

Indigenous peoples are the first placekeepers and city builders

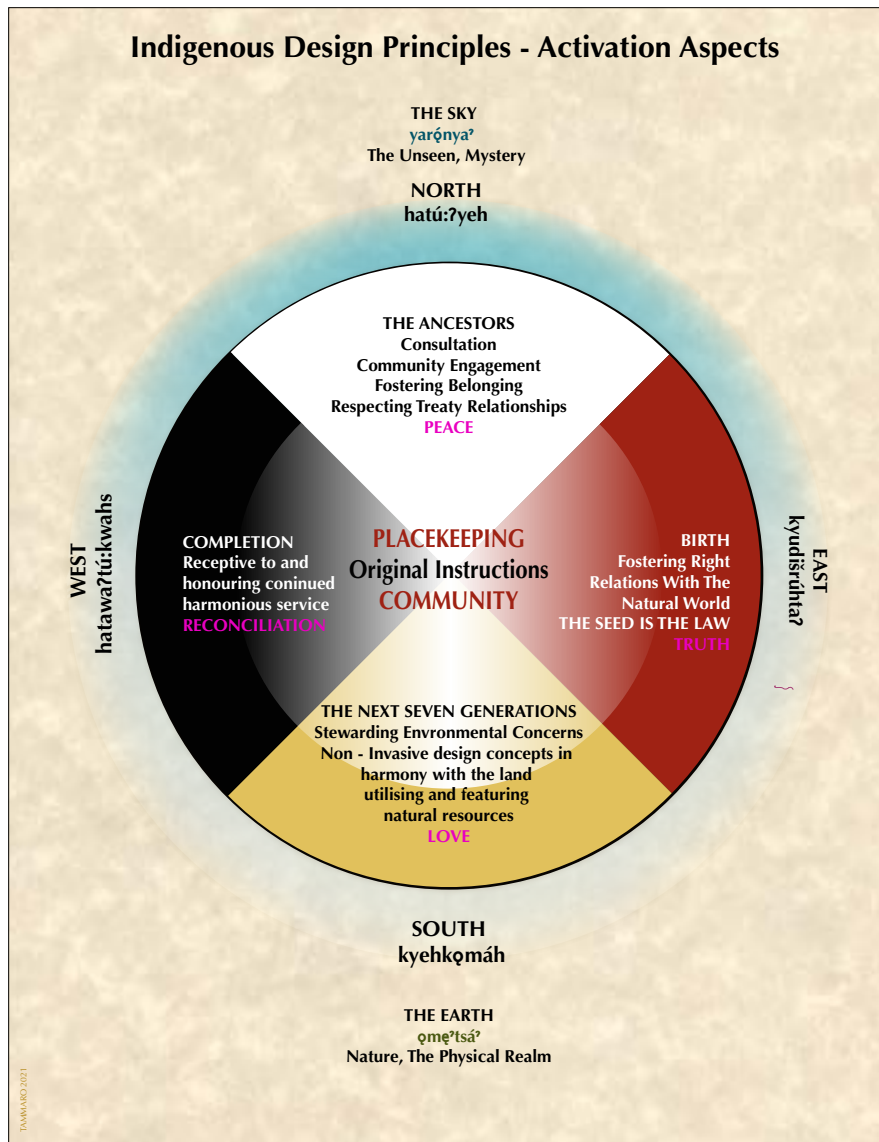
Despite the lingering perception that Indigenous peoples are not urban and modern, the reality is that cities of all sizes were settled on the ancestral territories and permanent or seasonal use sites of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Nations, and they have always been a contributing force within cities. In 2021, more than 80% of Indigenous peoples in Canada call cities home, and are active in every sector of society and the economy. As such, urban hubs across Canada are in fact not settler cities, but Indigenous cities. In fact, the Squamish, Musqueam and Tsleil-Waututh Nations in Squamish and Vancouver Area, BC; St. Mary's First Nation in Fredericton, New Brunswick, and the Yellowknife Denes in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories are all First Nations that are annexed with major municipalities.

Another way of understanding Indigenous city-building both historical and contemporary is that many Indigenous Nations across Turtle Island and around the world have large populations and provide similar governance, social, health, public infrastructure, and environmental services as municipalities. For Indigenous Nations, the path towards the resurgence of peoples' sovereignty and self-governance has been increased self-sufficiency for their communities and bridging systemic divides and barriers by bridging gaps in data and digital infrastructure; health and social services; and opportunities in economic, educational, and entrepreneurship opportunities.

Many Indigenous community and technology leaders across Canada are transforming their communities to be leaders in clean energy and nature-inspired technologies, fibre optic-enabled community-based broadband networks, e-health services, digital education platforms, net-zero housing innovation, food sovereignty, and culturally informed approaches to mental health and life promotion. The innovation excellence demonstrated in areas such as technology, land stewardship, climate resilience, and architecture is on par with large municipalities and is also being harnessed by urban Indigenous practitioners and entrepreneurs in the development of cities.

As the First Peoples of their respective lands, the ancestors of contemporary Indigenous Nations built vibrant settlements, governance structures, housing, land and water stewardship, and food production technologies, and social and health systems. They were the original placekeepers and city builders, artists, planners, innovators, scientists, and architects. Indigenous models have transformed natural environments and urban landscapes and embody connectivity to land and place, kinship, holism, sovereignty, resilience, and cultural revitalization.

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Credit: Wyandot/Wendat Lodge and Design activation principles, Catherine Támmaro

Models from Indigenous and other ancient cultures have much to teach innovation and municipal leaders about more resilient and nature-attuned ways to build regenerative urban communities and economies of the present and future. There are hundreds of thousands of Indigenous and ancient technologies and designs from all over the world that have been orally or textually documented and many are being revitalized in their original form to improve current systems.

They are also inspiring new nature-inspired sensibilities and models that are hybrid forms of traditional and contemporary technologies, adapted and scaled to the specific ecologies, social contexts, and urban challenges of diverse urban and rural communities.

Decolonization, Unsettling the Commons and Transformative Reconciliation

Decolonization and Unsettling the Commons

All city-building practices in settler cities across Turtle Island and other Indigenous homelands and treaty lands take place on the occupied lands of First Nations, Inuit and Métis – past, present, and future – and are subject to traditional covenants, inherent land rights, treaties, and self-government agreements. By virtue of cities taking place on Indigenous lands, and that more than 80% of Indigenous peoples in Canada live in cities, large urban hubs are in fact Indigenous Cities.

Moreover, all municipalities from small cities to large urban hubs have an opportunity to align the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's calls to action with placekeeping and city building policy and practice to become Cities of Reconciliation – as attempted by the City of Vancouver¹.

The creation of a City of Reconciliation framework was designed to honour Vancouver's Indigenous history and culture, and compels all departments of the City to find new ways to conduct city building, design and planning, and land stewardship in acknowledgement of the unceded Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Nation homelands that it is situated upon. Furthermore, Vancouver has also become the first major city in Canada to commit to implementing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), as formally acknowledged by the First Nations Leadership Council (FNLC).

Despite the distinctly Indigenous lineage, citizenry, and influence within cities of all sizes, there has been a systematic and systemic denial of Indigenous peoples' rights in urban spaces, including their right to self-determination over land-use planning and stewardship, and public space planning and design² that impact their community and heritage. Colonial and assimilation policies have attempted to erase Indigenous presence and expressions of placekeeping and innovation in public spaces and civic institutions throughout Canada's cities. While cities often symbolize beacons of opportunity for flourishing and prosperity, they have frequently become places and spaces of marginalization and

1- Vancouver's City of Reconciliation, and precipitatory city-wide policy and service review, was led by the pioneering work of urban planner and thought leader Ginger Gosnell-Myers (former inaugural Indigenous Affairs Manager with the City of Vancouver). Her work also contributed to opening up dialogue between the municipal government and the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh, which led to Vancouver becoming a City of Reconciliation and hosting the landmark Canada 150+ celebrations in 2017.

2 - Fawcett, R.B., Walker, R. & Greene, J. (2015). Indigenizing City Planning Processes in Saskatoon, Canada, *Canadian Journal of Urban Research*, 24(2): 158-175.

pain for many First Nations, Métis, and Inuit, including experiences of: discrimination and racialized and gendered violence; and disproportionate levels of vulnerability to poverty, economic and social marginalization, sub-standard housing and homelessness, incarceration, and health impacts from intergenerational trauma.

Even the public natural and built spaces of the civic commons that are intended for all residents to live, work, play, celebrate, and participate in how they are programmed – have often been designed and planned in ways that privilege the worldviews and rights of access of particular settler groups above those of urban Indigenous and racialized communities. In this way, civic commons or public spaces are complicit in producing and maintaining colonial structures and have thus become naturalized settler spaces.^{3,4}

While urban Indigenous practitioners are rooted within their cultural teachings and practices, urban forms of earth-working, art and design, and ceremony and structures, it is often still necessary in for them to legitimize and (re)claim their right to be in city spaces that link to long histories of colonial oppression and erasure of Indigenous cultures. As evidenced by too many recent cases of racism and neglect by hospitals and police services and continued violence against Indigenous girls, women and two-spirited people, public spaces and institutions in Canadian cities can be extremely unsafe, unwelcome, and even deadly for many Indigenous people.

3 - Great Lakes Commons: works with a national network of water keepers and stewards to awaken and restore our relationship to these water; to activate a spirit of responsibility and belonging in the bioregion; and to establish stewardship and governance that enables communities to protect these waters forever.

4 - Fortier, C. (2017). *Unsettling the Commons: Social Movements Within, Against, and Beyond Settler Colonialism*. Arbeiter Ring Publishing

This is completely unacceptable and shameful, especially in a country where settler governments and institutions have formally committed to the Royal Proclamation on Aboriginal Peoples, the Truth and Reconciliation (TRC) and UNDRIP calls to action, and launched a national inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. For the sake of their future, cities need to become much more inclusive, safe, and just for all people; and it should be formally acknowledged that the First Peoples of Canada have rights to the city and to practice placekeeping and other cultural forms in the civic commons.

Civic leaders are increasingly being called on by Indigenous and grassroots organizations to unsettle and challenge colonial settler planning and governance of the commons. They are simultaneously being called on to restore Indigenous and commons stewardship, design, and participatory decision-making models in natural systems and public spaces.^{5, 6}

These models demonstrate that the commons can be transformative by connecting all peoples through cultivating trust, inclusion, and belonging; and creating shared benefit and responsibility. In response, progressive civic leaders are innovating new and better ways to design, operationalize, and govern public spaces that are aligned with the realities and visions of Indigenous and diverse communities in order

5 - Indigenous Land Stewardship Circle: a Circle of Elders, knowledge keepers, community members and leaders who have joined with the City of Toronto, Urban Forestry, the TRCA, the High Park Nature Centre, and other local organizations around our shared commitment to healing Indigenous lands and community in Toronto. <<https://indigenouslandstewardshipto.wordpress.com/>>

6 - Great Lakes Commons: works with a national network of water keepers and stewards to awaken and restore our relationship to these water; to activate a spirit of responsibility and belonging in the bioregion; and to establish stewardship and governance that enables communities to protect these waters forever.

to deliver social, economic, and environmental benefits for their communities.^{7,8,9}

Despite the challenges faced by contemporary urban Indigenous communities, Indigenous voices, knowledges, creations and innovations in 2021 are as alive, vibrant, and generative as ever. They are prompting the level of truth-telling and transformational shifts that our societies desperately need in this current moment of persistent colonialism, patriarchy, and racism; global pandemic; structural inequality and insecurity; climate and environmental crises; and health and mental wellness crises. It is very hopeful and exciting to see amazing place-based interventions and creative forms disrupting sites around cities across Canada by Indigenous youth, artists, innovators, designers, knowledge-keepers, and activists.

For example, urban Indigenous practitioners and grassroots organizations across Canada have struggled for, negotiated and reclaimed public spaces to imagine and self-determine the worlds they want to create and live on their terms and according to their stories and values. Reworlding or reimagining the places and spaces they inhabit as Indigenous peoples, and the underlying settler paradigms that dominate them, opens up a multiplicity of ways for Indigenous people to be, know and do in cities.

7 - Evergreen: works in collaboration and partnership with Indigenous placekeeping practitioners and civic leaders to reimagine and transform civic commons, and cities of the future in ways that reflect Indigenous leadership and are in service of future generations. <<https://futurecitiescanada.ca/programs/indigenous-re-imagining-of-cities-project/>>

8 - The Bentway: re-imagines how we build, experience, activate, and value public space together. <<https://www.thebentway.ca/>>

9 - Civic Commons: by elevating community voices and uniting different sectors around mutually agreed goals, Civic Commons aims to build the infrastructure and collective muscle needed to address the root causes of inequity in Greater Seattle. <https://www.civic-commons.org/>

Ways that connect them to their Indigeneity, community, ancestors and the land. Through reworlding, Indigenous people are also imagining and activating their own futures, as well as re-shaping the landscapes and futures of the cities and civic commons they call home.

Based on Future Cities Canada Fellow Tash Naveau's work as a media artist, creative producer, arts administrator, and Placekeeping accomplice, the following Toronto-based and other urban examples and analysis of Indigenous and ally collectives and organizations represent the vibrancy of land/place-based and creative forms of unsettling and reimagining urban public spaces:

Indigenous collectives and grassroots groups are focusing their efforts on activating their inherent rights in cities to access lands, harvest traditional medicines and foods, and re-presence Indigeneity in culturally significant sites, though some may not have official names or outwardly present themselves as organized:

- Indigenous Land Stewardship Circle is a collaborative Indigenous and settler-allied circle centering its stewardship work on the Indigenous-created Oak Savannahs of High Park, and the caretaking of plant kin within the Park's boundaries. High Park is also known to contain places of great spiritual significance and harvestable medicines for the Haudenosaunee and Wendat who hunted and settled in Toronto, and current Indigenous users of High Park and Toronto lands.
- Mi'kmaq, Maliseet, Peskotomuhkati, and Gaspé region First Nations members who have been asserting and practicing their right to a moderate livelihood in fishing in their territorial homelands do this work to provide healthy sustenance, practice cultural knowledge, while ensuring, in their stewardship, the sustainability of fish stocks.

- There are many examples of research and land-based learning collectives around revitalizing and empowering Indigenous lands and cultures both local to the Toronto area and beyond. They organize and sometimes work arms-length with the City of Toronto and adjacent groups to forward stewardship, land-based learning and ceremony to community members. They are directed by community members in collaborative Indigenous praxis and have shaped their work utilizing intergenerational and intersectional leadership models:
 - Indigenous food sovereignty matrices including: the Centre for Indigenous Environmental Resources, the Cultural Conservancy (US)/Native Seed Project, Ojibiikaan, Mohawk Seedkeepers, and Taiaiak: on Historical Preservation Society.
 - Dechinta Centre for Research and Learning in Denendeh territory (Yellowknife, NWT) offers collaborative teaching and research in Indigenous knowledge including post-secondary education and research methodologies in arts and science fields. They are known for their land-based pedagogy and practices in education that are anchored in relationship-building and collaborations with Indigenous communities and governments.
 - Naadmaagit Ki/ Helpers of the Earth are a First Nations Ecological Restoration team working to remove non-native invasive plants and restore native ecosystems are based in the Weston/Black Creek neighbourhood.
 - Maamwizdaa is a group of Indigenous mothers/caregivers living in Toronto's West End, coming together to provide land-based cultural activities with a focus on learning how to build healthy relationships and supportive networks.

- Ogimaa Mikana is an artist collective working to reclaim and rename the roads and landmarks of Anishinaabek territory with Anishinaabemowin place names e.g. re-naming a small section of Queen Street in Toronto Ogimaa Mikana (Leader's Trail) in tribute to all the strong women leaders of the Idle No More movement.
- Land-based Placekeeping initiatives born out of necessity to protect ancestral lands include the Unist'ot'en camp on Wet'suwet'en territory in British Columbia, Kanasatake Resistance on Kanien'kéhaka territory in Oka, Québec, and the ReZpect Our Water protests and grassroots movement initiated by the Standing Rock Sioux Nation and surrounding Lakota, Dakota and Nakota Nations in Sioux County, North Dakota against the Dakota Access Pipeline.
- Wet'suwet'en house clans united to create camps to protect against the proposed expansion of Tar Sands and Fracking Gas pipelines running through Unist'ot'en territory. Daily activities within the camp change with the seasons and support the reclaiming of Indigenous land stewardship and cultural lifeways.

Indigenous urban community and allies also build community and placekeeping and decolonial actions through encampments in either protest, by necessity protection, or to be a part of a restored community.

There are many complex reasons for these instances; some starting point questions to consider before entering into a space of resolving land use disputes on/near Indigenous territories and the 'homelessness crisis' are:

- Why are Indigenous peoples' inherent rights to sovereignty, self-determination, access and use of their homelands and resource base, and governance leadership and structures not understood or honoured in urban and reserve settings?
- Is Indigenous people's agency and ability to access the land in cities not also important while they live unsheltered?
- How can municipalities and civic leaders intervene to make civic commons and already gentrified places safer and more welcoming to those who live on the land without shelter (Indigenous Peoples not on reserve may find themselves unhoused while resettling in host communities)?
- How can municipalities and civic leaders work with Indigenous and all marginalized groups to rewrite the civic commons first, so that it considers all bodies and their need for connection to land and water essential and sovereign?

An emerging tension and challenge for Indigenous and grassroots groups in arts and land-based placekeeping and decolonial work comes with the potential for mainstreaming and diluting Indigenous paradigms and practices amid the rising interest by settler institutions in reconciliation and engagement with Indigenous cultures and communities. How do Indigenous practitioners and organizations partner with civic organizations while resisting against Indigenous placekeeping practices and platforms being made mainstream or imposed on by dominant cultural agendas?

A strategy used by many Indigenous and ally collectives and organizations to preserve the integrity of their work and cultural roots has been to maintain their grassroots orientation in and for the community.

Where there is not a built-in process for co-creation with Indigenous partners, Indigenous groups will often stay arm's length from funders and collaborators, abiding by their commitments to granting agencies and partners while prioritizing their engagement with and commitment to Indigenous community stakeholders.

It is often important for the groups to remain fluid in their structure so that leadership can shift and grow with the community's needs. Programming within municipal and civic organizations that funded through government, corporate or institutional sources, may be beholden to frameworks and processes that are not aligned with Indigenous placekeeping values and methodologies, or visions for building an ecologically sustainable, community-centric and socially just city.



Credit: Marc Crabtree

Ongoing struggles occur within ideological values of place and land use because of a lack of knowledge and meaningful relationship-building with Indigenous communities.

In honour of the rich Indigenous legacies and futures that are intertwined with the history and future of cities, it is important that civic and Indigenous city builders and practitioners collaborate on an expanded vision of what a city means in 2021, and for the next seven generations. This is a vital part of the transformational reconciliation, placekeeping, and city-building work and must be consistent with the visioning and priorities of the diverse Indigenous, Newcomer, and settler communities that comprise cities.

Commitment to unsettling and decolonizing those colonial settler forms that have caused damage to the worlds of Indigenous peoples is integral to an Indigenous reimagining of cities. It is important to remember that colonialism is not a past moment that ended when power was transferred from the former European colonial powers to the new leaders of independent, sovereign states throughout the colonial empire. The legacies and impacts of colonialism, and the colonial matrix of power (coloniality) are ongoing and perpetuated at some level, in some form, by all social institutions in our society.

It is therefore imperative that municipalities and civic leaders work alongside Indigenous peoples for the long term, identifying and dismantling colonial discourses and practices that persist in placekeeping and city-building. At the same time, civic leaders can be co-creating spaces and opportunities with Indigenous communities to reclaim self-determination of the processes and expressions of place that reflect their identities and futures in urban centres. Moreover, how can civic leaders better commit to listening to, learning from, building reciprocal relationships with, and ceding power to urban Indigenous communities to ensure we are working together to make visible and honour the persistent imprint and activation of Indigeneity in cities?

Truth Telling Before Reconciliation

In coincidence with an emphasis on truth-telling before reconciliation¹, it is imperative that municipalities and civic organizations be honest about the history of conquest, colonialism, and genocide in the making of the Canadian state; and that all city building and placemaking occurs on the occupied lands of Indigenous Nations. An integral part of repairing, restoring, and building mutually respectful and equitable relationships with Indigenous peoples is for settler institutions to become more conscious of the deeply ingrained settler-colonial worldviews and power inequities that persist within contemporary urban planning and design, city-building, and municipal policies. This requires that settlers acknowledge their settler privilege on occupied Indigenous lands and gain in-depth understanding of their own complex relationships to Indigenous lands, peoples, cultures and impacts of colonization. It also requires that settlers understand that the 'Canadian identity' is founded in a colonial system that produces and reproduces polarization and economic inequality between Indigenous, Black, people of colour, newcomers, and European-descended peoples.

Moreover, the TRC calls to action and the preceding Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) formally call on people in Canada to unlearn the false and damaging 'truths' about Indigenous peoples that have been taught and socialized within many educational, political, and media spaces. This can be done through direct consultation with Indigenous knowledge-keepers, practitioners, and organizations, as well as learning tools and research led by Indigenous practitioners and scholars.

1 - Yesno, R. (2018, December). Before reconciliation is possible, Canadians must admit the truth, Maclean's Magazine. Retrieved from: <https://www.macleans.ca/opinion/before-reconciliation-is-possible-canadians-must-admit-the-truth/>

These sources can also help people looking to access appropriate and accurate information in ways that are more genuine and grounded in the worlds of Indigenous peoples.

Settler colonialism will continue to be the dominant narrative restricting Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds if it is not actively and constantly addressed and dismantled. Critical self-reflection of one's own cultural biases and blind spots, especially those that privilege settler colonial views and create exclusionary practices, is the only way to disrupt status quo patterns and inequitable practices. When we do this work with intentionality and open minds and hearts, it becomes possible to re-pattern relationships and approaches that are more honest, mutually valuable and generative for Indigenous and civic partners. Truth-telling about the colonial settler history and present of cities and city building is a necessary part of reconciling and healing for the future.

Many First Nations and Inuit community and technology leaders across Canada are transforming their communities to be leaders in clean energy and nature-inspired technologies, fibre optic-enabled community-based broadband networks, e-health services, digital education platforms, net-zero housing innovation, food sovereignty, and culturally informed approaches to mental health and life promotion. The innovation excellence demonstrated in areas such as technology, land stewardship, climate resilience, and architecture is on par with large municipalities and is also being harnessed by urban Indigenous practitioners and entrepreneurs in the development of cities.

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Models from Indigenous and other ancient cultures have much to teach innovation and municipal leaders about more resilient and nature-attuned ways to build regenerative urban communities and economies of the present and future. There are hundreds of thousands of Indigenous and ancient technologies and designs from all over the world that have been orally or textually documented and many are being revitalized in their original form to improve current systems.

Transformative Reconciliation

The TRC clearly states that the actual process of reconciliation would only be possible through meaningful, long-term actions by settler governments, institutions and societies to repair and re-build relationships with Indigenous peoples, and dismantle colonial structures and systems in Canada. “A critical part of this process,” they argued, “involves repairing damaged trust by...following through with concrete actions that demonstrate real societal change.” The 94 Calls to Action represent these concrete actions.

Consequently, there is increasing understanding by settler society that reconciliation is not a moment in time, but a long, committed, and ongoing process of truth-telling, dismantling settler colonialism, repair, recognition of Indigenous sovereignty, and healing that involves both settler institutions and Indigenous peoples.²

2 - Fortier, C. (2017). *Unsettling the Commons: Social Movements Within, Against, and*

Yet, it must be initiated and shouldered by settlers in a truthful, lifelong commitment. As famously quoted by former Senator and Chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Murray Sinclair, “Reconciliation is about forging and maintaining respectful relationships. There are no shortcuts.” It is very important that civic leaders understand that reconciliation is primarily the work of settlers and governments – not of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit. Indigenous staff and partners can play a significant role as advisors in reconciliation processes but it is not their responsibility to ensure that non-Indigenous partners become educated and sensitized about Indigenous peoples’ experiences, cultural protocols, dynamics of decolonization, and equitable nation-to-nation relationship-building.

The term ‘reconciliation’ has been critiqued as a misnomer because it implies that there was once a healthy and equitable relationship that became fractured and must now be restored to its prior wholeness. In the Canadian context, Indigenous-settler relationships have never been based on Canada’s recognition of Indigenous Nations as sovereign, equal partners. Instead, the state has systematically oppressed and marginalized Indigenous Nations despite their consistent struggles to assert their sovereignty and inherent rights as the First Peoples of these lands. There are hundreds of years and many many Indigenous lives and experiences that deserve to be brought to light, listened to and given justice. Reconciliation in Canada should therefore refer to “transformative” as opposed to “restorative” reconciliation.³

Beyond Settler Colonialism. Arbeiter Ring Publishing.

3 - Stanton, K. (2011). Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission: Settling the past?, *The International Indigenous Policy Journal*, 2(3): 1-20.

At minimum, transformative reconciliation is about settler organizations working to build strong relationships and shared understandings with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis partners as sovereign nations with inherent rights protected under Canadian Law. Transformative reconciliation is also a multi-faceted process that entails settler institutions working with Indigenous peoples to restore lands and land rights, economic self-sufficiency, and self-determination and self-government for Indigenous peoples. Systems-level transformative reconciliation between settler governments and Indigenous peoples is based on three important points of recognition:

- Indigenous peoples' sovereignty, inherent rights, and land agreements (e.g. treaties and land claims agreements).
- Restoration of land titles and rights to Indigenous Nations; and restoration of a healthy land-base in cities for urban Indigenous communities.
- Indigenous and civic organizations working in collaboration to rebuild a regenerative economy sustained by healthy communities and urban ecosystems.

Without decolonization, truth-telling and negotiations between Indigenous peoples and settler governments regarding restoration of Indigenous lands cannot occur. Without decolonization, a new relationship based on equal sovereign nations sharing political and economic power, lands and resources across Canada cannot occur. And without decolonization, the status quo of structural and economic inequalities against Indigenous peoples instituted during colonial rule will continue, without any genuine chance for transformative reconciliation.

Municipalities and civic organizations are uniquely positioned to embed and lead national transformative reconciliation processes and calls to action at municipal and community levels. At this level, deeper partnerships with Indigenous Nations and Indigenous urban communities are often the strongest. In particular, how can municipal reconciliation processes help to reimagine cities from Indigenous perspectives and models, especially in terms of: transforming the social and ecological systems that nourish communities; and investments into urban equity and social cohesion for all people?⁴

Municipalities also have the capacity to demonstrate proven best practices in transformative reconciliation with Indigenous partners for higher levels of governments.



Credit: New Beginnings, C.Belcourt and I.Murdoch

4 - Evergreen. (2017). Towards a Civic Commons Strategy. Evergreen & McConnell Foundation.

The following relational commitments⁵ are central to a deeper reconciliation that people must enter into first with the natural world if we are to transform the damaging production, trade, transportation, and consumption practices we are all locked into. They are also important commitments for municipalities and civic organizations to consider if they are to engage Indigenous communities in genuine forms of transformative reconciliation and collaborate on building resilient cities of the future. These include:

- Learning to live in a more sustainable relationship with the living earth.
- Learning to live in a more sustainable relationship to each other (Indigenous and settler) in sharing the lands and places of the civic commons.
- Learning to harmonize our relationships with each other (Indigenous and settler) with how we relate to the Earth.
- Learning to transform the destructive and unsustainable relationships of capitalism and settler-colonialism with the living earth and Indigenous and racialized peoples into sustainable relationships.

5 - Adapted from: Tully, J. (n.d.) A View of Transformative Reconciliation: Strange Multiplicity & the Spirit of Haida Gwaii, presented at the Indigenous Studies and Anti-Imperial Critique for the 21st Century Symposium, Yale University.

TIMELINE OF SETTLER-INDIGENOUS HISTORICAL EVENTS

The following is a chronological timeline of key historical, (de)colonial, cultural, legal, military, and relationship-building events¹² between Indigenous Nations and settler society in Canada. It represents a more linear trajectory of time and how important events unfolded from the time of colonial contact until recently. This timeline is not inclusive of many of the milestones that are significant to different Indigenous Nations and people, especially those that represent the particular cultural, spiritual, and legend-based events of each Indigenous nation or confederacy across Canada. An engagement exercise that may be quite valuable to civic and Indigenous partners is for them to work together to develop a local history timeline that reflects both linear and circular time, and significant Indigenous and municipal events.

From across Indigenous cultures, histories are recounted in the oral tradition from the time of ancestral histories beyond living memory. Oral traditions and origin stories describe: their deep connectedness of the peoples with land, water, and more-than-human kin; their conscious use and stewardship of the environment; and their sovereign and self-governing identities and systems that enabled them to be self-sustaining and adapt to changes in land and climate across the vast territories of Turtle Island – long before Europeans arrived and the Canadian state was formulated.

1 - Adapted from: Vizina, Y. and Wilson, P. (2019). Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples: A Holistic Approach, Toolkit for Inclusive Municipalities in Canada and Beyond, Canadian Commission for UNESCO.

2 - Historica Canada. Key Moments in Indigenous History. <http://education.historica-canada.ca/files/426/Key_Moments_in_Indigenous_History_Timeline.pdf>

Stories such as Sky Woman"/Aataentsic", "Seven Fires Prophecy", Wîsahkêcâhk and the flood, The Great Peace and Peacemaker, Sedna, Raven and the First Men, Gitchi Manitou, The Story of Napi, and Glooscap frees the water are foundational to the cosmologies, identities, land relationships, languages, socio-cultural institutions, and placekeeping practices of diverse Indigenous Nations.

Time Immemorial

Each Indigenous nation tells their own creation story about the origins of the world and their place in it; all claim their ancestry dates to time immemorial. At the same time, there is considerable archeological debate about when humans first came to North America, though broad assumptions suggest waves of migration from northeastern Asia, by both land bridge and boat, between 30,000 and 20,000 years ago.



18,000 –10,000 BCE

Irrefutable archeological evidence of human occupation in the northern half of North America, including in the Tanana River Valley (Alaska), Haida Gwaii (British Columbia), Vermilion Lakes (Alberta), and Debert (Nova Scotia).



10,000 – 2000 BCE

Settlements and communities are present almost everywhere in what is now Canada. From coast to coast, Indigenous peoples adapt to their surroundings and establish complex spiritual, artistic, and literary practices as well as economic, social, and governance structures.

2300 – 1000 BCE

Northeast Woodlands Indigenous Nations introduce agriculture.

2000 – 200 BCE

Indigenous Nations on the west coast establish sedentary living, hierarchical chiefdoms, and stratified communities. All have recognizable governments, intellectual traditions, spiritual and educational practices, and sophisticated implements.

500 – 1200

Developed communities on the Plains employ treaties to share territory with humans and non-human beings.

1000

Norse explorers meet “Skraelings” (possibly Dorset, Inuit, Thule, or Beothuk peoples) on Baffin Island and Newfoundland and Labrador. They exchange goods, but hostility and violence prevent lasting Norse settlement.

1450

The Haudenosaunee Confederacy, organized by Dekanawideh (the Peacemaker) and Hiawatha, tries to provide a peaceful and equitable means to resolve disputes among member nations in the lower Great Lakes region.

1455 & 1493

Further travels by Europeans and encounters with new Indigenous Nations result in foreign diseases infecting Indigenous peoples.

1493

Papal bulls authorize European nations to seize Indigenous lands in the Americas and enslave the peoples they encounter.

The papal bull Inter Caetera (the Doctrine of Discovery) is decreed a year after Christopher Columbus’ first voyage to America. Made without consulting Indigenous populations nor with any recognition of their rights, it is the means by which Europeans claim legal title to the “new world.”

1500

Estimates for the Indigenous population in what would become Canada range from 200,000 to 500,000 people, though some suggest it was as high as 2.5 million, with between 300 and 450 languages spoken.

1500s

France claims ownership of New France.

1500 – 1530s

Continual contact between European fishermen and Indigenous peoples on the Atlantic coast begins.

1534

Papal bull acknowledges Indigenous peoples are human and forbids their enslavement.

1537

Frobisher’s search for the Northwest Passage to Asia constitutes first known contact with Inuit.

1574 - 1778

Indigenous technology and knowledge of hunting, trapping, guiding, food harvesting, and disease control prove crucial to the survival of Europeans and early colonial economy and society, particularly during the fur trade. The establishment of alliances gives Indigenous peoples access to European weaponry and other goods.

1600s & 1700s

Tuberculosis, smallpox, and measles spread, intentionally or inadvertently, across North America, devastating Indigenous populations.

1613

The Two-Row Wampum (Guswentha) establishes the Covenant Chain, a series of agreements between the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and European representatives. They agree to work toward peace as well as economic, political, and cultural sovereignty. Gift exchanges honour promises and renew alliances.

1615

The first European missionaries (Récollets and later Jesuits) arrive to convert Indigenous populations to Catholicism.

1670

The Hudson's Bay Company is established by English Royal Charter, forming a monopoly and increasing the volume of goods in the fur trade.

1700

Métis emerge as a distinct culture

1701

Three dozen Indigenous groups and the French colonial government sign the Great Peace of Montréal, forging peaceful relations that end nearly a century of war between the Haudenosaunee and the French (and their Indigenous allies).

The Dish With One Spoon wampum treaty is made between the Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee nations, the treaty territory includes part of Southern Ontario between the Great Lakes and extending east along the north shore of the St. Lawrence River up to the border with the current province of Quebec.

1763

King George III of Britain declares dominion over North America east of the Appalachian Mountains.

The British Royal Proclamation gives limited recognition of title to Indigenous communities and provides guidelines for negotiating treaties on a nation-to-nation basis. The Proclamation requires a treaty with Indigenous Nations prior to settling in their territory – this remains the law in Canada.

Pontiac's Resistance provides a strong show of Indigenous unity. Under the leadership of Ottawa chief Obwandiyag (Pontiac), an Indigenous alliance tries to resist European occupation by ridding the lower Great Lakes region of English settlers and soldiers.

1771

First Moravian Mission established among Inuit at Nain, Labrador.

1784

The Haldimand Proclamation grants land, negotiated nine years earlier by Thayendanegea (Joseph Brant), to the Haudenosaunee Confederacy in return for helping Britain during the American Revolution.

1791

Haida chief Koyah organizes the first of many attacks on the British, who had begun coastal explorations in an emergent west coast fur trade.

1812

War with the United States sees tens of thousands of Indigenous people fight for their land, independence, and culture, as allies of either Great Britain or the United States. In British North America, the Western Confederacy, led by Tecumseh and Tenskwatawa, plays a crucial role in protecting Upper and Lower Canada from American invasion. By the end of hostilities, almost 10,000 Indigenous people had died from wounds or disease. The Treaty of Ghent, which is supposed to return lands and “all possessions, rights and privileges” to Indigenous peoples affected by the war, is ignored.

1828

The Mohawk Institute opens in Brantford, Upper Canada (Ontario), as a day school for boys from the Six Nations Reserve. In 1831, it begins to operate as a Residential School with the goal of assimilating Indigenous children. It is the precursor to the more elaborate system of Residential Schools.

1850 – 1854

The Robinson-Superior and Robinson-Huron treaties are signed in what is now Ontario, as are the Douglas treaties in what is now British Columbia. The controversial agreements allow for the exploitation of natural resources on vast swaths of land in return for annual cash payments, and make evident the differing understandings of land ownership and relationship-building through treaties. The controversial agreements reflect the divergent understandings between Indigenous forms of land relationship and stewardship versus colonial settler forms of exploitation of natural resources on vast swaths of land in return for annual cash payments.

1867

Confederation: the British North America Act creates the Dominion of Canada. Colonial responsibility for Indigenous peoples and lands is transferred to the new federal government, under the Department of the Interior.

1869

The Red River Resistance sees the Métis and First Nations allies defend the Red River Colony from the federal government’s attempt to transfer Rupert’s Land to Canada without consultation. Fearing a deluge of settlers and trying to safeguard their lands and culture, 10,000 Métis – led by Louis Riel – establish a Provisional Government to coordinate the resistance and lead an uprising. In the wake of the armed conflict, Riel flees to the United States. White settlement continues to expand westward. Promises to protect Métis rights are ignored.

1871 - 1921

Canada negotiates the numbered Treaties with First Nations.

1876

The Indian Act is passed by the Government of Canada on the premise that economic, social, and political regulation of First Nations peoples (and lands) would facilitate assimilation.

- First Nations peoples restricted to reserves on small parcels of their original territories.
- First Nations peoples required to obtain a pass from the Indian Agent to leave the reserve (1885-1951)
- Many subsequent amendments further restrict their rights and freedoms including: banning hereditary chiefdoms and other forms of governance; expropriating reserve lands for public purposes; prohibiting the potlatch and sun dances; and requiring attendance at Residential School.

1883

Prime Minister John A. Macdonald authorizes the creation of Residential Schools, run by Christian churches, to force Indigenous children to assimilate to Euro-Canadian culture and practices.

1884 - 1951

Potlatch and other traditional gatherings and customs are banned

1885

The Métis and their First Nations allies lead the five-month Northwest Resistance against the federal government in what is now Saskatchewan and Alberta. Anxious about white settlers and government encroachment on their lands, the Métis form a second provisional government in the region, again led by Louis Riel. The Métis Bill of Rights demands improved treatment for all residents of the region, including land rights, political representation, and better education. Calls go unheeded and Gabriel Dumont lead the Métis to take military action. Federal troops prevail and Riel is hanged for treason; Cree chiefs imprisoned.

1903

First RCMP posts established in the Arctic.

1919

The League of Indians forms to advocate for improved living conditions and the protection of Indigenous rights and practices. Though its effectiveness is weakened by government harassment, police surveillance, and disunity among Indigenous groups, it forms the basis for Indigenous political organizing in the future.

1922

The Story of a National Crime, published by the Chief Medical Officer for Canada's Department of the Interior and Indian Affairs, argues that Indigenous people's health is being ignored in Residential Schools and Indian Hospitals, in violation of treaty promises.

1923

Cayuga Chief Deskaheh campaigns to have the League of Nations recognize the Six Nations of Grand River as a sovereign nation.

1929

Complaints about Inuit not bearing traditional Christian names arise, beginning decades of government labelling strategies to ease the recording of census information and entrench federal authority in the North. Among the failed initiatives are metal discs with ID numbers, and Project Surname.

1939 – 1945

Between 5,000 and 8,000 Indigenous soldiers fight for Canada in the Second World War, serving in all major battles and campaigns. Most do not receive the same support or compensation as other veterans upon returning home.

1951

Indigenous lobbying leads to Indian Act amendments that give elected band councils more powers, award women the right to vote in band elections, and lift the ban on the potlatch and sun dances. Some soldiers who fought alongside Indigenous men and women support the change.

1953 - 1955

In the High Arctic Relocation, the federal government forcefully moves 87 Inuit from Inukjuak in northern Québec to Ellesmere and Cornwallis Islands. The relocation is part of the government's effort to secure Canadian sovereignty during the Cold War. Adequate support for the communities does not follow.

1950s and 1960s

Sled dogs are killed as part of the Sled Dog Slaughter, a government assimilationist initiative to force the Inuit of Northern Québec to deny their nomadic lifestyle and move them away from their traditional lands.

1954

Elsie Marie Knott becomes the first female chief of a First Nation in Canada when she is elected to lead the Anishinaabe (Ojibwe) Curve Lake First Nation near Peterborough, Ontario.

1960

Status Indians receive the right to vote in federal elections, no longer losing their status or treaty rights in the process.

1960s – 1980s

Thousands of Indigenous children are taken from their families and communities by provincial and federal social workers and placed in foster or adoption homes, often with non-Indigenous families. The number taken from their birth families in the "Sixties Scoop" varies by province, but is most prevalent in the Prairies. The process is immensely traumatic for parents and children and leaves many children with a lost sense of cultural identity.

1969

A federal White Paper on Indian Affairs proposes abolishing the Indian Act, Indian status, and reserves, and transferring responsibility for Indian affairs to the provinces. In response, Cree Chief Harold Cardinal writes the Red Paper, calling for recognition of Indigenous peoples as "Citizens Plus." The government later withdraws the proposal after considerable opposition from Indigenous organizations.

1971

The Inuit Tapirisat of Canada, renamed Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami in 2001, is formed as a national organization advocating for self-government, social, economic, environmental, health, and political welfare of Inuit across the 4 regions of the Nunangat in Canada, and preservation of language and history.

1973

The Supreme Court of Canada agrees that Indigenous peoples held title to land before European colonization, that this title existed in law, and that it continues unless specifically extinguished. Named for Nisga'a chief Frank Calder, the Calder Case forces the government to adopt new policies to negotiate land claims with Indigenous peoples not covered by treaties.

1974

The Native Women's Association of Canada is established to advocate for the social, political, and economic welfare of Indigenous women and girls. It promotes education, challenges discriminatory policies, and works to reduce inequality.

1982

The Canadian Constitution is patriated, and thanks to the advocacy of Indigenous peoples, Section 35 recognizes and affirms Aboriginal title and treaty rights. Later, Section 37 is amended, obligating the federal and provincial governments to consult with Indigenous peoples on outstanding issues.

The Assembly of First Nations (AFN) is formed out of the National Indian Brotherhood to promote the interests of First Nations in the realm of self-government, respect for treaty rights, education, health, land, and resources.

1980s – 1990s

Several politically charged standoffs occur on disputed lands. More than 800 people are arrested during the "War in the Woods" when Tla-o-qui-aht and environmentalists fight to protect ancient forests from loggers in Clayoquot Sound, British Columbia. The Oka Crisis entails clashes between Mohawk activists and Québec provincial police for 78 days. Tensions over the Kettle and Stony Point First Nation occupation at Ipperwash Provincial Park contribute to protestor Dudley George's death at the hands of an Ontario Provincial Police officer.

1984

The Inuvialuit and the federal government sign the Inuvialuit Final Agreement, a massive Western Arctic land claim.

1985

The Indian Act is amended to address discrimination faced by First Nations women who face the loss of their Indian status if they marry non-status Indians.

1990

The Meech Lake Accord collapses when Elijah Harper, the lone First Nations member in the Manitoba legislature, blocks its passage, citing the accord's failure to consult with First Nations or recognize their constitutional rights.

1990s – 2000

The Supreme Court makes several key decisions respecting Indigenous people, including but not limited to:

- 1997 ruling that traditional Indigenous land rights and title cannot be extinguished by the British Columbia government and validating oral testimony as a source of evidence;
- 2003 ruling prescribing three conditions for Métis status: self-identification as Métis; ancestral connection to a historical Métis community; and acceptance by a Métis community.

1993

Inuit and the governments of the Northwest Territories and Canada sign the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement, the largest in Canada's history.

1996

The final report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples is published. It recommends a public inquiry into the effects of Residential Schools and calls for improved relations between governments, Indigenous peoples, and non-Indigenous Canadians.

Last Residential School in Canada closes at Gordon First Nation in Saskatchewan

1999

The new territory of Nunavut is created.

2000

The terms of the Nisga'a Final Agreement come into effect, granting the Nisga'a \$196 million over 15 years plus communal self-government and control of natural resources in parts of northwestern British Columbia.

2006

The Nunavik Inuit Land Claims Agreement comes into effect, addressing ownership of land and resources in James Bay, Hudson Bay, Hudson Strait, and Ungava Bay, as well as part of northern Labrador.

2008

Prime Minister Stephen Harper issues a statement of apology to former students of Residential Schools in Canada for the harm caused by assimilationist goals, abuse, and cultural loss. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau extends the apology in 2017 to students of Residential Schools in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada formally acknowledges Supreme Court rulings on the Crown's "duty to consult" and, if appropriate, accommodate when the Crown considers initiating activities or decisions – often dealing with natural resource extraction – that might impact Indigenous peoples' treaty rights.

2012

Four women from Saskatchewan: Jessica Gordon, Sylvia McAdam, Sheelah McLean and Nina Wilson start Idle No More as a national (and online) movement of marches and teach-ins, raising awareness of Indigenous rights and advocacy for self-determination.

2015

Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report concludes that Residential Schools attempted cultural genocide and issues 94 Calls to Action. The Report documents the experiences of approximately 150,000 Residential School students and Survivors.

Supreme Court of Canada Chief Justice Beverley McLachlin notes that the mistreatment of Indigenous peoples is the “most glaring blemish on the Canadian historic record.” She further states that assimilationist efforts constitute “cultural genocide.”

2016

An Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls is launched in response to calls for action from families, communities, and organizations.

In Daniels et al. v. Canada, the Supreme Court rules that Métis and non-status Indigenous peoples are “Indians” within the meaning of s. 91:24 of the Constitution Act, 1867. Like the Inuit, they are not included under the Indian Act.

Canada officially signs the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which recognizes Indigenous peoples’ rights to self-determination, cultural practices, land, and security.

2019

The National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Girls and Women Final Report is released and reveals that persistent and deliberate human and Indigenous rights violations and abuses are the root cause behind Canada’s staggering rates of violence against Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQQIA people.

Indigenous Languages Act tabled in Canadian Parliament. Simultaneous translation of Indigenous languages offered in House of Commons for the first time.