

Making History Relevant

Connecting people, places and stories in B.C.

Historic places like house museums and heritage parks are facing new challenges in the 21st century. Originally set up to be protected from demolition, these places were often presented as artefacts set apart from everyday social and economic realities.

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Photo: City of Richmond

The 65-acre Terra Nova Rural Park in the greater Vancouver area is actively planned, managed and programmed as an evolving historic and cultural landscape. Here, the annual Chefs in the Field event brings together members of the food industry and food enthusiasts alike to enjoy a day of culinary excellence.

Terra Nova, un parc rural de 65 acres dans la région de Vancouver, bénéficie d'une planification, d'une gestion et d'une programmation actives en tant que paysage historique et culturel en évolution. Ici, l'activité annuelle Chefs in the Field réunit des représentants de l'industrie de l'alimentation et des gastronomes pour une journée d'excellence culinaire.



Photo: Courtesy of Craigdarroch Castle

The immense fortune of the Dunsmuir family is reflected in the four floors and 39 rooms of exquisite stained glass windows, intricate woodwork and fine Victorian-era furnishings.

L'immense fortune de la famille Dunsmuir est évidente dans les quatre étages et 39 pièces du château, ses vitraux exquis, ses fines boiseries et son magnifique ameublement de l'ère victorienne.

Visitors today, however, are looking for an engaging cultural experience that connects them to people and places from the past in ways that are more relevant to their own lives. Keeping visitors paying admission fees and volunteers investing their time and energy has meant tackling the challenges associated with changing demographics, visitor expectations, funding, technology, interpretation, and maintenance issues, in creative new ways.

Three heritage properties in British Columbia are responding to these challenges by adopting new models that address curatorial standards, economic use and community involvement. Victoria's Craigdarroch Castle, a traditional landmark house museum, has taken a business approach that focuses on rebranding the

museum as both a historic destination and a unique rentable heritage space. The Caetani House in Vernon is all about linking the arts with heritage by offering a range of artistic programs, studio spaces and community events. Richmond's Terra Nova Rural Park is an evolving cultural landscape that is breaking new ground by rebuilding historic land features, protecting wildlife and developing volunteer urban farming that provides food for people in need.

Conserving the historic significance of a place is no longer about restoring its bricks and mortar and describing what happened there, it is about making it happen again—by the site becoming a vital part of its community.

Craigdarroch Castle: Business as Usual Means Be Ready for Change

For John Hughes, attracting 140,000 visitors a year to Craigdarroch Castle has required some creative planning. As acting executive director of the Craigdarroch Castle Historical Museum Society, he has to strike a balance between focusing on the house as a national historic site and museum on the one hand, and a popular revenue-generating tourist destination on the other. “Visitors, tourism partners and sponsors all see the castle through different eyes, as does our local community,” he says. “There are always some who are quite put off that we operate it as a business.”

Known as “Victoria’s Legendary Landmark,” Craigdarroch Castle (1887-1890) is set on a hill overlooking the city and its harbour (Craigdarroch means “rocky, oak place” in Gaelic). It was built for Robert Dunsmuir, a Scottish immigrant, who made his fortune from Vancouver Island coal.

In 1979, it was given to the Craigdarroch Historical Museum Society to operate as a house museum. Epitomizing the “bonanza

castle,” a term used to describe oversized mansions built as symbols of success for wealthy North American industrialists during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Craigdarroch was designated a national historic site in 1992.

Adapting to change

Adapting to changing economic climates, people’s travel habits and visitor expectations has been vital for the museum, as it relies on admissions, gift shop revenue and donations for funding. Investing in building brand recognition and refining the castle’s advertising message has been a priority. A new website, launched in 2008, now averages ten thousand unique visitors a month. Recently developed off-season visitor experiences are improving revenues when museum traffic is normally slow.

Technology tools—from web analytics to social media—are helping measure the success of new initiatives as the museum strives to engage people and keep them connected after they have returned home, even if home is in Victoria.

Having a board of directors that takes its fiduciary responsibility seriously has also helped keep the society moving forward. “We’ve been well served by our volunteer



Photo: Waqcku

Victoria’s legendary landmark, **Craigdarroch Castle**—meaning “rocky, oak place” in Gaelic—overlooks the city and its harbour.

Le château Craigdarroch, monument légendaire de Victoria qui signifie lieu rocheux et boisé de chênes, en gaélique, surplombe la ville et son port.



Photos: Courtesy of The Caetani House

The historic **Caetani House** (left), the newly built straw bale studio adorned with frescos (centre) and the grounds and gardens that surround them (right) are part of an active community centre for the arts and heritage in Vernon.

L'historique **maison Caetani** (à gauche), le nouveau studio en ballots de paille orné de fresques (au centre) et les terrains et jardins qui les entourent (à droite) font partie d'un centre communautaire voué aux arts et au patrimoine à Vernon.

board members who, over the last decade, have invested wisely, enabling us to pay for our restoration projects without borrowing,” says John Hughes. “They’ve been vigilant in making sure that we meet our financial obligations each year and are able to plan for the future.”

Community partnerships

Partnerships with boutique hotels, transportation companies, local performers and other attractions offer easier and more engaging ways for visitors to see the castle and Victoria. The museum is reaching out to younger audiences by connecting with events like the Victoria Steam Exposition, an art happening of steampunk art, tech, fashion, music and film. According to Hughes, programs aimed at elementary schools and community groups will be targeted next.

Taking a look at the bigger picture

Craigdarroch Castle is also making connections with other heritage sites in British Columbia. The society is engaged in sector development initiatives with the Heritage Tourism Alliance of B.C., an organization focused on helping heritage sites reach market readiness status, provide consistent visitor experiences or connect with marketing information and support. A current project is adding new content via web and mobile applications to deliver educational resources and visitor information in order to help heritage sites develop business models that work for

their organizations and bring visitors to their doors. These initiatives would not be happening without the support of various government departments, downtown business improvement groups and regional destination marketing organizations.

“We plan to take advantage of affordable new technologies to deliver meaningful content and enhanced experiences for visitors, so business as usual means be ready to change, know your stories, then blend great people and cool technology to tell them,” advises John Hughes.

The Caetani House: Connecting Heritage and the Arts

The Caetani House, located in Vernon in B.C.’s Okanagan district, was designed and built in 1896 emphasizing solidity and comfort over design. Sold in 1921 to wealthy Italian immigrant Leone Caetani, Duke of Sermoneta and Prince of Teano, the house has been known by the family name ever since. Today it forms part of a unique heritage site in the community because of its association with both the Caetani family and the magnificent gardens and grounds that surround it.

Leone’s daughter, the late artist and teacher Sveva Caetani, bequeathed the property with a small endowment fund to the City of Vernon in 1994 to be used as a centre for the arts.

The Vernon Public Art Gallery had been managing the property and using the income to support the gallery. However, when it fell into disrepair, neither the gallery nor the City was prepared to take on the cost of maintenance.

In response, the Caetani Cultural Centre Society was formed in 2008 to take over the management of the endowment and to use it as intended: to protect the integrity of the heritage property and to maintain and enhance the facility as a centre for the arts to benefit the residents of Vernon.

“The society’s goal is to honour Sveva Caetani’s express wish that the site be used for community art,” says executive director Judy Katalinic. “We now offer programming that uses the property as a creative space to enhance the cultural life of the community.”

The Heritage Revitalization Agreement with the City restricts opening the house to the public—it has four apartments occupied by local artists—so the society focuses on the one and a half acre grounds. Funds were raised to renovate outbuildings into artist studios and washrooms, and to spruce up a courtyard for public gatherings. The original building façades were kept, preserving their heritage value.

And it didn’t stop there. A volunteer straw bale-building workshop resulted in a sixth studio—the first “green” building project on the grounds, which raised awareness about sustainable building options.

Today the property is a thriving cultural centre with an inspiring program of events that promotes the arts and heritage and invites community involvement. Tours of the gardens incorporate the history of the



Photo: The City of Richmond

Completed in 2007, the trail, boardwalk and bridges that follow the perimeter of Richmond’s **Terra Nova Rural Park** take visitors through a natural tidal marsh. On a migratory flight path, it’s a birdwatchers paradise.

*Achévé en 2007, l’ensemble de sentiers, promenades de bois et ponts suivant le périmètre du **parc rural Terra Nova** permet aux visiteurs d’explorer un marais maritime. Se trouvant sur une route de migration, il est un paradis pour les ornithologues.*

house and family while open-air art markets and open studio walks showcase artists' work. Year-round workshops lead up to the Caetani Lantern Festival in October—the largest community event in Vernon.

This year, an Artist in Residence Program was initiated to explore how artists, the community and business can collaborate. James Postill is making use of a studio to research and perfect his art of fresco painting. Outreach work takes him into schools, and has him facilitating workshops and preparing an exhibition of his work. The Straw Bale studio will be adorned with frescos—leaving a permanent art installation for the community.

Programming aims to increase the society's membership and demonstrate how the community benefits from supporting this local heritage property. A five-year plan will see upgrades and installations to allow public access to the house, increasing the scope for much-needed fundraising and the potential for an interpretive museum.

Terra Nova Rural Park: Respecting the Past and Living the Future

Richmond's delta island (Lulu Island), part of the greater Vancouver area, is known as the "Peaceable Kingdom." Its great abundance within a magnificent natural setting has drawn aboriginal hunters and gatherers, agricultural colonizers and post-industrial entrepreneurs. The landscape retains traces of these uses, providing a subtle, captivating record of diverse (and largely anonymous) hands.

Terra Nova Rural Park, a 65-acre site on the northwest corner of Lulu Island, looks outward to a panorama of sea, sky and distant peaks. It is surrounded by a 22,000-acre estuary, the Fraser River, an extensive dyke system, a 35-acre natural area and a residential subdivision. It is not a museum property, but a living cultural landscape. After 20 years of community activism, the City of Richmond acquired the site in 1996. As one of its newest and most non-traditional parks, Terra Nova is actively

planned, managed and programmed as an evolving historic rural landscape, rich in environmental values.

What makes Terra Nova so special is that the landscape reflects layers of history—the stories of individual and community aspirations and values over time. It contains visible remnants of a pre-European First Nations midden, original 1880s pioneer farm homes, gardens and orchards, fences, hedgerows, drainage canals, fishing cannery buildings dating from the 1880s to the 1930s and a number of modern buildings that came with the recent land acquisition. Many of these landscapes now provide a rich diversity of habitats for wildlife.

Protecting and reusing heritage buildings and historic landscape patterns, including early planting configurations and species, sets the benchmark for adaptive reuse and interpretation.

Commemoration, celebration and interpretation

Key to the success and ultimate sustainability of the park is understanding the whole site as a dynamic vehicle for interpretation that is both "evolving" and "involving" by finding creative uses for the site and buildings and engaging the public in education, partnerships and innovative programs.

A portion of the park, the Farm Centre, is dedicated to active urban agriculture. The Richmond Fruit Tree Sharing Project is a non-profit society farming 2.5 acres of land that includes a solar-powered greenhouse with the primary goal of harvesting crops for the Food Bank and conducting organic gardening classes.

The Terra Nova Schoolyard Society engages over 500 schoolchildren who work in garden plots to learn about the value of fresh food, healthy eating habits and such global issues as food security and social responsibility. Corporate groups, "gardening grannies," neighbours, schoolchildren and many other groups have put in over 10,000 volunteer hours in both farming and environmental programs.

Other projects include environment and agriculture themed public art benches, rehabilitation of the cannery buildings for

live/work rentals, a coffee shop and a habitat management plan.

The Terra Nova vision of heritage conservation respects the past and charts the future by linking people, nature, heritage and modern urban agriculture in a creative park space. The City and the community at large have committed to that vision, commemorating and celebrating this rural cultural landscape through the interpretive lens of modern-day activities and uses.



Photo: City of Richmond

The non-profit 1.5-acre Sharing Farm demonstrates Terra Nova Rural Park's commitment to active community-based urban agriculture.

La ferme communautaire sans but lucratif de 1,5 acre témoigne de l'engagement du parc rural Terra Nova en faveur d'une agriculture communautaire urbaine.

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