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PETER LATTA

Review of

Tracy, William A. et al., eds. 2005. *In Time and Place: Master Plan 2005 For the Protection, Preservation and Presentation of Alberta's Past*. Edmonton: Alberta Community Development.

Pp.165, CD, illustrations, paperbound, notes, ISBN 0-7785-4337-4.

How does an institution make a decision about which artifact to seek out or accept for a collection? How should a government, besieged by requests to take on heritage buildings, collections or to protect landscapes, decide which heritage resource will receive the indefinite support of public funds? The ground seems littered with historic buildings and protected spaces, and museums are stuffed with great things. New levels of understanding about people and their activity, however, define new areas in need of preservation and interpretation. With so much already preserved, how do we know what is missing from the story? This is the problem of a mature society which has enjoyed more than a century of historic preservation.

The Historic Resource Management Branch, Cultural Facilities and Historical Resources Division of Alberta Community Development, has addressed the matter of selecting for collection, exhibition and research squarely and honestly in *Master Plan 2005*. The publication is an excellent step toward helping decision makers—whether volunteer committees, full time curators or civil servants—better understand what heritage resources they have and what is needed to achieve

their organizational goals. The purpose of *Master Plan 2005* is to be a “comprehensive guide intended to encourage the preservation of Alberta’s heritage resources” (1). To accomplish this, *Master Plan 2005* takes a methodical approach to identifying heritage resources and makes a formerly intuitive process demonstrably rational, precise and, one would hope and expect, supportable by governing and funding authorities.

Using a qualitative research process of managing broad categories of material history which may not immediately seem related, *Master Plan 2005* adopts an approach likely to be acceptable to the intended audience. As a Government of Alberta document, the historical resources of that province are the central focus of the plan but, in truth, these do not seem vastly different in categorization from those of most places.

To establish an understanding of the wealth of material in the province’s care, the authors established a thematic framework based on current museological and historical approaches to the preservation and understanding of multiple pasts. Using Alberta’s historical resources as a demonstration model, the plan is reasonably adaptable

to other jurisdictions—large or small—and helps the reader/user not associated with government to follow the process of adding their own appropriate themes. This adaptability adds to the overall value of *Master Plan 2005*.

A strength of the plan is the clarity of its writing. Using examples, it follows the placement of resources (or artifacts and sites), within thematic areas. Applying the plan should produce a tabular representation of historic resources—those of a province, a museum, a heritage society—which, at a glance, will let users see in which themes or sub themes the greatest concentration of resources lay. This is a rigorous process which demands the time and attention of users and, despite the potential payoffs, time requirements may be the one thing that prevents this plan from being widely used outside government. For heritage organizations wishing to adopt this process, especially if they are digitizing collection records, appropriate fields of information related to their themes and sub themes can be easily inserted in most digital record programs, and probably be done retroactively as well. To facilitate the use of this plan, a CD-ROM is included that will allow a curator or committee to begin the task without too much reinvention. For a curator or committee preparing to create an exhibit or even to assess current holdings, this process should give clear indicators of the strengths and relationships of resources within thematic areas and highlight gaps within a collection. The benefits of the plan are that with demonstrable information at the level of the item/artifact, arguments can be made to vigorously pursue those historic resources needed to round out a collection, or to support funding applications for research or the creation of new exhibits using the special strengths of an institution.

Early in the document the authors write about the changing concept of adequacy and discuss how much and what should be represented in public collections. As relationships between heritage resources, new research and potential use are identified, we risk seeing equal value in all resources of a certain age. This cannot, however, be a licence to accumulate without discrimination. On this point, *Master Plan 2005* does not advise what should be collected: that responsibility remains with the manager, curator or committee. The plan is however, a diagnostic tool that lets us self prescribe. It helps us understand our institution's accumulated strengths, and lets us more clearly see our weaknesses. Selection for collections is always based on the judgement of individuals. *Master Plan*

2005 will lead us to the point of making a decision, but cannot decide for us.

Master Plan 2005 is divided into five sections. Part I, "Preservation Strategy," includes an excellent short essay on the philosophy of preservation and a review of ten principles for preservation. These principles are newly devised from current museological scholarship and tempered by the need for practical application. Each principle is followed by a description, three illustrative examples from the Alberta experience and concludes with a brief summary which reinforces the application of the principle.

It is troubling that the principle referring to the public purpose motivating heritage preservation is the weakest and references only two examples, neither of which is an initiative of the provincial authority: "Enhance the promotion of appreciation of heritage protection and preservation through increased public accessibility to educational resources" (24). Should we strive to increase public accessibility to educational heritage resources to enhance the appreciation of heritage preservation? The answer is yes, of course, but that is hardly the key purpose of heritage preservation, especially as it contributes to public education. The statement itself seems inconsistent with its summary: "Preservation of heritage helps to define a society's understanding of what it is and how it came to be. Awareness of its heritage can provide strength and understanding to a nation" (24) which is reasonably reflective of what heritage workers and volunteers tend to believe.

Part II, "A Thematic Approach," quickly outlines the reason this process has been chosen and how it works. It outlines the themes, sub-themes, components, elements and sub-elements in relation to Alberta history. Additionally, this section explains what "resource slotting" is and how research flows from this systematized analysis.

Part III, "Using *Master Plan 2005*," walks us through a general application of the master plan using museum, building and archaeological resources and research and archival examples. This section encourages people using the plan to ask the questions most central to their goal—what do we want to do? The worksheet is presented, as are examples that demonstrate in a practical way what information can be extracted from the *Master Plan 2005* process.

Part IV, "The Thematic Framework," is the longest section where eighteen themes of Alberta's history are thoroughly delineated. Each theme is introduced with a sharp capsule history, and the major

connections that can be drawn between the themes are outlined. The cut-off date for Alberta's historical activities is 1955, "in accordance with departmental precedent" (2) which seems like an overly cautious date even for a government department, a fact that appears to be not lost on the authors. Nonetheless, the themes can easily be extended to contemporary periods by non-government organizations using the same analytical framework.

Part V, "CD with Printable Appendices," is a helpful feature of the plan, in that it will save users the time required to transfer their own information into the prescribed format. What the plan does well is encourage curators and committees to view their collections dispassionately, look for strongly represented themes, weakly represented stories and ways individual artifacts are important across themes.

Alberta's Historic Resources Management Branch can be justifiably proud of this contribution to heritage development and management. As a discussion of the principles and philosophies

of collecting and developing heritage resources, *Master Plan 2005* could become required reading. As a guiding document for the practical analysis of resource accumulations, it has much to offer to persons tasked with building collections, developing research programs or who wish to create new exhibits using their institution's strongest components. The last word properly belongs to the authors who describe the plan as "a new and innovative tool intended to encourage the preservation of Alberta's heritage resources. Its basic premise is that by preserving a wide variety of heritage resources and undertaking a wide variety of preservation activities, Alberta's history can best be protected and revealed. Alberta's history is a story waiting to unfold. The use of *Master Plan 2005* can help capture the full drama of this story. It should be seen as a tool adaptable to specific preservation opportunities. It is not a constraint but an enabling and empowering mechanism" (52, 58).