

Celebrating Civilization

New Museum Blends Intellect with Imagination



Photo: Malak

It rolls up softly from the eastern bank of the Ottawa River — a low, sensuous wave of mysterious curves, copper hills and ancient-looking, cliff-like vistas. Canada's newest museum seems shaped less by human hands than by centuries of fast-moving water, ice and wind. Yet the new Canadian Museum of Civilization, opening on June 29, is every inch a product of the information age — a prototype museum of the twenty-first century.

Innovation has been the watchword on the project from the very beginning. Architect Douglas Cardinal is renowned for his pioneering, organic approach to building. Many consider this his masterpiece.

High-Tech Time Machine

Part technological tour de force, part scholarly time machine, the museum has been designed to present the history of Canada and its people with sweeping scope and dimension. In its vast halls, life-size reconstructions of historic sites are married to an advanced network of computer and audio-visual technology creating what Museum Director George MacDonald calls "the most stimulating and visually rich space anywhere in the world."

From the outset, everyone involved in the project realized that launching a vital new cultural institution meant rethinking what museums are all about. Gone is the static "display-case" mentality. Instead, many artifacts in the museum's collection will be set in a living historical context. At every turn, the skills of artists, actors, filmmakers, photographers, and craftspeople of all kinds have been called on to heighten the experience. The result? A hands-on appeal to the intellect and the senses — a place where learning and entertainment meet.

One of the museum's most eye-catching attractions is the great glazed space of the Grand Hall. Five stories high and larger than a football field, the hall's floor-to-ceiling wall of glass opens on a spectacular view of Parliament Hill and the Ottawa River. Here, teams of native craftspeople have created a traditional village set in a West Coast rain forest habitat. The village highlights exquisitely carved coastal-native totem poles from the museum's collection, standing proudly against a mysterious backdrop of immense coastal fir trees.

Transported back to the natural and human environments of the pre-European coast, visitors have a firsthand opportunity to experience the cultures that produced these works. Actors, dancers and performers are on site to capture the imagination. And direct audience involvement is always a possibility.

Everywhere, characters from West Coast native mythology will make their appearance. Under the huge cedar beams of the longhouses, adventurous visitors can beat drums, learn from storytellers, and join in the action. For the athletic, there will even be Haida canoes — hollowed out of a single tree trunk — to paddle. Events will change on a regular basis. The hall's performance facilities and a removable stage can adapt to a wide variety of special events.

The huge scale of the museum continues in the History Hall, a life-size tableau of important places and moments in Canada's past. From the arrival of the first Europeans — Norse sailors who made their way to the New World from Greenland — to the opening of Canada's North, multicoloured threads from the cultures that built

Canada's new Museum of Civilization combines architectural genius with modern technology to create an international cultural attraction.

the nation are woven through a landscape of time and space.

Here you could find yourself dancing the cotillion in a town square in old New France, surrounded by actors and performers recapturing the spirit of yesterday's lifestyles. Elsewhere, you can join in a nineteenth-century fur trading ceremony or explore dozens of other features of Canada's past, from a turn-of-the-century railway station, to an authentic example of the once ubiquitous Chinese laundry.

Hats Off to Children

Children are in for special treatment from the moment they arrive. Architect Cardinal, true to his reputation for meticulous planning, has created a separate reception area for visiting schoolchildren. The arrival and departure area for buses has been laid out to keep the students and their teachers organized. For winter, facilities have been provided to