

Closing Remarks to Atlantic Canada Institute Colloquium on Interiors

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It is always with some trepidation than one agrees to comment on the proceedings of an entire conference. I find it easier to comment on this colloquium than on most, however, since I enjoyed it so much. I would like to thank everyone here for their participation, and hope that you all found it as rewarding as I have.,

When we discussed the format of this last session, the other commentators felt that it might be best for me, as one of the original organizing committee, to attempt a brief evaluation of the last three days. Did we meet our original objectives? How well did we meet them? In attempting to remember exactly the evolution of the colloquium, I can only recall vaguely talking with Marie Elwood and Barbara Riley on the need for Atlantic region curators to meet, of complaining to Neil Rosenberg of organizational problems, and lo and behold, Neil called for the Atlantic Canada Institute, Shane O'Dea, and Paul O'Neill, and the colloquium was born. I think it important to acknowledge the co-operative nature of this venture between museum, university, and ACI. In these days of ever-tightening belts, our future hopes for accomplishment lie, I believe, in congenial and co-operative projects. Briefly, our original objectives in staging the colloquium were: first, a meeting of like minds in the Atlantic region — curators, academics, researchers, and the "lay" public interested in material history; secondly a sharing of knowledge, a presentation of the state of the art in this area of research, as George Kapelos put it; thirdly, a look at interiors *per se*. We were interested in looking at material history from a slightly different point of view, from the inside out, looking not at grand edifices, public halls, but at people's homes, their contents, and the perception of space — a look at room space and mind space.

Did we succeed? I think we did. I can look around the room and observe the blend of participants we sought — curators from the museum community, folklorists and historians from the universities, interested members of the general public. I can note as well a broad representation from the Atlantic region, as well as from national agencies, and colleagues from the United States. I am pleased to observe the differing ranges of expertise and experience which made the colloquium so multi-faceted — curators but also conservators and craftspeople, professors and students, professional and lay participants, if I can use those

hoary terms. I should mention as well that the curatorial component had a chance to meet and share some of their particular concerns the day before the Colloquium proper began. Matters such as de-accessioning, acquisition policies, and the cultivation of "angels," as Donald Webster calls donors, were aired.

I think that this colloquium has also succeeded in communicating the state of the art. One participant remarked that there was a freshness about the research presented. I think of Cora Greenaway's paper with its information on the up-to-date discoveries, Marie Elwood's on apprenticeship — a most recent interest, and Irene Rogers' comprehensive view of the cabinetmakers of P.E.I. whom the Heritage Foundation has done so much to promote. We are extremely pleased as well that the colloquium was held in Newfoundland. It is good to receive an infusion of Atlantic Canadian energy at a time when our own studies of our material heritage, if not in their infancy, are in their early adolescence. I hope those of you from away have enjoyed our sharing with you the freshness and excitement of our own recent work — Shane's look at heating, Walter Peddle's explication of outport furniture, and Linda Dale's look at interior perceptions, as well as the valuable work of Memorial University folklorists like Gerry Pocius and Wilf Wareham. We are proud as well to share with you Walter Peddle's exhibition at the Museum, which, I hope most of you will agree, is an incisive commentary on interiors and aesthetic perception. I would like as well to thank those from away for the inspiration of their work, the directions in which you have pointed and in which we have yet to go.

Finally, have we learned anything new or surprising about interiors? We were not after all looking at only the roomscape and its individual elements, but at its meaning. I for one have been overwhelmed by the perceptual difference concerning space which papers like Ken Donovan's on Louisbourg, Linda Dale's on the Newfoundland home, and Carol Whitfield's on barracks life presented. The lack of privacy in past space seems to me a major element in attempting to understand our cultural evolution. I think it vital that we do understand our cultural changes in terms of our own past. Museums have long been noted for their ability to display the culture of others. Perhaps our increasing sense of history makes it imperative that we practise our skills in cultural anthropology on ourselves.

I would like to turn briefly now to what many of you know is a particular hobby horse of mine – the role of the museum. What does this new sense of our past mean to museums? The explosion of heritage interest in the last fifty years has given impetus to the rise of a great number of institutions and sparked widespread public interest in the common past. The museum perforce must respond to this interest, because I believe quite strongly that museums are not peripheral institutions but have an important cultural and public function. By museums, I am of course including historic sites, which, with our colleagues from Parks Canada, have proliferated across the country. Museums are different from other institutions of learning and socialization. They can, through exhibits, provide context to the present world. This is an important function we have discussed at length during this conference, and is perhaps the one in which the historic site excels. Museums, in the classical sense, have, however, another equally important role – that of abstraction. The museum's ability to extract from context, and to render the object as artifact is important not only from the aesthetic point of view. This abstracting ability must not be lost in the melange of contextual displays. I realize this is an unfashionable

viewpoint, but perhaps it is time to re-examine the strengths of the museum as an institution and the reasons for them.

Why is it important in the final analysis to preserve and promote what some of us feel are dinosaurs in the present age? Is the museum necessary? I think so, and I will now venture out on a most unsteady limb. I think museums are even more necessary now than they have been in the past. The society that uses museums today is different from traditional society. Life is not patterned today according to unchanging cultural prescriptions. I would hazard to say that the people today who visit museums come to them for patterns, seeking meaning and order in their lives by looking at how things have been ordered in the past or are ordered in the natural world. The industrial revolution has for the most part freed the western world from terrors of physical want, but not from the horrors of ugliness and ennui. We are far from the ordered days of our communal past. Our life is more particular and individual than it has perhaps ever been. We must seek ways to order it with beauty and grace, and I feel that museums have a role to play in what my colleague referred to as the poetics of space, to display order and poetry to a popular audience.