

Your Stories, Our Histories Workshop Report

Background

On April 25, 2019, the first workshop in a series of community engagement workshops for the City of Kingston’s ‘Your Stories, Our Histories’ project¹ was held at the Portsmouth Olympic Harbour building in Kingston, Ontario.

The purpose of this two-hour workshop (and future workshops) is to create a safe space where Kingston residents can come together to share their ideas and engage in a discussion on what museum exhibitions, programs and cultural events they would like to see offered by the City of Kingston. This particular session focused on the strengths, challenges and opportunities related to cultural heritage across the city. It was facilitated by Ottawa-based consulting firm First Peoples Group, which was founded in 2006 and specializes in inclusive engagement and facilitation practices.² They assisted in bringing ideas together and in helping to build consensus on themes, stories and how we contextualize history here in the City of Kingston.

A total of 12 participants attended the workshop, representing various interests from around the City from museum curators and academics to entrepreneurs and local residents. Sitting in circle, participants discussed heritage in its multiple forms: tangible heritage such as museums and institutions; intangible heritage such as events and oral histories; and, natural heritage such as the Frontenac Arch Biosphere.

The following report captures high-level themes / key messages that emerged out of this workshop.

Strengths

At the start of the session, participants were asked what Kingston is known for and what stories are already being told well. Each participant reflected on this question and shared their thoughts with the group. A summary of these perspectives is captured below.

¹ The City's 'Your Stories, Our Histories' project is intended to gather community input that will be used to develop an updated Cultural Heritage Strategy for the City of Kingston. This Strategy will assist in guiding the development of exhibits, programs and events offered through the Cultural Services Department, and specifically the exhibitions and programs offered through Kingston City Hall National Historic Site, the PumpHouse Museum and the MacLachlan Woodworking Museum. It will also be used as a guide for the development of exhibitions and programs to be offered as outreach initiatives throughout the Kingston community.

² First Peoples Group, “About” online: <<https://firstpeoplesgroup.com/about/>>.

Tangible Heritage

According to participants, the City of Kingston is known for its architecture. Tangible or “built” heritage around the city was said to really stand out, with institutions such as museums, historic sites, galleries, churches, the Kingston Penitentiary, St. Lawrence College, Royal Military College, and Queen’s University already well represented across the city.

Intangible Heritage

Participants also noted how some intangible heritage is well represented around the city. This included the telling of oral histories – specifically contemporary, colonial, military history (including Kingston’s role in Confederation and the story of Sir John A. Macdonald). Participants also felt that festivals and music have become a strength of the city.

One participant highlighted the multi-faith table, which brings together different faith communities and celebrates the diversity of the city. A couple of participants also mentioned the Swamp Ward and Inner Harbour History Project (SWIHHP), which presents the stories of two of Kingston’s oldest areas, the Swamp Ward and Inner Harbour, through archival and oral history focusing on the twentieth century.³

Natural Heritage

While multiple participants identified the waters surrounding Kingston as a defining feature of the city, few participants highlighted natural heritage as something that is already being done well. Only one participant identified the waterfront as an area for great attractions and events (such as the International sailing competition and the Maritime Heritage Centre’s work on the Inner Harbour).

Challenges and Opportunities

What stories need to be told in a better/more holistic/inclusive way?

Participants moved from listing Kingston’s strengths to identifying any sites, attractions, monuments, exhibits, events that have missed the mark in terms of telling Kingston’s true history, or have lost their relevance over time. They were also asked to consider what stories need to be told in a better / more inclusive way, where these stories should be told, and in what ways. Several key themes came out of this discussion, as described below.

³ Swamp Ward and Inner Harbour History Project, online: <<https://swampwardhistory.com/>>.

As noted above, participants believe Kingston's heritage is well told in some spaces – notably the downtown core and Skeleton Park. However, there is certainly an opportunity to bolster this in the west end of the city. Similarly, participants believe Kingston's tangible heritage is well represented around the city. However, there was concern from one participant that these heritage sites are not being kept up / maintained.

As noted above, several participants acknowledged that Kingston has done well to open several museums to tell the different pieces of Kingston's history. However, there was agreement among some participants that there is no central place / institution that tells the whole story of Kingston. One participant mentioned that greater collaboration between museums is needed and others agreed.

What are ways that we could build or share heritage or history that aren't already happening? What stories need to be told & how?

One participant saw need to pay closer attention to voice and visibility. This opportunity for the City to be more inclusive in the stories shared / highlighted was echoed by others around the circle; with some noting how many of the current stories center around "old white men" or violence, and "these stories continue to be the same." Participants identified a number of voices that are not currently well represented and whose stories could be better told, including: migrants / newcomers, women and children, the French, the Two-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (2SLGBTQ) community, persons with mental issues and disabilities, Indigenous Peoples, and inmates in the Kingston Penitentiary, including Indigenous inmates.

Stories of the "unsung heroes" like John O'Shea, a labourer, who lost his life while rescuing dozens of Kingston residents from drowning in the 1870s, were also seen as missing from the current history. Participants suggested that the City could amplify these community voices by creating pub-style arts events similar to what the late Kim Renders, writer, director, and actor accomplished with great success.⁴

In addition, several participants expressed that the Indigenous voices and perspectives were not prevalent in Kingston's heritage and attractions as much as they would like and should be present within the City. Some participants saw relationship-building with Indigenous peoples as important and necessary so that Indigenous perspective could be told in a respectful way. One participant expressed confusion about the resistance Kingston seemed to have regarding any embrace of Indigenous history. This same participant stated that addressing Indigenous history does not devalue from current told

⁴ Canadian Theatre Encyclopedia, "Renders, Kim", Online:
<<http://www.canadiantheatre.com/dict.pl?term=Renders%2C%20Kim>>.

(colonial) history, but the context is necessary. Someone suggested creating an Indigenous cultural centre that the City could contribute money to establishing.

Other New Ideas: What would residents like to see?

Other new ideas and opportunities mentioned include:

The workshop participants were keen to share their ideas on how to improve the City's attractions and create experiences for people living or visiting Kingston.

In terms of the conveying of history, several participants wish to have less known and different stories told in order to diversify from the prevailing Sir John A. Macdonald stories. This could be shared in a "story of the day" on the City of Kingston website. There could also be storytelling and "story days." To tell these other Indigenous and other lesser known stories, we must build relationships with knowledge holders/keepers in an ethical way without being extractive.

Regarding tangible heritage, while a couple of participants mentioned that churches stood out for them as useful and notable spaces, there is a concern about the trend of churches being repurposed or demolished if they are not maintained. One participant suggested the possibility of using churches as multi-use spaces (i.e. restoring heritage buildings to use for other purposes). Natural heritage areas such as the waterfront area could be built up as a main area of attraction. For example, it was suggested that the Biosphere could be promoted as eco-tourism.

Participants suggested creating events and attractions at areas outside of the downtown core to highlight other areas including this waterfront. Such ideas included an exhibit on industrial buildings, street art events, and cultural display panels throughout the City. The public photography exhibit could be expanded beyond the downtown core. One participant suggested that a Maritime Heritage Centre that could focus on the inner harbor and boat building. Another participant suggested creating an exhibition of the architectural history of Kingston.

Travelling exhibits where people go to more than one location to learn about history was brought up by several participants. This could look like collaboration between different museums on the same themes/topics for exhibits, as well as a City tour to different locations with participants travelling by foot or bus in walking and bus tours. Multicultural exhibits and an Indigenous cultural centre were also suggested. It was important to participants that different organizations collaborate and interact between different museums, faiths and cultural groups.

Participants expressed how they want to move past the tangible to the intangible, which includes creating experiences, relationship-building and building a social fabric for the city. Participants saw the City of Kingston being a main creator and funder of these various suggested events and attractions.

Other new ideas and opportunities mentioned include:

- Tell several small stories in more places
- Acts of discovery
- Focus on the “Ephemeral”
- Increase capacity to move past the tangible to intangible (people want experiences not things) and build social fabric
- Find more opportunities to connect
- Tell the stories of inmates at Kingston Penitentiary
- Build relationship with knowledge holders/keepers without being extractive (doing it in an ethical way)
- Consider a maritime heritage center to highlight boat-building / inner-harbour history
- More multi-use spaces (i.e. restoring heritage buildings to use for other purposes)
- Exhibit on industrial buildings
- Protect the biosphere (eco-tourism, turtles)
- Focus more on the waterfront (bring back tall ships?)
- Street party or neighborhood walks to tell history of buildings
- More street art
- Series of exhibitions on architectural history of Kingston, in addition to static displays at Heritage Resource Centre
- Cultural display panels
- Opportunity for multicultural festival

Next Steps

The next community engagement workshop will be held during the week of August 14 and will build on the themes identified in April. For more information on upcoming Your Stories, Our Histories engagement opportunities or to find out more about the City’s work to develop an updated cultural heritage strategy, please contact Jennifer Campbell by email at jlcampbell@cityofkingston.ca or by phone at 613-546-4291, Ext. 1377.