

[S1] Mapping Cultures and Evolving Land Use in Mill Woods

By Catherine C. Cole, ICOM/CAMOC, Milan, 2016

[S2] Mill Woods is a community in southeast Edmonton, Alberta, in Western Canada. The area has had several incarnations over the years.

[S3] In the late 19th century, the Papaschase Cree band occupied land around Fort Edmonton, a Hudson's Bay Company fur trading fort, on the north shore of the river that runs through what is now the City of Edmonton.

[S4] When the federal government established Indian reserves in the area in preparation for settlement, the band was moved off its traditional land and relocated south of the river. The area was surveyed between 1880 and 1884 as the Papaschase Indian Reserve but just five years later, in 1889, before the band could become established on the land, the federal government took away their reserve, saying that the band had, in fact, disbanded. Recently descendants went to court to assert their claim – unsuccessfully.

[S5] The government reclaimed the land, resurveyed it as farmland, and in 1894 sold parcels to about 100 families of Moravian settlers, German-speaking emigrants from Russia who immigrated for religious freedom and the opportunity to congregate in the area.

[S6] Following end of World War II, and particularly after the economic boom that resulted from the discovery of oil south of the city in 1947, the population of Edmonton increased dramatically over the next two decades. In 1969, the municipal, provincial and federal governments established a unique collaboration to create an urban village that would provide affordable housing south-east of the city. From August to October 1969, the Province secretly accumulated land within a nine square mile area identified for the Mill Woods project. Once the project was announced that October, the City started negotiating with non-consenting landowners and developers moved in fueling land speculation.

[S7] The design concept was developed with optimism in 1970-71. It was a delicate process because it involved all three levels of government – municipal, provincial and federal. Mill Woods was conceived of as a city within a city, to have all the facilities and services residents required.

[S8] The plan is a complex document that took into consideration the creek that runs through it, service corridors, relationship to surrounding industrial and farm lands, public transportation, walkways, etc.

[S9] The concept had three objectives: physical, social and economic – that have met with mixed success. Physically, urban sprawl continues to be a problem in the city; socially, Mill Woods is a very culturally diverse area where younger members of ethnocultural communities, who grew up in schools together, appear to mix more socially than do their elders and it is considered a rough area although that reputation is not entirely warranted; and economically it was indeed a success as the City was said to have made \$185M on the development.

[S10] The City acknowledged the early history of the area by giving neighbourhoods, schools and parks names in Cree language although whether those names are considered to be respectful or cultural appropriation is debated. Today there is a significant Aboriginal community in the area – not necessarily descended from Papaschase – and an increasing focus on indigenous culture in schools and community programs. Many Aboriginal children live in foster families, a lot of which are Filipino.

[S11] I am interested in the many ways the community has been ‘mapped’, in terms of demographics, political and geographic boundaries. We collect different maps of the area and create our own for walking tours.

[S12] Throughout this project I have been asked – ‘Why Mill Woods?’ Mill Woods is a unique development; it is the only City-planned and developed community in Edmonton, and the only development built on land purchased by the Province as a land bank. At the time, municipal, provincial and federal governments were all investing in affordable housing. Until the 1970s, the city had been built on a grid system, but this development took the design off the grid with a ring road running through it. The fact that the city’s growth since the 1970s has been largely through immigration only makes the community more interesting. Residents have fought layers of stereotypes – classism, racism and fear all say more about the rest of the city than they do about the community itself.

[S13] The Mill Woods Living Heritage project was initiated in 2012 by Don Bouzek and I, Don a videographer and I, a historian by training; neither of us lives in the community. It is a prerequisite for our primary grant that the people working on the project be from the community. The funding program is called ‘Living Local’ and it is a partnership between the local heritage council, arts council, and community leagues. Community leagues are volunteer-run, neighbourhood-based, largely recreational organizations that usually operate a community hall and park, skating rinks, and sports programs as well as coordinating neighbourhood responses to urban planning. Through community leagues citizens are involved in the management of their cultural and urban landscape. This experiment in bringing heritage and arts organizations and community leagues together has only been in place for five years. We

work with artists living in the community. Over the years we have worked with artists of different cultural backgrounds (Canadian, Chilean, South Asian, Aboriginal), working in a variety of media (poetry, dance, music and sculpture).

[S14] We have produced a number of elements since 2012, including a website – which is not expensive or flashy but was built to keep people informed about the project. As work is completed new elements are added to the site.

[S15] The website includes excerpts from some of the more than 50 oral history interviews that have been conducted. In order to identify people to interview, we have worked with community-based ethnocultural organizations, such as Memoria Viva for the Latin American Community and Cari-West for the Caribbean community, and joined a Cultural Diversity Collaboration and an Aboriginal Family Night, all to build trust with community members and to explore the community in different ways. Doing this type of community-based work is extremely time-consuming but rewarding. I use information from the oral histories and archival research to write a monthly column for a community newspaper called the *Mill Woods Mosaic* and as the basis of displays, walks and workshops; research is also used by the artists we work with as inspiration for their work.

[S16] We created a temporary display which was first shown at the local ‘Canada Day ‘ celebrations – the largest in the city – and have since been shown at various schools, the public library, seniors centre, arts events and workshops. Using a trade fair type of system, the display consists of six panels that introduce the history of the area and the project itself.

[S17] We have led walking tours of neighbourhoods within the community, talked about the three distinct histories of use, the development of facilities and meanings behind place names en route, and invited community members to speak at a gurdwara, a mosque, an Islamic Centre, a housing cooperative, and a neighbourhood park.

[S18] We created a pop-up exhibition that involved interpretive panels – some of which were written by me based upon our research and some were written by community members. We made panel templates and held a workshop to talk to people about how to select images and prepare text. Unfortunately, the workshop was not well-attended. So we contacted people within the community to ask them to create interpretive panels. Then we put them up all over the community last Thanksgiving (mid-October) – essentially the last nice weekend of the year for outdoor events, and created a map showing where they were. Unfortunately we had an incredible wind storm that weekend and many panels were damaged or missing. We’re not really sure what impact the project had relative to the investment.

[S19] We facilitated a community mapping workshop after one of the walks. We laid out a lot of photographs, maps and other materials from the community and asked participants to 1. Select images that were meaningful to them; 2. Discuss each with other participants in small groups; 3. Create a collage showing what Mill Woods means to them collectively; and 4. Share their ideas with the larger group.

[S20] We worked with an Aboriginal artist who grew up in the community and created a sculpture about the interlocking neighbourhoods in the community. He then worked with a group of kids at the Aboriginal family night dinner who all contributed to the backdrop. We worked with a South Asian khattak dancer on a piece about the meaning of light in Indian culture integrating a phrase from an oral history as the rhythm line. We worked with a Chilean rap poet on the experiences of Latin American immigrants. We're now working on a piece that will combine Aboriginal music and khattak dance to tell a story about cultures mixing.

[S21] Edmonton still does not have a City Museum although our 2007 cultural plan recommended establishing one. For now, we have a program called ECAMP – Edmonton City as Museum Project – that is trying to engage Edmontonians in discovering the city through curiosity bus tours and a canoe tour, and telling stories about the city online. The project is not limited by city-owned collections, in fact, as far as I know, it hasn't looked at the city-owned collections.

[S22] Those of you who attended the CAMOC conference in Vancouver in 2012 will remember Larry Beasley's keynote address. He said, "There is no constant force for ongoing engagement and dialogue between people and the diverse realities of city life. And cities are worse off because of that. I think that force could be the city museum." The Edmonton Heritage Council has taken this statement to heart and is supporting various approaches to mapping the city. These types of initiatives are effective in encouraging people to look at their city differently, and to build a stronger connection to place.