Interpellating the Edmontonian: Public Art, Collective Memory, Technologies of Community

Abstract

The author draws on notions of everyday life as a productive practice, and proposes three technologies of community—planning, collective memory, and interpellation—as fundamental tools in the process of community building. These tools are then used to propose a particular space as representative of the active deployment of collective memory in its own reproduction. Enabled by a by-law, public art of various kinds is seen as a primary method of informal education in the City of Edmonton.

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In tomorrow's world, men will not need artificial instruments such as jets and space ships. In the world of tomorrow, the new man will 'think' the place he wants to go, then his mind will take him there. --Sun Ra, 1956

(in Walsh, 2005, ¶ 1)

The essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things.—Ernest Renan, What is a Nation? (1882)

(in Confino, 1997, p. 1)

Introduction

Rhythmic footsteps erase the gap between my ‘heritage’ home and Grandin Station. Overhead, giant American elms extend a protective canopy, filtering if not blocking the rain entirely. Underfoot, concrete squares –‘square to the world’ in surveyor’s parlance—and a narrow strip of green circumscribe ‘no man’s land’, a grassed boundary that appropriates nature’s vernacular to regulate the pedestrian’s path. Despite this demarcation of an acceptable route, I imagine myself to be free, autonomous author of my day; yet at intervals pre-determined by the automobile’s appetite for right of way, the planner’s map, and the surveyor’s transit and chain—I stop, look both ways, and continue my journey. It occurs to me that this walk is an homage, an unconscious bow to the legendary ‘conquerors’—David Thompson, James Hector, Walter Moberly (Peakfinder, 2005)—of Canada’s vast expanse and to their vision of a privatized nation in parcels one-mile-squared. Iteration *ad infinitum* of this notion of nation-as-grid has rendered confusing any world unfaithful to the parallel-perpendicular discipline of north-south-east-west. My stop-and-go walk is also a concession to the triumph of a vision of The City “founded by utopian and urbanistic discourse” (de Certeau, 1999, p. 128); The City as logical extension of the colonial dream of expansion and progress; The City as a physical manifestation
of collective memory\(^1\).

But if a victory has been won, it must be that *something* has been set aside and forgotten. What has attempted to replace this mysterious *something* is clear; one need only step into the everyday to verify the truism. But a second glance discerns another truth; for the viewer willing to see, *silences* occupy the interstices of collective memory. Even as the process of selection privileges particular histories over others, and as commissioned art and the physical structures they adorn construct an urban landscape of indoctrination, ghostly after-images compose a counter-narrative of *invisibility*. And while a localized past is preferred, themes are not drawn exclusively from the well of local lore; tropes of missionary zeal, westward expansion, and national unity inscribe the local with larger myths of the regional and federal. Collected in mural and sculpture, concrete and brick, asphalt and steel, the abstract values, legends, and dreams of communal-self are reified; public spaces become *lieux de mémoire*\(^2\) produced by and productive of the modern city and citizen. Deployed thus, Edmonton’s public art and architecture constitute a discursive practice of internalization; the local, regional, and national become “everyday mental propert[ies]” (Confino, 1997, xii).

Following this general framework, the purpose of this essay is to draw attention to the ways in which symbolic connections are produced and sustained amongst the past, present, national, regional, and local; how they are circulated, distributed, consumed, and reproduced (Hall, 1999); how, in other words, an imagined community\(^3\) is linked with its corporeal manifestations. In general, I examine the relationship between resident and city as co-productive, each acting upon the other. In particular, I consider the proliferation of art along Edmonton’s

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\(^1\) The term “collective memory”, discussed below, is drawn from Confino’s excellent book *The Nation as a Local Metaphor* (1997).

\(^2\) Or ‘places of memory’ (Langthaler, 2002).

\(^3\) Again, discussed below, and drawn from Langthaler’s (2002) treatment of Benedict Anderson’s notion of ‘imagined community’.
light rail transit (LRT) system in the context of the city’s “percent for art” by-law (City of Edmonton, 1992). These works, I argue, are not merely derived from shared recollections, but are themselves productive of those memories. Public art, that is, does not exist solely to denote “a ‘raw’ historical event” (Hall, 1999, p. 508), but is narrative in another sense. A statue of a hockey player hoisting the Stanley Cup, for example, is not a transparent memorialization of a moment in history; rather, when combined with works located elsewhere⁴, it tells the story of a ‘City of Champions’, thus engendering in the citizen-onlooker self-identification as a member of a ‘winning tradition’. The point here is obvious: the intent is not to honour a hockey player, but to instill a sense of pride in place–loyalty to an abstract entity. Public art, then, transmits to the citizen particular images, emotions, and ideas of The City. No longer confined to the role of gathering place or transportation junction, the public square or LRT platform is activated as a transmitter of civic ideology. In other words, it becomes a discursive space (Hall, 1999).

Through the enabling mechanism of a city by-law, thematic discourses are selected and made ‘real’ in the form of commissioned art. Literally drilled, strapped, or otherwise attached to the foundations and pillars of the structures they adorn, these tales of the city are imbued with a degree of permanence; they become, for all intents and purposes, totems of the city’s collective memory.

I do not wish, however, to limit the scope of this analysis to those aspects of public space whose messages are clearly discernable through content analysis (ibid.). Commissioned art is only the most obvious example of the purposeful manufacture of a unifying collective memory. For if strategically deployed pieces of art can be read as producers and circulators of memory, a consideration of the purportedly innocuous details of this planned city should reveal further

⁴ Two examples of this suffice to make the point: first, the several signs that mark Edmonton’s city limits with the slogan “City of Champions”; and second, the murals on the outer walls of United Cycle depicting championships in various sports over the course of Edmonton’s history.
stories. Following from this understanding, I conclude this essay with a consideration of the LRT line itself as a *text*, one that contains, if we continue the metaphor, ten (soon to be eleven) volumes run-through with a common plot; or, alternatively, as a series of chapters that may be juxtaposed to create a series of stories written for and by the users of the system. It is tempting, given the nature of rail lines, to read the chronicle of the LRT as both linear and fixed. But the up-take of a story is not predetermined by disembodied beings who re-distribute the colonial narrative of inevitable progress through righteousness, charity, and meritorious action; rather, it is a tapestry woven by the daily actions and interactions of the many who occupy its latticework.

**Technologies of Community**

It must be declared at this point that walking is a routine set in contrast to the everyday narrative of Edmonton. Edmonton is, fundamentally, a city of single-passenger vehicles, themselves physical representations of the citizen imagined as individualistic consumer. It is a landscape intersected by wide streets and avenues and punctuated with traffic lights, an arrangement productive of particular patterns of movement. It is also an expression of the urban planner’s fantasy of dominion over a piece of earth, itself an articulation drawn wholesale from the colonial settler’s dreamscape of broken land, and a sign of the will-to-permanence of the city. Situated alongside this dominant discourse, to walk or utilize public transportation is to display the signs, respectively, of a lack of means or a belief in collectivity. Both are looked down upon as undesirable if occasionally necessary evils despite the tens of thousands who walk or take the bus daily. And while also an aspect of the larger, dominant order, public transit is of secondary importance in the overall plan for the city’s growth; there seem to be few limits to the sprawling tentacles of Edmonton’s parkland consuming suburbia. Put another way, shared transportation is subordinated to a dominant mode of relating to the city, a dominant conception that inscribes a
tale of the ‘good’ Edmontonian: self-sufficient and proud; hard-working and honest; the individual as capitalist, reliant only upon himself for success.

So, given its tendency to diffusion, its eternal, sprawl-inducing, centrifugal spin, what centripetal mechanics draw Edmonton together as a community? That it is drawn so is undeniable; the city’s continued existence is evidence enough of this. And while the need to pool resources for survival is a compelling historical argument for concentrated settlement, this explanation is not particularly illuminating to a consideration of the affective ties that bind communities together over the long term. It may be asserted with some degree of accuracy that ‘the city’ is a configuration of economic expediency; but it may not be similarly argued that ‘community’ exists as a result of this same attraction. The opposite, in fact, may be true; the resistance of towns and cities to their dissolution following the departure of major industries provides ample evidence of this. But unlike an economy, which is, in many respects, easily quantifiable if not entirely tangible, a community requires conscious effort. It may be effectively, that the attractive force of community constitutes an ideology, whatever that ideology may be. But “in order to be effective, ideology must also be affective” (Goonewardena, 2005, p. 47); it must, in other words, be attractive to the intended recipient. With this understanding as a starting point, I consider a number of technologies of community, educative devices arrayed as an aesthetic, gravitational practice.

Planning the City

De Certeau (1999) articulates a notion of “walking in the city” as a kind of urban resistance, an escape from “the imaginary totalizations produced by the eye” (p. 128). Walking is

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5 The fate of Kemano, British Columbia is an exception that proves this rule. Established and entirely owned by Alcan, Kemano was slated for closure in 1999. A movement to save the town was started by residents who had developed a strong sense of belonging despite the town’s overtly economic raison d’être. Efforts to save the town ultimately failed, though not for lack of residents’ attachment to the community (http://www.interlog.com/~grlaird/kemano.html).
a creative act, a performance in defiance of the typical conception of the city envisioned as stable and transparent, lying in wait to be read as written. The lived-city resists the planner’s designs. It is not built but happens as a product of an everyday that “has a certain strangeness that does not surface, or whose surface is only its upper limit, outlining itself against the visible” (ibid.). Real life in the city comprises practices “that are foreign to the ‘geometrical’ or ‘geographical’ space of visual, panoptic, or theoretical constructions” (ibid.). While the everyday is articulated in genuine experience, the city as planned opposes continuous re-creation; the “migrational, or metaphorical, city thus slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city” (ibid.).

What de Certeau seeks here is no less than to name the means—the technologies—by which the aspirations of the planned city are achieved. Following from the oppositional binary of designed versus organic, the planned city is a tableau disciplined in the service of predictability: “perspective vision and prospective vision constitute the two-fold projection of an opaque past and an uncertain future on to a surface that can be dealt with” (ibid.). Reification of the idea of the city is realized in “the production of its own space [emphasis in original]”, understood here as the outcome of the complementary acts of construction and demolition, an elimination of all that is not the city itself (ibid.). In the case of Edmonton, erasure accompanies unity as the map of the city is “harmonized into a numbered grid” (Wiebe, ¶ 3). Those unfortunate enough to have boulevards named after them have their accomplishments ‘disappeared’; their names, “disposed in constellations that hierarchize and semantically order the surface of the city”, inevitably lose “the value engraved on them”, but not their “ability to signify” (de Certeau, 1999, p. 132). And signify they do, but it seems unlikely that the pseudo-anonymous Mr. Whyte would have imagined his name adorning the lips of those looking for kitschy knick-knacks and drunken
revelry\textsuperscript{6}. Indeed, few Edmontonians lay claim to the ability to locate the referent of these wanton signifiers. It follows that historicization imagined in this way represents a re-positioning of history in the service of a preferred future. We sympathize with the intent of memorial, but misrecognize the mechanism and its effect: whether in the form of street name, plaque, or public art, commemoration represents “a dangerous tendency to invoke a completely mythical past”, an effort to invisibilize an undesirable “present or immediate past” (p. 137). The challenge of all counter-narratives to the ‘now’ is removed.

\textit{Collecting Memories}

If the city seeks its own apotheosis, it must inscribe its primacy not only upon the land, but also upon the minds of its constituents. Alon Confino’s (1997) notion of collective memory provides a useful elucidation of an expression that, while possessing a degree of currency, defies the common understanding of ‘memory’. Indeed, ‘memory’ is typically relegated to the personal domain; after all, “social groups cannot remember” (p. 8). But to suggest that one ideates the world in isolation is to deny significance to the social, thus creating an improbable vision of the individual as independent creator of both personal and communal spaces. This is, of course, impossible, for the individual inflects and is inflected by society: “one’s memory…originates from the symbols, landscape, and past that are shared by society” (ibid.). Even the relative importance of discrete personal memories is “embedded in a specific cultural, social, and political context”. What we deem the critical events of our own lives tend to align (or dissociate) us with images and ideals of the larger community. But the salience of collective memory becomes particularly clear when we consider that it is individuals—not some disembodied ‘they’—who collect and recollect the events that constitute a common past (p. 8). Memory of

\textsuperscript{6} Whyte Avenue is the central street of Edmonton’s Old Strathcona district, best known for its boffo boutiques, bookstores, and booze (http://www.oldstrathcona.ca/Index2.html).
this kind, in other words, is decided both by and for members of the group.

How then, can the notion of collective memory be deployed in this study of Edmonton’s urban landscape? Confino is primarily concerned with connecting the local and the national, so his analysis may be adapted to the current object of study in two ways. The first is to explore how affective connections are fostered amongst the variously positioned groups within the local, and how this newly constituted group relates to the region and nation (p. 8). Unity in this case must be understood as an abstraction, one that has little basis beyond that which is created by collective or coercive actions. Furthermore, a polyphony of group identities, especially pertinent in an immigrant society, would appear to stand in defiance of any sense of local or “national belonging” (ibid.). This is particularly so at the national level where, in the past, geographical dispersion and limited communication mitigated against loyalty. In the present context of a grid-city, one might expect that the planned landscape, inscribed with the ideology of private property, would function similarly: the self-interested individual is ensconced in a private enclave, transported alone to and from the castle in defiance of interpersonal contact. In the face of such a society, an assemblage, that is, of atomized individuals, how does the collective memory of a community hold together? Confino postulates that it relies upon “the negotiations between local…and national memory” that construct a “local-national” identity (pp. 8-9). Reduced in scale, the development of an imagined Edmonton requires an elision of the personal, local, and national in order to overcome divisive planning practices.

It is also important to explore collective memory as a practice by which people “internalize the nation [emphasis added]” (p. 8). In other words, it is not enough to allow for the diversity of a community’s constituents. While the ability of disparate groups to negotiate a balance of competing needs is vital, without a concomitant acceptance of the results of that
process, unity cannot be accomplished. Internalization, then, is commonly accomplished by the circulation of “a visual image of the nation” that represents “interchangeably the locality, the region, and the nation” (p. 9). In Edmonton, evidence of this strategy is found in the ubiquity of artistic renderings that signify a local history of sporting excellence. Similarly, its city hall establishes a putative link to the regional (i.e. provincial) by adorning itself with pyramids whose intended referent—the Rocky Mountains—rest more than four-hundred kilometers to the west. And the national is invoked both symbolically and actually through the still-existing structures of the transnational railway. Thus, “image[s] of the past” inhere “in material objects of everyday life” (ibid.). But these images must be understood as iconographic, akin to a religious worship, rather than historical or documentary (ibid.). Through these internal and external connective threads, we are encouraged to “embrace the notion of imagined community”, to internalize the external as part of ourselves (p. 10).

The production of collective memory is an educational process, a technology of community, and a complex one at that. It has been suggested above that this form of education is primarily coercive. Confino supports this suspicion:

Every society sets up imagined pasts. But to make a difference in a society, it is not enough for a certain past to be selected. It must steer emotions, motivate people to act, be received. (1997, p. 11)

It must be activated as a “sociocultural mode of action” (ibid.). Remembrances, in other words, are purposeful rather than passive. As discussed above, the collective memory of Edmonton is displayed publicly, but the intent of these installations is not transparent. Nor should we expect it be so; indeed, elements of urban space—public art, architecture, and infrastructure—act as a buffer between an abstract (potentially undesirable) ideology and the oblivious viewer, thus performing a mediative role (Goonewardena, 2005, p. 50). Furthermore, collective memory is
insidious in the sense that its discrete elements masquerade as history. But memory “both differs from and converges with history” (Confino, 1997, p. 12). We easily recognize that personal memory is subjective, contingent, and pliable, yet we equate ‘history’ with ‘truth’. History, though, “is also a malleable understanding of the past” whose veracity flows from an acceptance that “it is governed…by rules of evidence and verification” (ibid.). That it is granted authenticity through the mediation of trusted types—written texts and visual representations—only serves to obscure further its ideological orientation.

Inscribing Memory – Interpellating the Edmontonian

Both history and memory, then, are selective. But in order to make sense of how selective memory becomes exclusive truth, we need to move beyond an understanding of informal public education as coercive. We need, in other words, to examine the processes of memorialization that rely on acquiescence. The key lies in the productive role of the historian, artist, architect, and planner: “memory and history converge because the historian conceives of his or her story within the general image of the past shared by society, within a collective historical mentality” (p. 12). Here the canard of cultural producers existing in defiance of the mainstream is discredited. Upon inspection, the idea that the historian or artist sits by definition in opposition to the commonly held ideology becomes tenuous; but if we accept a certain amount of radicalism on the part of these individuals, we would not normally postulate the same in the architect or planner. And while extremes of ‘the left’ are represented within each of these communities, for the most part, those directly involved in the production of public art and spaces maintain the hegemonic system. Althusser’s (1992) notion of interpellation is relevant here: particular narratives ‘call out’ to both producer (in the abstract) and consumer (of the ‘cultural’ product) precisely because they are preferred, not because they are true. Put another way, they are perceived as ‘true’ within a
commonly understood and accepted discursive frame, a mental and physical space within which one’s subject position can be readily discerned (Goonewardena, 2005, p. 50); read in another context, within, that is, a different temporal or geographical location, these ‘true stories’ appear absurd. It is by this mechanism that the Cuban Revolution is rendered evil to the observer in the United States, or the ‘Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution’ mysterious to the non-Chinese. On the visual plane, the various pyramids\(^7\) of Edmonton might jar the Egyptian eye as surely as a giant perogy would mystify the Greek tourist in Glendon\(^8\). But to the interpellated resident, glass pyramid equals ‘mountain’ as surely as crucified perogy signifies ‘Ukrainian town’.

At this point, it becomes necessary to clarify the language upon which my argument rests. Throughout this essay, I have used the words ‘art’ and ‘culture’ with undefined abandon. I offer—as it has likely been assumed by now—an analysis based not upon ‘high’ art, but of art as common, of culture as ordinary (Williams, 2002, p. 92), of everyday life comprised of the daily acts and interaction of people with their surroundings. Williams held up the ‘ordinary’ as the logical starting point in any analysis of culture, and so it must be here. In Edmonton, the ascendant culture is working-class; Williams’ teashop denizens have little place in its everyday. This is not to suggest that Edmonton is somehow more proletarian than other cities (though it may well be); indeed, ‘working-class’ in this case has little to do with the economic means of the city’s residents or, for that matter, much of western Canada. What I am suggesting is that the dominant aesthetic of Edmonton is working-class. In a city founded on the fruits of farming, manufacturing, and heavy industry, it is difficult to discern a gentry in the old-country sense. Those with the money to do so may or may not flaunt it; the ‘self-made man’ is as likely to be so

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\(^7\) On City Hall (http://www.trailcanada.com/photos/photos-ab-05-03.asp) as well as the Muttart Conservatory (http://www.trailcanada.com/photos/photos-ab-05-08.asp).

as not, and if he isn’t, he will adopt and believe a vision of himself as such. He will, in other words, ‘self-interpellate’ to the dominant cultural frame of reference⁹. Thus, identification of Williams ‘teashoppe’ culture in Edmonton becomes problematic. And while the argument may rage as to whether or not Edmonton is “low and trivial in taste and habit” (p. 98), this is, for the time being, beside the point. It will serve my purpose to establish that Edmonton collectively imagines its past as ‘blue collar’ and, as a consequence, represents itself the same way in the present. Stated another way—and to butcher Williams in the process—there are no masses in Edmonton, only ways in which it sees itself as masses (ibid.).

If Williams successfully situates the everyday for this analysis, it remains for us to locate the means by which collective memory is realized in tangible ways. Mirzoeff (1999) provides the conceptual link between the everyday and the material objects within it: “it is not just a part of your everyday life, it is your everyday life” (Mirzoeff, 1999, p. 3). The everyday, then, broadcasts dominant ideologies by drawing the viewer to the interface of visual technologies—paintings, buildings, and sidewalks (ibid.). But in order for this kind of reception to make sense, we need to understand that a landscape of art and structure is a text. There is, in other words, a communicative link between the message and the receiver, a technology by which the text is received, and, by extension, assigned to memory. A text is read. Reading, in turn, is an practice of the everyday, a performance re-constitutive of the messages encoded in public space.

Conceiving of the visual landscape in this way allows us to understand “the importance of image making” (ibid.), the act of choosing “the formal components of a given image”, but not ignoring “the crucial completion of that work by its cultural reception” (ibid.). Here Mirzoeff draws on de

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⁹ Politicians in Alberta provide some stunning examples of this phenomenon. Regardless of actual means or origin, blue collar credentials are trumpeted to the public as indicators of worthiness for public service. The argument goes something like this: ‘once a working-class boy, always a working-class boy’. Highmore summarizes the political uses of interpellation thus: “politicians, for instance, are often fond of using terms like ‘everyday life’ or ‘ordinary people’ as a way of hailing constituents to a common culture: people like us, lives like ours” (Highmore, 2002, p. 2).
Certeau’s (2002) concept of an everyday life that “invents itself by poaching in countless ways on the property of others” (p. 64). ‘Poaching’, however, carries a scent of theft that might be cast off with a simple cerebral maneuver: the elision of others’ mental property—memories—and our own. Following this line of reasoning, reading is re-imagined as a productive act, rather than the passive component in the binary set ‘writing-reading’, the equal of ‘consumption’ in ‘production-consumption’ (p. 71). It is not, however, concerned with the creation of material goods; rather, it “produce[s] without capitalizing” (ibid.). For de Certeau, the productive capacity of reading stretches beyond re-constitution:

In reality, the activity of reading has…all the characteristics of a silent production: the drift across the page, the metamorphosis of the text effected by the wandering eyes of the reader, the improvisation and expectations of meanings inferred from a few words, leaps over written spaces in an ephemeral dance. (ibid.)

The same applies to reading the public space. Walking, driving, or riding the streets and rails of Edmonton, residents read and read into the text of the city, transposing and transforming it with and into the personal and the memorable (ibid.). Conceived thus, “reading…introduces an ‘art’ which is anything but passive” (p. 72); everyday life becomes a two-way process by which a version of the collective is inscribed onto oneself and subsequently re-inscribed onto the tableau of the city. Reading—living—is an act of translation and transliteration; the internal, including the internalized, is combined with the external in a métissage\(^\text{10}\) of the everyday.

**Technologies in Action**

Having discussed in detail the various means of production of the city, it remains for me to demonstrate them in action. How is it that technologies of planning, collective memory, and interpellation play out in the public spaces of Edmonton? In order to make tangible this

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10 I borrow this term from my classmate, Dwayne Donald. Métissage, as I understand it, refers to the construction of understanding based on the mixing of the conventionally incompatible, such as western and eastern philosophy, oral and written language, Aboriginal and European worldview.
framework, I consider a specific example, a mural that may be viewed from the platform of
Grandin Station, an underground light rail transit station in central Edmonton. Unveiled October
12th, 1990 by the mayor of Edmonton, the painting is a representation of the life and works of
Vital Grandin, a priest (Oblates of Mary Immaculate) and Bishop (1868 to 1902) of the area
inclusive of Edmonton (Ridge, 1989). In terms of its technical merit, the mural is common;
striking in neither form, nor content, it nonetheless successfully transmits a reasonable, if
uncritical, synopsis of the publicly remembered aspects of Grandin’s life. My purpose is not,
however, to criticize either the artist’s talent or the life of the Bishop. Rather, I want to show how
the mural draws upon and re-iterates a number of themes in Edmonton’s collective memory. I
also return to my assertion that public representations of history inadvertently relay silences,
narratives of invisibility that the collective memory would rather hide.

While there is always opportunity for public input into the planning process, it goes
without saying that the art eventually displayed will tell a story acceptable to those most
interested and involved. The selection of the story of Bishop Grandin, in other words, has little to
do with the thoughts and impressions of the current residents of the neighborhood in which the
mural is hung, and more to do with the wishes of those most vocal and passionate about this
particular location. It is true that there is a physical link to the community in that a number of
structures in the neighborhood owe their existence directly to the presence of the Catholic
Church, and these provide a significant portion of the mural’s content. Indeed, the station and
mural are dug into the ground directly beneath Grandin Catholic Elementary School, and only
blocks from St. Joachim’s (French) Church and St. Joseph’s Basilica (English). But the time in
which religion dominated the everyday life and imagination in the community is long past; high
rise apartments and condominiums have since grown up and engulfed the community. Few
contemporary residents would link their lives to either the church or the staid Grandin depicted below their feet. Furthermore, many would no doubt be surprised to learn that the mural depicts them as the inheritors of the good Bishop’s project.

But there is a second and more important reason why the content for the mural can be chosen and taken-up without controversy. While the story represented is essentially that of a (powerful) religious minority within the larger community, its themes reflect those popularized in the collective memory of the community at large. The first of the mural’s three panels, for example, evokes a commonly recognizable history, as well as the physical landscape, the idea of progress, and Christian charity. Green trees, blue sky, and fluffy clouds provide an idyllic backdrop. Over Grandin’s right shoulder, an explorer or coureur de bois provides a temporal link to a rugged past (Figure 1). Over his left, spruce trees—common in the Edmonton region and parts north—signal an aspect of the natural environment familiar to the viewer. Moving from left to right, a story of development is told, from exploration to contact to mission construction. A kindly and fair-skinned nun cradles a baby (Figure 2), preparing, it appears, to present the child to (the seemingly disinterested) Bishop Grandin. Particularly interesting in this panel is the way in which spatial relationships signal ascendant status of the European vis a vis the indigenous people depicted. Images of Bishop Grandin and the nun are prominent in the foreground; the ‘indians’ remain in the background, their individual features indiscernible compared to the considerable detail of the white characters. They remain mere objects of the paintings while the European subjects actively engage the eye of the viewer.
The ‘modern’ mission building towers over the lean-to that (inadequately) shelters the ‘indians’, its positioning to stage-left indicating its advanced stature in the narrative of civilization (Figure 3). The second panel continues the story: the arrival of the railway provides a symbolic connection to the national dream; the proliferation of modern structures and further spatial differentiation as the church presence—civilization—increases, stretching to the horizon. The Métis trader appears on the scene, but watches in passive acceptance as the modern world in the form of a steam engine arrives on his doorstep (Figure 5). Where in the first panel the missionary worked among the ‘primitive’ native, here a story of assimilation and merger is told. Always the ‘indian’ is a bystander in the sweep of history. The third panel brings us finally to the present. The temporal leap is jarring, but makes the desired connection between the pioneer(ing) and a still vital mission: the modern neighborhood with its churches and school are here (Figure 6), and the missionaries—sans bishop—still work to build the community, offering help and learning (in the form of a toy block) to a single Indian child (Figures 6 & 7). The two churches, French and English, re-inscribe the local-national link, the tropes of national unity and ‘two founding nations’ too powerful to resist.
The final connection between the tale told here and the neighborhood above is solidified with the inclusion of the station entrance in the foreground of the school.

Here we see clearly how technologies of planning and collective memory combine to interpellate the viewer within the narrative presented. The mural is meaningful to the viewer not because this specific story is known, but because the themes and messages were and are presented to her or him *ad nauseum* through the public education system and the theatre of the everyday. The messages are, in other words, *encoded* in the spaces and institutions of daily life (Hall, 1999). Stuart Hall’s conception of “naturalized codes” is helpful here:

Certain codes may…be so widely distributed in a specific language community or culture, and be learned at so early an age, that they appear not to be constructed – the effect of an articulation between sign and referent – but to be ‘naturally’ given. (1999, p. 511)

It should also be understood that the spaces in which any other story can be made visible are increasingly limited (de Certeau, 2002, p. 65). Planning as a regulative technology defies the possibility of an equal dissemination of information, thus privileging accepted and acceptable discourses as represented in the planning, construction, and decoration of the city.

But the coercive force of cultural regulation does not recommend a descent into a politics of despair. And I would be remiss if I did not draw attention to another possible reading of the mural, one that underlines the contention that reading—consuming—as “*another* production” (de Certeau, 2002, p. 65). Stuart Hall approaches this by distinguishing between meanings that the “determinate moment” of production “pre-fers” upon a sign, as opposed to that which is ‘confered’ at a second determinate moment of consumption: “we say *dominant*, not ‘determined’, because it is always possible to order, classify and decode an event within more than one ‘mapping’” (1999, p. 513). Taken to an extreme, a message can be completely re-constituted through invoking an “oppositional code”: “it is possible for a viewer to understand both the
literal and the connotative inflection given by a discourse but to decide the message in a *globally contrary way*” (p. 517). The viewer/receiver dismantles—“detotalizes”—and rebuilds the message—“retotatalise[s]” it” (Hall, 1999, p. 517). It follows from this understanding that the viewer/receiver of the encoded message claims agency. Thus, to the critical viewer, the application of an oppositional code allows a viewing of the Grandin Station mural as a tome of dispossession, domination, and cultural genocide. Little imagination is required to see how the story positions indigenous peoples as objects to be acted upon, to be converted, and educated. Indeed, from a position of numerical dominance in panel one, the ‘indian’ is reduced to near extinction in panel three, save for a singular representative in the form of a child devoid of any semblance of a unique culture. A final crucial detail is the subtle absence of a crucifix around the native child’s neck, surely no accident as all of the other characters depicted display the cross prominently. The native object—singular, pagan, still childlike and unaware—remains an object of the colonizing mission.

**Conclusion, or, ‘Sign, Sign, Everywhere A Sign’**

The mission of this essay has been to establish that public space is a text, that the forms of art, architecture, and infrastructure comprising the planned city constitute a system of signs that may be read. The city, as such, may be understood as a story, a narrative that adheres to a primary rule of storytelling: that the story must draw upon the existing dominant public understandings of the events to be depicted, as well as the political and social practices that identify particular (versions of) stories as worthy of representation and, thus, propagation. Stories, in other words, are not comprehensible simply because they exist; they must also identify the viewer as a subject within the tale—they must, in other words, be capable of interpellation: “if no meaning is taken, there can be no ‘consumption’” (Hall, 1999, p. 508). In aid of viewer

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11 Special thanks to The Five Man Electrical Band.
identification, it falls to the storyteller, the artist, to “draw topics, treatments, agendas, events, personnel, images of the audience, ‘definitions of the situation’ from other sources and other discursive formations within the wider socio-cultural and political structure of which they are a differentiated part” (Hall, 1999, p. 509).

Earlier, I described how, in the hands of a reasonably capable artist, Grandin Station has been activated as a *lieux de mémoire*, as a place in which memory is produced and re-produced as a means of reifying a particular image of the community. It is enough to say that “community art…impact[s] on the memory and history of place” and that the artist in this particular case, Sylvie Nadeau, is complicit in the propagation of a destructive, if well-accepted, story” (Johnston, 2002, p. 196). But I would also argue that Edmonton’s LRT line itself is an *objet de mémoire*. As a symbol of the nation, no representation surpasses the Canadian Pacific Railway, embodiment of the ‘Canadian Dream’ of an uninterrupted tri-coastal land tied together. Edmonton’s LRT, intentionally or not, fulfills a similar role, not only for the obvious visual linkages it conjures, but due to the sheer number of people who use it on a daily basis. Add to this that the line connects the north and the south of the city, and that it is (slowly) growing, and its potency as local unifying symbol is strengthened. But the potential power of the LRT as a sign is that it hails the viewer to a vision of the local that recalls the national. In doing so, it is a physical structure that performs an educational function in the everyday life of Edmonton, a site productive of a future Edmonton as envisioned in the collective memory of an imagined community.
References


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