

Heritage or blockbuster

by Sabine Eiche

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Recently, the words heritage and museum have been springing up in the local papers as insistently as the dandelions in my lawn. At the root of the discussion is a proposed new museum for Richmond, which is sometimes presented in the guise of a heritage museum, sometimes as a \$59 million “destination” museum (suitable for blockbuster exhibitions – more about that later).

English took the word museum directly from Latin. The ancient Romans, for whom museum signified a place of study, based the word on the Greek “mouseion,” meaning seat of the Muses, those nine sister-goddesses who inspired learning and the arts. “Heres,” the Latin for heir, is the source of such words as heritage, inheritance and heirloom.

Our heritage can take different forms. In the broadest of terms it refers to our past, our history. As with any other kind of inheritance or heirloom, if we don’t want to lose it, we have to look after it. Much of Richmond’s heritage has already been lost, through a combination of ignorance and indifference. If Richmond is planning a new museum, surely priority should be given to one that harbours and exhibits what can still be salvaged of this community’s past?

What was Richmond known for, until well into the twentieth century? Anyone who’s seen old photographs of the area can answer that – farming, fishing (in Steveston) and horse-racing. And in 1930, when the Vancouver airport was built on Sea Island, aviation entered the picture. Isn’t it logical, then, that a

museum for Richmond should be one where we, and future residents, can learn about the activities that shaped Richmond's special character?

The plan for a \$59 million "destination" museum comes with a different story. According to the consulting firm involved in the project, Arlington Group Planning + Architecture Inc., a "destination museum" would fill "Metro Vancouver's need" for a location for "major attractions such as blockbuster exhibits."

Really? Since when does Richmond need to become a venue for "blockbuster exhibits"? And I'd like to know more about what kind of "blockbuster exhibits" they have in mind. As an art historian familiar with most of the major museums in the western world, I've had years of experience with blockbuster exhibitions. After the first blockbuster in 1972 – "Treasures of Tutankhamen" in the British Museum, London – exhibitions on this scale became all the rage in the 1980s and 1990s. They're now dying a welcome and well-deserved death. The costs of putting on a blockbuster are prohibitive. If the exhibition is to include anything first-rate (and blockbusters are more about the quality than the quantity of the displays), insurance costs alone could deplete the entire budget.

For some years now, museums in Europe and North America have been mounting small exhibitions, drawing on their own collections. The fact that everything is from a local source contributes to their appeal and success. People learn to identify with their heritage, in this instance their local museum's collection. It helps develop civic pride.

Think about it – blockbusters or civic pride. Which does a community need more? It's a little like being asked to choose between the occasional fireworks and continuous illumination, isn't it?