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*Case Study Report*

# The Decolonization of City Planning through the Activation of Indigenous Voices

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## Abstract

*Like many cities with colonial legacies, the City of Lethbridge (Alberta, Canada) is grappling with concepts of truth and reconciliation, decolonization and Indigenization. These concepts have forced city planners to reconsider their relationships to colonial structures, systems and barriers which have physically and narratively removed Indigenous peoples from their ancestral landscapes. Lethbridge has taken efforts to re-think typical approaches to situate Indigenous voices, perspectives and forms of knowledge as key inputs into the design, delivery and implementation of city planning. This Case Study Report highlights two projects where the City has sought to co-design engagement and planning outcomes alongside Indigenous peoples: The Traditional Knowledge and Use Assessment (2017) and the Municipal Development Plan (2021). The Report highlights lessons learned in the following areas: 1) how to reflect Indigenous and other equity-deserving voices within plans and policies; 2) how to co-design engagement with Indigenous peoples; and 3) how to create policy spaces that incrementally deconstruct colonial barriers. Collectively these projects highlight a paradigm shift within city planning (and related disciplines) whereby the traditional roles of Indigenous peoples transform from listeners to leaders, audiences to narrators and policy recipients to instigators.*

## Keywords

*Decolonization, Indigenous community planning, city planning, Indigenization*

## 1. Context

Prior to the arrival of European settlers, North America was, and continues to be, a complex patchwork of Indigenous places, communities and territories. The colonization of these Indigenous geographies, and the attempted genocide of entire peoples has left a legacy that continues to be felt today.

Canada is home to more than 600 Indigenous communities, speaking over 70 distinct languages. In 2016 there were over 1.6 million self-identifying Indigenous peoples living in Canada (approximately 4.5% of the total population), from three broad groups: First Nation, Métis and Inuit (Statistics Canada, 2019). The population growth rate of Indigenous peoples continues to out-pace the non-Indigenous population by more than four times (between 2006 and 2016), signaling a demographic resurgence of Indigenous peoples in Canada (ibid).

The City of Lethbridge (Alberta, Canada) is located within ancestral lands of the Siksikaitisitapi (Blackfoot Confederacy) peoples whose territory covers vast areas of Western Canada and the United States. As described by Kainai Elder Mike Bruised Head (2021): “For thousands of years...the Siksikaitisitapi have lived and travelled across large areas of present day Alberta, Saskatchewan, Montana and North Dakota. Blackfoot territory is generally described using landmarks such as the Niitsístakiimistsi (Rocky Mountains)

to the West, the Pónókaisissa'ahta (North Saskatchewan River) to the North, the O'makspa'tsikoi (Sand Hills) to the East, and the Ootahkoitahta (Yellowstone River) to the South."

The Siksikaitsitapi is comprised of four distinct Nations: Kainai, Piikani, Siksika Nations whose Reserves are located in Southern Alberta, and the Aamsakpi Pikuni Nation whose Reservation is located in Northern Montana (USA).

Lethbridge (Sikóóhktok, in Blackfoot) is at the heart of the territory, and like many Canadian cities, has in recent years begun to more meaningfully consider concepts like truth and reconciliation, decolonization, and Indigenization. These concepts have forced city planners in particular to reconsider their relationships to colonial systems, structures and barriers, which, over Canada's history, have in part contributed to the physical and narrative removal of Indigenous peoples from their ancestral landscapes.

This sense of critical self-analysis is witnessed more broadly, including within professional bodies (Canadian Institute of Planners, 2019), but as well within academia (University of British Columbia, 2018) and increasingly, local governments (City of Lethbridge, 2017). The main drivers of these policy and public statements, strategies and other similar initiatives are the "Calls to Action" and "Calls for Justice" emerging from two National Inquiries into the legacies of colonization and on-going acts of genocide committed by the Canadian state: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC; 2015) and the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (NI; 2019), respectively.

The TRC analyzed the Residential School System, an overtly racist system that actively removed Indigenous children from their families, communities, languages and cultures and placed them in state and church co-administered institutions with the intention of forcefully assimilating Indigenous peoples. This system, which operated from the early 1800s until 1996 (CBC, 2008), resulted in the deaths of thousands of children and intergenerational traumas that continue to manifest in disproportionately high levels of addiction, mental health and homelessness among Indigenous peoples.

The NI examined the "systemic causes of all forms of violence against Indigenous women and girls, including sexual violence" (2019). The Commissioners found that the physical, sexual, economic, social and institutional forms of violence experienced by Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQQIA+ peoples "amounts to a race-based genocide...[which has been] empowered by colonial structures..." (ibid).

These two inquiries produced an enormous body of knowledge about the historical and contemporary experiences of Indigenous peoples. The evidence and resulting Calls to Action (TRC) and Calls for Justice (NI) indicate that the city planning profession and local governments, among virtually all sectors in society, have and continue to perpetuate systems, structures and barriers that disproportionately impact Indigenous peoples.

For example, TRC Call to Action #47 (TRC, 2015) discusses the concept of the Doctrine of Discovery and the notion of *terra nullius*, both of which were used to morally justify the colonization and erasure of Indigenous presences over vast landscapes. Looking forward, TRC Call to Action #57 calls upon all levels of government to ensure public servants are educated on topics such as "the history of Aboriginal peoples...the legacy of residential schools [and] the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples" (ibid), to ensure that decision-makers have the necessary knowledge to understand the systems of oppression that are in place, and pathways to deconstruct them.

Meanwhile, various NI Call for Justice reference the need to protect the social, physical, cultural and economic security of Indigenous women, girls and gender diverse persons, including in areas such as language, culture, housing and resource development sectors (NI, 2019). For example, Call for Justice 2.3 states "We call upon all governments to ensure that all Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people are provided with safe, no-barrier, permanent, and meaningful access to their cultures and languages in order to restore, reclaim, and revitalize their

cultures and identities. These are rights held by all segments of Indigenous communities, from young children to Elders. The programs and services that provide such access should not be tied exclusively to government-run cultural or educational institutions” (NI, 2019). City planners can look to this Call to promote Indigenous-led cultural revitalization initiatives within the public realm that not only increase access to cultural knowledge, but also serve to promote pride and mental well-being among Indigenous peoples who may feel disconnected to their culture with an urban setting.



Figure 1: A recently completed art installation by Kainai artist Cheyenne McGinnis in Downtown Lethbridge. This project represents one of several in the City to advance what it calls “Indigenous Placemaking” and increase the presence of Indigenous languages and cultures in the public realm. Source: City of Lethbridge.

Moreover, NI Call 13.2, while focused on “Extractive and Development Industries,” is still highly relevant to a city planning context: “We call upon all governments and bodies mandated to evaluate, approve, and/or monitor development projects to complete gender-based socio-economic impact assessments on all proposed projects as part of their decision making and ongoing monitoring of projects. Project proposals must include provisions and plans to mitigate risks and impacts identified in the impact assessments prior to being approved” (ibid).

To those who may be unfamiliar with these National Inquiries and the broader history of Canadian settler-colonialism, the lines connecting the planning profession and the historical, contemporary and indeed future experiences of Indigenous peoples in Canada may be hard to draw. Despite that, the knowledge shared by the inquiries and the early decolonization work emerging from Canadian municipalities, compels the profession to consider how it can plan differently.

## 2. Truth and reconciliation, decolonization and Indigenization, and the search for Ethical Space

“Truth and reconciliation” has emerged as a useful concept that reinforces the need to tell more fulsome and ultimately critical histories of our communities, prior to being able to actively seek (re)conciliatory relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. As I have observed over more than a decade of experience working at the forefront of reconciliatory city planning, non-Indigenous peoples continue to paternalize Indigenous peoples (consciously and unconsciously) as they seek to develop solutions to settler-created problems they have likely never experienced nor fully understand. This includes issues such as the lack of affordable housing, high rates of homelessness, perceptions of urban safety and cleanliness, the lack of Indigenous representation within the public realm and the protection of Indigenous cultural heritage. Truth and reconciliation reminds us to pause, reflect critically on our own relationships to history, and consider the perspectives and experiences of others.

Once planners begin to seek shared understanding, two other concepts emerge: decolonization and Indigenization. I interpret decolonization as an active process to remove systems, structures and barriers put in place to oppress and erase. Decolonization in practice could mean the removal of housing policies designed to segregate people, colonial ways of governing (i.e., the composition of committees), or even oppressive names within the public realm.

Put differently, decolonization is a first step in creating what Indigenous scholar Willie Ermine refers to as Ethical Space. Ermine (2007) defines Ethical Space as the space that is “formed when two societies, with disparate worldviews, are poised to engage each other”. Ethical space implies the presence of mutual respect, understanding and intent to come together (reconcile).

Indigenization, is the active application of Indigenous perspectives, ways of knowing, representations etc. within the Ethical Space that is created once the decolonization process has begun. Decolonization peels back the layers, and Indigenization is either what is revealed or what can emerge to fill the policy, governance, public realm etc. gaps. Given the overwhelming diversity of Indigenous peoples, the term Indigenization is potentially problematic, and should be replaced with more territory-specific language. In Lethbridge, this would amount to something akin to “Blackfoot-ization.”

In practice, the boundaries between these concepts are not always clear, nor are they ever really complete. The processes are also not necessarily linear, but rather repetitive and iterative. Moreover, they take time and humility. As such, these interrelated processes cannot be rushed, less the “solutions” derived become token and unsustainable.

### 3. Projects Overview

The City of Lethbridge has taken significant steps to better situate Indigenous voices and perspectives as key inputs into the design of city planning projects. While these efforts have not always been immediately understood as overt acts of decolonization or Indigenization, with the benefit of time and perspective, the City’s work sheds light on how planners can begin to move more intently in those directions.

These efforts are captured in two City projects: The Traditional Knowledge and Use Assessment (TKUA) project and the Municipal Development Plan (MDP). These projects highlight a paradigm shift in city planning whereby the traditional roles of Indigenous peoples transform from listeners to leaders, and audience to narrator. This shift repositions Indigenous voices, perspectives and forms of knowledge as key inputs and drivers of city planning and supports the incremental decolonization of the planning and policy arenas.

#### 3.1 TKUA

The TKUA (City of Lethbridge, 2017) was initiated as a response to a newly adopted provincial government regional land use plan that called for greater consideration of Indigenous heritage. Lethbridge’s planning department used this as a jumping-off point to critically examine the ways in which Indigenous heritage were considered within its own municipal plans and processes.

Based on extensive conversations with Siksikaitstapi representatives, it was confirmed that very little was known by the City about Indigenous heritage in Lethbridge. This, in stark contrast to Lethbridge’s well-documented and managed inventory of post-contact heritage, suggests a lack of understanding within the municipal government as to how to engage with Indigenous cultural heritage and a limitation of existing policies and systems. What resulted from these conversations was a partnership between the City and Blackfoot Nations to explore the history of Blackfoot traditional land use for all public lands across the entire city. From this partnership emerged a baseline assessment of cultural and ecological

locations of significance, serving as a departure point for future planning projects led by either the municipality or private developers.

Creating the inventory has ensured that Indigenous knowledge and territory are considered at the beginning of projects rather than part way through wherein they emerge as just another set of constraints.

One of the main innovations of this project, was the way in which it decolonized the collection of Indigenous knowledge. Rather than using a non-Indigenous intermediary to collect information, the City hired Elders and Indigenous heritage technicians directly. This allowed Indigenous knowledge, methodologies, approaches and deliverables to emerge, and be paired with western processes (e.g., GIS) – creating a sort of ethical space.

It also helped to mitigate some of the challenges within the provincial government’s heritage management processes that the City is required to follow. For example, with the benefit of a more comprehensive view of Indigenous cultural landscapes, the city is able to consider more than just discrete sites that may fall within a development footprint. As well, with Indigenous peoples controlling the way their histories and knowledge are shared, then there is a greater sense of comfort that information shared is accurate, fulsome and less likely to be nuanced through a settler colonial lens.



**Figure 2: Staff and Elders from Kainai, Piikani and Siksika Nations visiting sites around the City of Lethbridge as part of the TKUA project. Source: City of Lethbridge.**

With this information now in place the City is working to better showcase Indigenous heritage sites to the public as well as exploring site specific management plans. The City is also continuing its partnership with the Blackfoot Nations to update the overarching heritage management framework (Heritage Management Plan; City of Lethbridge, 2021) to include protocols and processes for identifying, managing and protecting Indigenous heritage within the City. The successes and innovations of this project have since been enshrined through policy in the City’s recently updated MDP, including requiring all developer to complete increasingly detailed assessments of Indigenous traditional land use.

### 3.2 MDP

The MDP (City of Lethbridge, 2021) project was initiated in 2019 with the intention of building upon a suite of recently completed studies, strategies, and plans. This includes the TKUA, as well as the City’s Reconciliation Implementation Plan, which outlines commitments to reconciliation through a series of “City Actions”. Several of the City Actions focused on the City’s planning department and suggest small

but meaningful shifts in the ways that Lethbridge recognizes Blackfoot Territory and peoples within planning and heritage management processes.

The MDP relied heavily on engagement with Indigenous peoples and Communities to design engagement and priority policy areas. Early engagement with Indigenous partners revealed the need not only for planners to re-consider how Indigenous peoples “show-up” in long-range municipal policy plans, but the ways in which colonial narratives are perpetuated through the way a City describes its “origin story”.



Figure 3: Staff and Elders from Siksika Nation in discussion with City of Lethbridge staff and consultants as part of the MDP project. Source: City of Lethbridge.

In the past, Lethbridge’s policies and plans typically only consider the needs of Indigenous peoples within very narrow areas and typically from a deficit position where they are only seen as recipients of assistance and perpetually in a state of being un-well – i.e., in need of housing or addiction recovery services. In other instances, Indigenous peoples are considered through what amounts to *erasist* narratives where their presence only exists in the past. Being confined to the past prevents Indigenous peoples from occupying current and future policy and potentially physical spaces. In the previous MDP, this meant largely confining Indigenous peoples to discussions of how archaeological sites should be protected and summarizing thousands of years of history into just a few sentences.

Through engagement, Indigenous peoples expressed their desire to be considered in all policy areas and for a deeper and truthful history to be shared. The result is the sharing of a more fulsome history, embodied through a Blackfoot land acknowledgement and forward by Kainai Elder Mike Bruised Head in the first pages of the MDP. Moreover, Indigenous peoples past, present and future are reflected from a position of strength in the MDP’s vision, community profile, and virtually all policy areas.

The positioning of the MDP with the planning hierarchy means that all future land use plans and corporate work plans will need to advance these policies. This includes the ways in which the MDP re-imagines the spaces held by Indigenous peoples and how their voices are engaged and reflected.

#### 4. Plan Differently

The TKUA and MDP projects demonstrate small, but meaningful shifts in the quest to decolonize city planning. Decolonization is a process that relies on telling potentially uncomfortable truths about our shared history so that we may reconcile the past, present and future. Decolonization is also a necessary step in the creation of Ethical Spaces, within which Indigenous-led acts to Indigenize policies, plans and perspectives can emerge.

#### 4.1 Decolonize language

The first step in being able to decolonize city planning and create spaces for Indigenous voices, is to change the language we use. Decolonizing language often requires subtle changes with powerful results. For example, removing possessive or generalized language to describe Indigenous peoples, i.e., **our** urban Indigenous community or **my Indigenous** representative, and replacing it, depending on the circumstance, with more neutral or specific language, i.e., **the** urban Indigenous community or the **Blackfoot Elder** representative. De-centering planners from relationships also allows Indigenous voices and perspectives to stand on their own, without qualification, and can show respect for the knowledge which will then emerge. Being more specific with our language, also indicates our awareness that there are many diverse *Indigenous* peoples and perspectives.

Decolonizing language is also about reflecting the deep history of places. Acknowledging original languages and original place names, again de-centers colonial narratives and demonstrates a respect for the deeper histories of the places where planners work. In Lethbridge, this means referencing Indigenous conceptualizations of people and places like Niitsitapi (Blackfoot people) or Sikóóhkotok (Lethbridge), in place of – or at the very least alongside – more recent geo-political constructs like “Treaty 7 Lands” or the City of Lethbridge. Since language is largely place-based, to be able to learn what language to use requires planners to listen, learn, and engage with Indigenous knowledge holders.

In Lethbridge, the TKUA has helped planners learn more about the City and region through the voices of Blackfoot Elders. These learnings have subsequently been reflected in every major City planning and policy document since – in large and small ways. We do this through land acknowledgements, incorporating Blackfoot language, showcasing the voices of Indigenous peoples and Communities who have participated in engagement sessions, and being mindful of our language use so as not to perpetuate the marginalization or qualification of Indigenous voices.

#### 4.2 Decolonize history

One of the most devastating consequences of the planning profession has been the removal of Indigenous cultural resources, histories and peoples from landscapes. This removal was in part “justified” through the Doctrine of Discovery the notion of *terra nullius*, which ideologically transformed places with rich deep histories into isotropic plains ready to be developed from perceived nothingness into lands with “value”. This logic has been perpetuated in narrative form through the ways we describe the histories of our cities. These “origin stories” frequently begin with the arrival of European settlers, and if not, include mere footnotes of pre-contact history without mentioning on-going and future land uses by Indigenous peoples (relegating their relevancy and physicality to the past).

The answer here is not for planners to become historians, *per se*, despite the fact that they should indeed be well-versed in the history of the communities they work in. Rather, they should become experts at holding spaces for Indigenous peoples to be the voices of their own histories. This again de-centers the planning profession and allows Indigenous peoples to describe the histories that they believe are most compelling and in need of telling in relation to the plan or policy at-hand.

The TKUA project set Lethbridge on this course following significant time spent listening to the perspectives of Siksikaitstapi representatives, including learning about their frustrations with how historical resources were being managed by other levels of government. Understanding local history through their words has drastically shifted the way the City now plans neighbourhoods and natural areas. For example, traditional knowledge studies are now mandatory requirements for area structure and area redevelopment plan (large sector-level statutory plans), alongside more commonly required studies such as transportation impact and environmental assessments. This means that Indigenous cultural sites, and

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potentially forms of ecological knowledge, are well-positioned to inform the direction of land use plans and policies rather than just serve as impediments down the road.

Moreover, sharing more complete and often critical histories within the City's MDP has helped the City to better situate policy directions. After all, it is difficult for a policy to achieve anything without being situated in context: and who better to describe that context than the persons experiencing the weight of that same history. For example, if we are designing policies to support Indigenous economic development, understanding the historical barriers faces by Indigenous peoples in accessing things like credit and market places is critically important.

#### 4.3 Decolonize engagement

Engaging with Indigenous peoples and Communities should begin with a simple question: Would you like to be engaged, and if so, how?

While this may seem rather simple, so often planners show up to engagement conversations with preconceived notions of how engagement should look. Moreover, planners tend to center themselves within conversations and conflate the term engagement with information sharing (i.e., asking for thoughts and ideas, rather than being lectured to).

Meaningful engagement with Indigenous peoples requires a transformation in the traditional power imbalances between planner and engaged audience, in this case creating spaces for Indigenous peoples to shift from being listeners to leaders, audiences to narrators and policy recipients to instigators.

The first important step is for Indigenous peoples to be more in control of engagement methodologies. While it may not always be (immediately) feasible for Indigenous methodologies to be exclusively followed, it is well within reason to attempt to co-design engagement. This may mean: that Indigenous peoples themselves indicate who the relevant experts and knowledge holders are in given topic areas; following cultural protocols, such as providing a gift or meal as a pre-cursor to requesting knowledge; respecting Indigenous intellectual property; encouraging engagement in an Indigenous language; or supporting inter-generational knowledge transfer between Elders and youth.

The City of Lethbridge now regularly engages Indigenous peoples in what we call "pre-engagement" to understand their interests and preferences for being involved in everything from land use to transportation to cultural planning projects. This approach ensures that Indigenous peoples are able to establish their own priorities and get involved on their own terms. In one innovative City project, community engagement was completely transformed, and Indigenous community leaders took on the role of facilitators, panelists, and educators as part of a two-day conference designed to set the direction of a future Indigenous Cultural Centre (City of Lethbridge 2020).



Figure 4: Blackfoot community leaders share perspectives and knowledge as part of the Indigenous Cultural Centre Feasibility Study at the City of Lethbridge. Source: City of Lethbridge.

### 4.3 Conclusion

These projects presented in this case study report, as well as the broader shift seen at the City of Lethbridge (among many other Canadian cities), demonstrates how planners must and can re-imagine their positionality. Moreover, it suggests how Indigenous peoples and potentially other equity-deserving peoples can emerge as key contributors to the ways we understand and plan for our cities. What is presented here is not only the rationale as to why this work should happen, but also tangible steps that every planner can implement to decolonize their work.

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