpose.

The shift from a collection-centric focus, as seen in the original 1970s definition, to one centered on community, learning, accessibility, and inclusivity marks a crucial and transformative change. Continuous adaptation is essential to keeping museums relevant and engaging for visitors and communities, who now have more opportunities to participate actively in their institutions. This definition serves as a roadmap for the future, ensuring that museums remain spaces of inclusion and information, evolving to meet the diverse needs of cultures and societies.

Across the world, we can already observe this transformation taking place in museums. Curators and educators

are adopting new, more inclusive methods of engaging with the public, emphasizing immersive, collaborative, and socially responsible approaches to learning. These shifts reflect the recognition that museums must stay relevant to the contemporary world, responding proactively to its challenges and opportunities.

MONOVA and The Future

With a new strategic plan for 2024-2027 MONOVA commits to follow and pursue our guiding principles:

Inclusivity: Our approach will reflect the social, emotional, physical, intellectual, creative, and cultural spirit of the people and places we serve.

Empathy: We will create space for diverse perspectives and honest dialogue.

Relevancy: We will actively listen and seek to understand our current context.

Memory: We will remember the past to know the present and plan for the future.

Co-Creation: We will deliver on our mission through active participation and collaboration.



Fig. 5. Truth & Reconciliation Day Gallery Tour with Indigenous Cultural Programmer Jordan Dawson. © Alison Boulter



Fig. 6 .Truth & Reconciliation Day Program at MONOVA. © Alison Boulier

Trust: The strength of our inter-connections and relationships will speak boldly through exhibits and programs.

Innovative and Forward Thinking: We will embrace new approaches, technology, and ideas to enhance audience experience.

MONOVA honors our relationship with the Skwxwú7mesh and sə́lilwətaʔ Nations who continue to steward the ancestral territories now recognized as North Vancouver. The signed MOUs are integral to our ongoing commitment to working together in partnership and MONOVA ensures we honor the principles and objectives of the MOUs, work collaboratively with Skwxwú7mesh and sə́lilwətaʔ Nations and establish effective working relationships, approaches

and protocols that help guide this collaborative work in the best possible way.

Looking ahead, MONOVA is steadfast in our commitment to push boundaries. We envision a future where museums do more than preserve history—they actively shape a more inclusive, compassionate, and connected world. Our journey will continue to evolve, embracing new technologies, methodologies, and partnerships to ensure we remain a vibrant and forward-thinking institution for generations to come. As we build on the past, we will continue to forge strong collaborations with communities and partners, ensuring that MONOVA plays a meaningful and transformative role in the lives of all who engage with our collections, exhibits, and educational programs.