



# Civic-Indigenous relationships in the era of Truth and Reconciliation

Lifelong commitment centered on truth-telling and dismantling settler colonialism required



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The history and future of cities in Canada are interwoven with Indigenous Peoples, lands, rights, systems, identities, and futures. The natural and built spaces that are often called civic commons are imprinted with the presence, stories, seeds, hunting and trade routes, medicines, artistic creations, and aspirations of diverse Indigenous Peoples.

These spaces – intended for the well-being and productivity of all residents – are on Indigenous lands. Yet, they 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. Civic commons are thus complicit in producing and maintaining colonial structures and have become naturalized settler spaces.<sup>1,2</sup>

Indigenous and other racialized communities have experienced a long and tangled history of injustice and mistrust in cities because of the ongoing impacts of settler colonial legislation and policies in Canada. The tireless efforts of many Indigenous practitioners and communities and non-Indigenous allies to unsettle, creatively disrupt, reclaim, and reimagine these cities as Indigenous cities have catalyzed critically important shifts.

## Commitment to Long-Term Investment and Restoration

We are slowly coming to a place where Indigenous values, models, and protocols are finally

being acknowledged as important to the DNA and evolution of placekeeping and city building within Canada's urban centres.

In light of these important shifts, it is only appropriate that municipalities and civic leaders commit to long-term investment in opportunities directed at:

- the restoration of inherent rights and treaty rights;
- strengthening of cultural identities and capacity building; and
- building robust communities that are self-determined by Indigenous Peoples.

Public spaces, institutions, and services throughout cities reflect Indigenous identities, presence, contributions, and voices. Therefore, the planning, design, and decision making around civic commons and public assets should be based on the self-determination and diverse needs and perspectives among urban Indigenous Peoples.

In this era of Truth and Reconciliation and Indigenous sovereignty in Canada, municipalities and civic organizations are being called to commit to both the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's

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1 Adam J. Barker, "The Contemporary Reality of Canadian Imperialism: Settler Colonialism and the Hybrid Colonial State," *The American Indian Quarterly*, vol. 33, no. 3 (Summer 2009): pp. 325-351.

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

(TRC) Calls to Action, and Principles of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) through their Reconciliation efforts and respectful engagement with Indigenous communities and organizations.

There is increasing understanding by some settler institutions that Reconciliation is not a moment in time but a long and ongoing process of honesty, repair, recognition of Indigenous sovereignty, and healing that involves both settler institutions and Indigenous Peoples. What is less understood is that this process must be initiated and shouldered by settlers in a truthful, lifelong commitment centered on truth-telling and dismantling settler colonialism.

It is very important that civic leaders understand that Reconciliation is primarily the work of settler governments and society – not of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit. It is not their responsibility to ensure that municipalities and non-Indigenous partners become educated and sensitized about the dynamics of decolonization, equitable relationship-building, and Indigenous Peoples' rights, experiences, and cultural protocols.

### Spirit of Engagement While Reconciling with the Impacts of Colonialism

Based on interactions with and feedback from Indigenous and civic practitioners across Canada, there is consensus that while municipalities and civic organizations are interested in Reconciliation actions and partnering with Indigenous communities, they often lack knowledge and confidence about what path to take.

The varied and complex terrain of legal rights, governance structures, economic conditions, demographics and cultures, capacities and resources, and relationships with settler governments and institutions across diverse Indigenous nations and geographies make the process even more daunting. Added to these challenges are the impacts of colonialism, poverty and homelessness, divisive national and regional policies, intergenerational trauma, and damaging urban planning policies that have contributed

to this gap in Indigenous engagement at the municipal level.

While many municipalities have opted to co-exist with Indigenous communities instead of building pathways for collaboration,<sup>3</sup> this dynamic is beginning to change as more civic leaders begin to understand:

- urban centres take place on Indigenous lands governed by treaties and comprehensive land agreements;
- Indigenous Peoples are inherent rights-holders (including those living in cities); and
- Indigenous Peoples have an ongoing presence and invaluable contribution to the evolution of cities and city building.

While Indigenous and civic practitioners may have different worldviews, they share similar priorities and hopes for building strong and resilient futures for their respective communities. 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.

Civic leaders can work with Indigenous and civil society organizations to identify and dismantle the persistent colonial and dominant forms of planning and governance of built and natural public spaces. Indigenous and other BIPOC voices are often excluded, and their presence and contributions hidden. They can also co-create spaces and opportunities with urban Indigenous Peoples to restore Indigenous and commons stewardship, design, and participatory decision-making models – elevating processes and expressions of place that reflect Indigenous identities and futures in urban centres.

### Navigational Tools for the Engagement Journey

The Civic-Indigenous Placekeeping and Partnership Building Toolkit<sup>4</sup> is a production of the Indigenous Reimagining of Cities (IRC) program. This resource for civic leaders and Indigenous practitioners can guide community engagement, design, and planning processes.

Weaving together a diversity of the perspectives, teachings, analyses, protocols, methodologies, and expertise of Indigenous knowledge-keepers and practitioners from across Canada and globally, it aims to provide a model of learning, guidance, and practical application for municipalities and civic organizations. The content is inspired by and builds on the incredible base of ancestral and contemporary knowledge, experience, and wisdom of the many Indigenous people who have been courageously and passionately reawakening and transforming urban landscapes and settler understanding across Turtle Island.

The guide is meant to meet civic practitioners where they're at in their engagement journey with Indigenous cultures and collaborative partnerships. It's an invitation to either start their awareness and learning journey or to deepen their learning and capacities regarding Indigenous placekeeping and reimagining public spaces.

It aims to guide them as they explore their roles in an emerging movement to transform Canada's cities and social institutions in alignment with Indigenous values and approaches, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action, and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Principles.

The toolkit offers a cadence of analyses, tools, protocols, approaches, case studies, and resources that empowers municipalities and civic organizations to navigate their learning path with respect to Indigenous community engagement in design, planning, and partnership building processes. Context-setting sections include Indigenous perspectives on:

- placekeeping and city building;
- decolonization;
- unsettling the commons;
- transformative Reconciliation;
- and mapping settler-Indigenous historical events.

The "Tools" and "Approaches" sections encompass a variety of instruments and guiding teachings to help civic practitioners navigate the relational, conceptual, cultural, ethical, sovereignty and governance, research, evaluation,

3 Morgan Bamford, Theo Breedon, Chris Lindberg, et. al. (2019), *Stronger Together: A Toolkit for First Nations-Municipal Community Economic Development Partnerships*, Federation of Canadian Municipalities and Cando.

4 **Municipal World Insider and Executive Members:** You can download this toolkit in the research library on [municipalworld.com](http://municipalworld.com). Just search for "placekeeping."

legal, relational, and planning contexts that frame relationship building and co-creation processes when working with Indigenous community and practitioners.

## Decolonizing Within the Organization

Inspired by the lived experiences of many Indigenous staff leading engagement work within settler government offices and organizations, and the pioneering work of the Towards Braiding reader,<sup>5</sup> “Decolonizing Within the Organization” delves into the many practical, ethical, and educational dimensions and implications for settler institutions to consider prior to, and during, engagement with Indigenous Peoples.

For settler organizations interested in engaging Indigenous staff and partners in relationships and processes that genuinely include their worldviews and disrupt and reconfigure inequitable power dynamics and colonial patterns, leadership needs to listen to and learn from the experiences and needs of Indigenous staff and partners. There can be no genuine righting of relationships and transformative Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples without an organization’s openness to:

- critical reflection and truth-telling;
- decolonizing employment practices, workplace culture, relationships with BIPOC staff and communities, and programs and policies; and
- course-correcting around harmful systemic patterns that are often imperceptible because they have become so normalized.

Willingness by executive leadership to create space for critical reflection of internal biases and blind spots (no matter how unintentional) and deep learning from and deference to Indigenous leadership,

worldviews, and methodologies is often challenging for organizations. Yet, the positive outcomes of these actions can lead to enduring and reciprocal partnerships with Indigenous communities, as well as deep cultural and humanizing shifts within the organization that benefit all staff, partners, and community participants.

Decolonization within the organization must also be approached through systems and institutional level transformations by:

- decentring settler biases and dominance in institutions and professional fields; and
- valuing and revitalizing Indigenous knowledges and approaches.

Decolonizing municipal structures and civic organizations is an ongoing, evolving process that requires both settlers and urban Indigenous Peoples to work together to create public institutions and spaces that are equitable, inclusive, and honour Indigenous presence, cultures, and futures.

## Guiding Protocols for Civic-Indigenous Engagement

Each Indigenous nation and community in Canada has their own set of principles and protocols that:

- inform and protect their values, cultural practices, knowledges, lands and land rights, languages, governance and laws; and
- guide relationship building in diverse collaboration and partnership contexts.

Protocols are intentional guidelines and agreements between the People, the Land, and the Creator within a ceremony, practice, or process. Protocol is the backbone of ceremony, governance, and cultural practice. It reinforces trust, reciprocal relationships, knowledge sharing, and community building by honouring the living memory of

ancestors, place and land, and the knowledge of Elders and community leaders and experts.

These guidelines are informed by the knowledge, experiences, and stories shared by Indigenous thought leaders, artists, architects, and activists active in urban placekeeping, creative practice, decolonial action, and city building.

The toolkit is also inspired by many dialogues with and teachings by esteemed Indigenous Elders and knowledge-keepers from different Nations. From their experiences working with Indigenous communities and partners, contributors described the cultural and ethical protocols and values instrumental to cultivating: Indigenous leadership, self-determination, community specific, deep listening, shared knowledge and benefits, and positive impact in the design, planning, and decision-making processes.

The guidelines featured in this toolkit include Indigenous land and place-based protocols, language, ceremony, and community engagement.

They are intended to guide municipalities and civic organizations in key learning and community engagement activities, including:

- coming together with Indigenous communities in shared understanding and respect for Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination in all areas of engagement;
- following the protocols of those whose land practitioners are working on, or whose knowledge they are engaging;
- building cultural competency and deferring to Indigenous leadership and governance, values, knowledges, and approaches; and
- building equitable, intentional, and committed partnerships and collaborative design and planning processes with Indigenous community and organizations. **MW**

5 Elwood Jimmy, Vanessa Andreotti, and Sharon Stein (2019), *Towards Braiding*, Musagetes.

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