

**Bridging Knowledge Communities  
at the  
University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology<sup>1</sup>**

by Karen Duffek<sup>2</sup>

At the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology where I work, in Vancouver, Canada, there is an extraordinary mask—a “Great Raven Hamsiwe” from the Kwakwaka’wakw First Nations people of Vancouver Island—that the Museum bought from a local crafts shop in 1965. This mask was commissioned sometime around 1920 by Chief John Scow to display the privileges he had received as dowry from his high-ranking wife, Tlakwel, and it was presented and danced before his community during the time when the important potlatch ceremony of the First Nations people was still outlawed by the government of Canada.

Last year, this same mask became the subject of research by a young First Nations (Kwakwaka’wakw) scholar, William Wasden, Jr., who worked with us in a joint internship between the Museum of Anthropology and the U’mista Cultural Society at his own community of Alert Bay. The Museum had hardly any documentation on the mask, so William went to his community and asked the knowledgeable elders there about its history. He began with questions that were then of interest to the Museum—that is, who made the mask, and when? But in their conversations with William, the elders focused much more on the inherited privileges represented by objects like this—privileges still

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<sup>1</sup> Paper presented at the conference *New Roads for University Museums*, the annual conference of ICOM’s International Committee of University Museums and Collections (UMAC), Mexico City, 26 – 29 September 2006.

<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to my colleague, Dr. Sue Rowley, whose document I have drawn on substantially for this paper: her successful “Bridging Knowledge Communities” strategic research grant application submitted to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, September 2005, and for which we are co-applicants with other colleagues at the UBC Museum of Anthropology.

owned and kept alive by family members through display in potlatches, even when the original object has left the community and become an “artifact” in a museum—and they made clear their concerns about the need to strengthen understandings among their own people about the proper ceremonial use of such privileges today. They brought to the forefront the question of how a public museum can function as a community tool—that is, how community knowledge and cultural practices can be appropriately shared with museums to ensure good documentation of the histories of ownership and use of objects in the collections, and how in turn museum information systems and practices can support the very urgent needs of both urban and rural First Nations communities for access to their own heritage.

What I want to talk about in the few minutes I have here is the way in which we are currently addressing the challenges of “un-masking” the prevailing museum frameworks in which objects are named and understood, of building relationships with cultural communities, and of building on those relationships to support respectful and mutually beneficial research. I will highlight a few aspects of a major renewal project that we have recently begun—a project that had its initial impetus in our need to do something about the very limited storage space we have for collections and the lack of adequate research space for staff as well as visiting researchers, artists, and other community members. It is a project that has since moved from the need for more room toward a much broader, more deeply transformative, and conceptually challenging idea that pulls at the strings binding museum to university, that tangles the definitions of researcher and community member, and that unravels dominant categories and ways of knowing to make room for multiple knowledge systems.

First Nations in British Columbia have been in the forefront of demands that the relationship between museums and contemporary Aboriginal peoples be re-aligned. This is not an abstract idea for the museum where I work, because not only do we hold First Nations collections, but the Museum and the entire campus of the University are located on the un-ceded traditional territory of the Musqueam First Nation. At the same time, the Musqueam and many other Aboriginal peoples see a continuing need for institutions such as museums, despite the critiques of museum representation and the historical relations of power in which those representations are rooted. Museums have been assisted by Aboriginal communities to move toward a new road, where the future of the museum is seen as a place where knowledge is stored, maintained, and shared for purposes encompassing community needs. Museums are seen as a kind of “memory institution” where invaluable information is housed, and we are learning that this information needs to be made accessible to and managed in partnership with its original holders.

The Museum of Anthropology and its partner First Nations communities have begun to travel this road by expanding the definition of “research” and “researcher” to be inclusive of our constituents—university students and scholars, as always, but also the public, and most particularly, First Nations community members. And as a university museum, we have received major state funding from the Canada Foundation for Innovation for a project based on this redefinition of research—a project we have called *A Partnership of Peoples: A New Infrastructure for Collaborative Research*.<sup>3</sup> One component of this three-year project is a new research facility in our building, which will create the storage space we need as well as better and more welcoming spaces for

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<sup>3</sup> See the Museum of Anthropology’s website for more details on this project and its funding sources: [www.moa.ubc.ca](http://www.moa.ubc.ca).

community members and other researchers to work with our collection of about 35,000 objects from around the world. As part of this component, we have begun to work with numerous First Nations to re-think the fundamental ways that collections are organized and made accessible—that is, the ways in which the objects—or “belongings,” as some Native people prefer to call them—are displayed, stored, cared for, named, their histories of use and ownership documented, and how they are managed to support the communities’ own cultural learning and access needs. Museum collections tend to be named and ordered in a firmly Western classification system that completely ignores Indigenous classifications and intellectual categories. So we have started on long-term research with community members to make First Nations languages and worldviews central to the way collections are organized.

The second main component of the project to be developed is an electronic one, called the Reciprocal Research Network. This will be a network that supports collaborative research in museums and often remote communities by linking British Columbia First Nations communities, the Museum of Anthropology, and major Canadian and international museums. For First Nations of British Columbia, whose material heritage is spread around the world in museum and private collections (there is more in New York alone than in all British Columbia museums and communities combined), the network will provide unprecedented visual access to research collections in North America and Europe. Its success will depend on the Museum and its initial First Nations partners in this project—the Musqueam, the Sto:lo, and the U’mista Cultural Society—developing protocols and intellectual property agreements that work for all participants. Their challenge is to adapt computer-based tools to culturally-diverse traditions of

knowledge management and accommodate Indigenous property rights to traditional knowledge.

Over the past years, the Museum of Anthropology and its students have worked with many communities to provide a forum for First Nations voices in temporary exhibitions and to facilitate community-curated exhibitions. Moving forward, though, means that we need to work with First Nations partners more specifically to develop tools and relationships that can bridge diverse knowledge communities and to support the transfer of knowledge between them.

Where have we got to so far? The bulldozers have started digging deep holes around the museum and the physical expansion is becoming real. And we curators wonder sometimes if we, too, have dug ourselves into a big hole, primarily as budget cuts are implemented, original plans scaled back to meet them, and deadlines rush upon us. What impact will these constraints have on our commitment to develop meaningful partnerships over time, and truly share authority with First Nations communities? And how responsive will we prove to be to other changes? Through our consultations with community members, for example, we are finding that our very museum-oriented focus on objects is having to shift somewhat in response to the most urgent cultural concern of most British Columbia First Nations—their endangered languages. The last generation of elders who still grew up with the Indigenous languages as part of their experience (despite having gone through residential schools) is now disappearing. As knowledge about objects and language diminishes with them, the idea of incorporating Indigenous languages and knowledge systems into the way we organize the collections becomes critical and can tie in directly to communities' own cultural strengthening programs.

As a final remark, then, among the many challenges facing university museums today—especially ethnology museums with Indigenous collections—concerns with social position should have less to do with how museums fit into university hierarchies than how we and our universities may work to build new and mutually beneficial relationships with originating communities.

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