

## Contested Space A Place on the Way to Collaborative Government?

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### Article abstract

The announcement in 1999 by the government of Newfoundland and Labrador of a new \$40 million cultural heritage complex, known as The Rooms, to replace the crumbling buildings of the provincial art gallery, museum, and archives should have been greeted by celebration. Instead, a rancorous public debate ensued that threatened to cancel the project. That debate centred on government's choice of an eighteenth century fort site for the new building. This article reviews the genesis of the project which caused the public dispute and traces the discussion as the contest for the building site unfolded. The Rooms controversy, and the events which eventually brought it to a close, powerfully illustrate the importance of public consultation to government decision-making in heritage matters. The debate vividly demonstrates how different interest groups claim authoritative voice around issues of heritage preservation and interpretation.

## CONTESTED SPACE

### A Place on the Way to Collaborative Government?

**Peter Latta**

*St. John's, Newfoundland*

room: a tract of land on the waterfront of a cove or harbour from which a fishery is conducted; the stores, sheds, "flakes," wharves and other facilities where the catch is landed and processed, and the crew housed (Story et al. 1999).

In 1999 the announcement of a much needed cultural heritage complex for Newfoundland and Labrador, known as The Rooms, should have been greeted by celebration. Instead, a rancorous public debate ensued concerning site selection that threatened to cancel the project. The Rooms controversy, and the events which eventually brought it to a close, powerfully illustrate the importance of public consultation to government decision-making in heritage matters. They also vividly demonstrate how different interest groups claim authoritative voice around issues of heritage preservation and interpretation.

#### **The Background of The Rooms**

For several years, and most acutely by the early 1990s, the Provincial Museum of Newfoundland and Labrador, The Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador, and the Art Gallery of Newfoundland and Labrador had physically deteriorated. Complaints from the public raised the profile of the problem but without evident response from government. The perilous economic state of the province, particularly following the 1992 collapse of the cod fishery, compounded the problem. It seemed then that cultural heritage infrastructure would not receive the attention needed for some time.

In 1997, however, the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the landing of John Cabot represented a significant opportunity for the Newfoundland and Labrador government to celebrate heritage and achievement. In addition to sponsoring tourism and community events, the provincial government proposed construction of a complex to house the three provincial cultural heritage institutions. Much depended upon federal financial support for the Cabot 500 initiatives. In addition to a new Parks Canada development in Bonavista, the keystone of the year's celebrations, the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador requested support from Ottawa to build an estimated \$40 million cultural heritage centre.

Planning for a new provincial museum, archives and art gallery building began in 1994. In June of that year the architect for the project, outlined the building concept in a letter addressed to "Interested Citizens": "the three components, museum, archive, art gallery, must maintain their individual identity, while being 'rooms' within a complex..." (Pratt 1994). Written comments were invited and at least one "public, open house session" planned. Concurrently, staff of the Department of Tourism, Culture and Recreation, which was responsible for the project, consulted with a number of stakeholders.

At this early stage the architect proposed several site options along with his outline of the physical requirements of the building. From the beginning, however, one location which encompassed several waterfront buildings was mooted as best (*Evening Telegram* 1994a). By the end of 1994, what had seemed a positive step forward in cultural heritage preservation was stalled over the issue of site choice. The editor of the *Association of Newfoundland and Labrador Archives (ANLA) Bulletin* summed up the matter with the proposed options:

... Pippy Park site has received opposition because of its remoteness from downtown. The Government House grounds have received opposition because of the destruction of green space. The site adjacent to City Hall, while offered practically for free, would require major excavation and is also too small and would require the purchase of some very valuable land to the west. While a site has not been confirmed, approval has been given by Cabinet to begin negotiations in the possible purchase of the block of waterfront land. There have been some concerns about the choice of the waterfront site by the archival community... (*ANLA Bulletin* 1994: 4).

These concerns tended to focus upon environmental controls. While the archivists favoured preservation of collections over other criteria, the Newfoundland Historic Trust, the principal built heritage society in the province, expressed an opposing view. The Trust supported the reuse of the waterfront buildings as the preferable choice and claimed responsibility for ending any serious consideration of the Government House grounds. In addition, the St John's Downtown Development Corporation held a public meeting to discuss the project and found "a number of individuals were pushing for a downtown location and, in particular, reuse of older buildings" (*ANLA Bulletin* 1995: 4). Others wanted a complete change of plans and proposed the building be moved out of the capital, notably to Bonavista to the site of John Cabot's 1497 landing (*Evening Telegram* 1994b). When stakeholders agreed on none of the proposed locations, the province settled on the site of an eighteenth century fort.

Overlooking the city and its harbour, Fort Townshend was raised between circa 1774 and 1780 by the British military to protect St John's from attack by sea and land. Shortly after the fort's construction, however, military planners shifted their focus to Signal Hill where they concentrated on fortifying the harbour. From around 1808 (with the exception of the years bracketing the War of 1812), Fort Townshend was no longer militarily dominant, but housed military and civil government offices. Gradually Fort Townshend deteriorated.

By the 1870s large portions were demolished following disbandment of British troops in Newfoundland. In the late 1940s several of the buildings comprising the original fortifications were torn down, including the two-story infantry barracks built in the 1770s. [In the 1940s, the barracks] ... was almost certainly the oldest [building] in the city and among the oldest in the province (Skanes et al. 2000: 44-45).

Although first identified in 1934 by the Newfoundland Tourist Development Board (NTDB) as a historic place, and named as a National Historic Site of Canada in 1949 following Newfoundland confederation with Canada, Fort Townshend's significance was largely overlooked. For example, when spearheading the promotion of landmarks after the Second World War, the NTDB initially focused its attention on Signal Hill. Fort Townshend was not forgotten entirely, as the deputy minister of Public Works attempted to preserve "three bomb-

proof shelters” on the site in 1953. However, without a committed budget for preservation work, and with only questionable expertise in masonry restoration available, his initiative stalled. Importantly, the preservation needs of two locations also attracted attention away from the fort. There was a growing sense of urgency to preserve Signal Hill from property encroachments and vandalism as well as to prevent the proposed destruction of Fort Amherst, another harbour defence in use from the eighteenth century to the Second World War. Against these competing demands, work to preserve above ground ruins at Fort Townshend did not happen. In time the ruins were removed (Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador).

Meanwhile, the fort site was used for other government services. In 1895 the central fire station was built there, and this was replaced by a second station on the same spot in 1946. In subsequent years, a parking lot occupied a large area of the fort. In 1975, a new police station planned for the land was moved to an adjacent lot when the fort’s historic nature was brought to official attention (Callahan 2000b).

When Fort Townshend was named the location of a new cultural heritage complex, objections were raised first about the threat this would pose to a neighbouring historic building. The owner of this building, the Observatory, asked the Newfoundland Historic Trust to assist in shielding her property from the development. The result was a heated public exchange between the president of the Historic Trust and the Minister responsible for the development (FitzGerald 1995). Meanwhile, The Association of Newfoundland and Labrador Archives confirmed that the site met their needs; they also raised the issue of archaeology.

Government’s reaction to questions about the project reportedly was not positive.

There are rumblings from the provincial government that they are receiving no good press on the project and little public support. Many members of the public look at our economy and are saying that we should be spending our money on other things. There have been suggestions that federal financial support for construction may not be forthcoming if public support for the project is not visible (ANLA *Bulletin* 1994/1995: 2).

Debate was cut short in the fall of 1995 when the necessary federal support did not materialize, and the project was cancelled.

## The Rooms at Fort Townshend

In the years following the Cabot 500 proposal, the Fort Townshend site attracted little interest. Other than monitoring an excavation to remediate a 1996 oil spill, no archaeology was done there (Skanes et al. 1999: 54).<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the condition of the provincial archives, art gallery and museum buildings continued to deteriorate to a point where collections were unquestionably threatened. In 1999 the government of Newfoundland and Labrador struck an advisory committee with the mandate of developing a proposal for a cultural and heritage centre (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador 1999a). The Advisory Committee on Cultural Infrastructure did not seek public participation in their task, choosing instead to restrict input to those most closely associated with the purpose of the new building, namely stakeholder groups with mandates for culture and heritage in the province. The provincial archaeological community, which did not then have a membership based organisation, was overlooked in this process (Vaughan-Jackson 1999).<sup>2</sup>

The Advisory Committee issued its report in December of 1999, recommending a new structure, known as The Rooms, be built at the Fort Townshend.<sup>3</sup> The Advisory Committee focused attention on the physical requirements of the institutions and highlighted how The Rooms would meet their immediate needs through the construction of a well designed building that incorporated state of the art technology for environmental and security controls. The Rooms' interpretative design incorporated archaeological remains which, although not unique, was arguably an innovative approach.

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1. During the federal election of 2000, the Friends of Fort Townshend issued a press release (2000b) pointing out that federal funding had never been requested for the fort since its designation as a National Historic site in 1951.
  2. At the same time government announced a smaller version of The Rooms project for the Memorial University campus in Corner Brook.
  3. The appointment of the Advisory Committee on Cultural Infrastructure has been suggested as being made before the 1997 provincial election (Vaughan-Jackson 1999). The Committee consulted representatives of twelve organisations: Genealogy Society; Historical Society; Association of Cultural Industries; Visual Arts Association; Historic Trust; Heritage Foundation; Museum Association; Friends of the (Newfoundland) Museum; Archivists Association; Arts Council; St John's Infrastructure Committee; Art Gallery of Newfoundland and Labrador (Information from Department of Tourism, Culture and Recreation).

In 1999, concurrent with the work of the Advisory Committee on Cultural Infrastructure, the government engaged a consulting team which included archaeologists from Memorial University. Their mandate was to use archival sources to identify locations of probable foundations and other structures on the site. The research team was initially cautiously optimistic about the possibilities of incorporating innovative archaeological interpretation in The Rooms provided adequate field research was conducted prior to construction (Skanes et al. 1999).<sup>4</sup> Later, debate revolved around the question of whether or not the research team's recommendations for further archaeological assessment before a final architectural design had been acted upon (Pope 2000).<sup>5</sup>

By committing to fund the project almost entirely through their own exchequer, the provincial government guarded against any possibility that federal or other funders would delay or prevent completion. However, almost immediately after the premier announced

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4. The report by the archaeological team outlined their work process and early thoughts on the project. "By using historic maps and plans of the site, it was possible to predict the positions of earlier features relative to surviving one [...] some form of field testing program should be devised and implemented as a preliminary to final design work and construction. [...] As to the proposed museum/art gallery/archives complex, clearly the most dramatic location for its construction at Fort Townshend would be in the vicinity of the Grand Battery. [...] The suggested approach of *in situ* preservation and presentation has been used at museums in Montréal and Québec City, and at a Viking interpretation centre in York, England, with great success. At home, the recent rebuilding of the Lester-Garland House in Trinity involved incorporating into that new structure as part of an interpretation display, older ruins discovered during archaeological excavations beneath the floor of that particular historic dwelling. A similar strategy could be taken at Fort Townshend and extant stone and brick features used to enhance what could prove to be a world class institution..." (Skanes et al. 1999: 56).
  5. The contention that the site plans were finalized before actual archaeological work remained a critical factor, as archaeologists continued to explain throughout the debate. "Why the timing of public opposition to this location? That results from the fact that the Province did not follow recommendations in the study it commissioned on the historic resources of the site. That study [...] recommended archaeological assessment of the site, *before* design of the interpretative space. Instead, the Province accepted a design before any archaeological assessment was carried out, so that the extent and excellent preservation of the remains of the Grand Battery and other features came as a surprise both to officials and to most of the archaeological community" (Pope 2000).

acceptance of the report of the Committee on Cultural Infrastructure, there were dissenting voices.<sup>6</sup> A public debate, at times rancorous, continued for many months; it became a major source of division in the arts and heritage community of St. John's and a lightening rod for local and provincial politicians. The matter grew so heated that at one point the entire project seemed threatened.

## The Debate

For many heritage advocates and concerned city residents, the government's decision to construct The Rooms over Fort Townshend was a catalyst for expressing frustration about historic sites which had been lost to "development." Indeed, the context of The Rooms announcement was a time of heightened public awareness of heritage losses. Contributors to this debate compiled a long list of losses dating back to the "bulldozing of the old post office on Water Street" in 1949 (D. McGrath 2000). These ranged from individual buildings to streetscapes, ships and collections (Shields 2001) and the construction of an office building on the waterfront in the 1970s.<sup>7</sup> One lengthy review of "bungling" of heritage preservation in the city echoed a frequently raised concern over the absence of an overall development plan for the city.

Downtown development is not the real issue here, as development and preservation need not be mutually exclusive. However, if anyone at City Hall actually has a coherent plan for developing downtown St. John's while preserving its singular characteristics, I haven't seen much evidence of it (Hennessey 2000).

Other city planning controversies involving properties in the same historic neighbourhood as The Rooms were fresh in the public mind. One was the pending sale of Shamrock Field, a church-owned playing field, to a grocery store chain. Another was the completed sale and renovation of the historic Irish Benevolent Society building into upscale townhouses. This project obstructed the sight of the harbour narrows from the Basilica, thereby altering a familiar St. John's viewscape. For

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6. The first reported concern came, ironically, about the Observatory (Sullivan 1999).

7. Absent from the inventory was the 1995 cancellation of a new building for cultural heritage.



many of those residents who wrote letters to newspapers or posted e-mails, then, Fort Townshend was just the most recent demonstration of government's ineffectiveness in protecting heritage resources.

Protesters' letters directed blame for the failure to defend Newfoundland and Labrador's built heritage at all levels of government. Although *The Rooms* was a project of the provincial government, several of the issues colouring the background of the protest were within municipal jurisdiction. The public often blurred levels of governmental responsibility when raising questions concerning heritage resources, as this example illustrates.

The Rooms is in one of the most historic and dignified residential and institutional precincts in North America. It seems unbelievably short-sighted that the character of this area will not be preserved for posterity ... The city government has abdicated leadership on these development issues, preferring to leave planning to developers. I urge the provincial government to show leadership on these issues, especially considering its substantial investment in *The Rooms* (Mellin 2000).

### **The Problem of The Rooms: Speaking Out But Not Being Heard**

The Government of Newfoundland and Labrador relied on both paid consultants and advisory committees to arrive at its decision to build *The Rooms* at Fort Townshend. These are widely accepted channels for governments to access expert opinion when undertaking public projects. However, while seeking informed advice lends credibility to the initiatives of legislators, it can also spark public scepticism if ignored or used selectively.

The 1999 report of the archaeological team hired to review the documentary evidence of Fort Townshend observed that the most dramatic place at Fort Townshend for the new building would be at the Grand Battery, and that good archaeological practice would recommend "some form of field testing program should be devised and implemented as a preliminary to final design work and construction" (Skanes et al. 1999: 56). This recommendation challenged the role of the building designers and became the focal point of contention for archaeologists and others. Although the architects reportedly made some adjustment to the footings of the building to accommodate features uncovered

during archaeological excavations,<sup>8</sup> the government's apparent reluctance to either accept or directly address concerns raised in the initial advice contributed to the growing sense of contention among the general public.<sup>9</sup>

As The Rooms controversy unfolded, a local historian resigned from the St. John's Heritage Advisory Committee, although apparently not for reasons directly related to The Rooms. Instead, the resignation was reported to be out of frustration with city council's repeated refusal to accept the committee's recommendations. The historian argued that

[city] council too often rejects [heritage advisory] committee recommendations out of "expediency" and for "the most frivolous of reasons" [and consequently was] ruining the streetscapes and roof lines in the downtown core (Jones 2000a).

The question raised by both the historian and archaeologists is how should elected persons, who bear the responsibility for implementing decisions, deal with contracted advice? The Mayor of St. John's expressed his view when he commented on the resignation from the heritage advisory committee.

It's an advisory committee to council and council has the right to reject [recommendations] or not... Its recommendations are not binding on council. So I don't know why people get so upset because sometimes their recommendations are not accepted (Jones 2000a).

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8. The Rooms architect defended his role by explaining changes made to accommodate the site. "The archaeological significance presented by Fort Townshend has been recognized since Day 1 [...] As a result of the archaeological information, [the architects] have expanded the basement area and reconfigured it in such a way as to improve the interpretation and potential of the Grand Battery Wall" (Bennett 2000a).
  9. A public meeting sponsored by the Archaeology Unit of Memorial University (18 October 2000) resulted in the acceptance of the following resolution: "Whereas recent archeology at Fort Townshend has shown that construction of The Rooms on the proposed site threatens the integrity, if not the very existence, of the most significant remains of St. John's eighteenth-century past, the citizens in attendance at this public meeting resolve to petition government to reconsider previous decisions in the light of new information and to relocate The Rooms immediately and with full retention of funding to a venue that will not pose a threat to any heritage resources." This perception was given further weight in a later conservation report (Weaver 2001: 4).

In the case of The Rooms, the government's perceived rejection of expert advice, combined with the obvious exclusion of the public from the decision making process, led to public scepticism about its sincerity in consulting in the first place. Lack of consultation or reliance upon a small pool of community advisers contributed to the sense that the decision making process was exclusive and elitist. One observer wrote

My displeasure is with the way The Rooms were thrust upon us, that is, as a community... I am aware that there was a committee... to advise on the structure, however, there seemed to be little opportunity for input about the proposed structure or its location. Had we, as a community, been given the opportunity to discuss this project in a public forum as we currently are, we may not be in the present controversy concerning Fort Townshend as a major archaeological site (Daly 2000).

This view was reiterated more bluntly by another commentator.

... We are told that the site selection was made through an "open" process. Perhaps the promoters could remind us of the public meetings they held before the decision was announced, and the efforts they made to facilitate public participation in their process.

As it is, we are confronted by a bad decision made by a narrow elite employing a flawed process that will rob our children of an important heritage location (MacLeod 2001).

### **The Public's Many Voices**

Arts groups, largely in favour of The Rooms, expressed minimal concerns about the site. Heritage stakeholders were more divided. While some participated in the few public discussions, not all chose to voice their views through the media or to take specific public positions on the project.<sup>10</sup> Having been consulted by the Advisory Committee on Cultural Infrastructure, perhaps they felt their opinions had been taken into account.<sup>11</sup> However, throughout most of 2000 those who thought the government had fallen down in its role as custodian of provincial

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10. At the time the author was Executive Director of the Association of Heritage Industries, a coalition of provincial heritage groups.

11. A question undeveloped in this study is whether the arts and heritage stakeholders' financial dependence on government influenced their role in the debate. The author has seen little evidence to suggest this was a pressure.

heritage and/or who felt excluded from the decision making process vied to be heard. A stream of letters to editors of local papers, press releases from heritage and arts groups, public commentaries through the broadcast media, and a significant amount of correspondence directly with legislators embodied many divergent views of The Rooms project. Archaeologists based at Memorial University spoke out loudly against the project and circulated a petition in an attempt to delay construction. The Friends of Fort Townshend, a special interest group who formed in reaction to the controversy,<sup>12</sup> also raised visibility. But neither these protests nor two public debates held during the fall of 2000, sponsored by the Newfoundland Historic Trust and CBC respectively, significantly focussed the debate (Bennett 2000b; Sweet 2000). Critics continued to link their concerns to several main issues related to the development, such as archaeology, lack of city green space, urban planning or architectural design. So many disparate viewpoints, given equal weight within the various media, made assessing the overall strength of the objections or support for The Rooms difficult.

Despite the debate's broad range, it is possible to identify dominant themes. Initially, much of the concern focussed on the site choice and the impact of construction on Fort Townshend's remains. Although the Committee on Cultural Infrastructure pursued the matter of location with at least one stakeholder group, it is clear from the public responses that stakeholder groups only spoke for their specific interests and not for the interests of the general public.<sup>13</sup> Other objectors highlighted the fort's extensive archaeological remains and the site's centrality to provincial history. For example, in a strongly worded letter to the editor of *The Telegram*, a military historian admitted his opinion concerning the location of The Rooms had shifted as the ruins seemed to be more extensive than anticipated.

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12. The "risk of being too exclusive" in selecting stakeholders and the difficulty of recognising an unformed interest group is discussed in Thomas (1995: 60).
  13. Responding to a request from the Advisory Committee on Cultural Infrastructure, the Association of Newfoundland and Labrador Archives found a majority of its members throughout the province in favour of the Fort Townshend site compared to an alternative at Memorial University (ANLA 1999). Requests by the author to view the correspondence of the Advisory Committee on Cultural Infrastructure were refused. Thomas discusses the tendency of governments to accept stakeholder opinions as representative of the public (1995: 93-111).

Fort Townshend is a major archaeological site — it is part of our Newfoundland history. It was once the largest fortification in North America, an example of military engineering of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries that can find few examples elsewhere. It is a reminder of this period, troops from Newfoundland helped to save British North America — from the American invasion in 1776 and again in the War of 1812. To cover up even a small portion of this valuable site would be an unforgivable act of vandalism (Parsons 2000).

Some opponents of the site viewed the issue as a simple matter of finding another space large enough for the building. Alternative places suggested included a vacant hospital, a redundant stadium and a nearby playing field, all three of which were well known but also contested spaces within the city of St John's.<sup>14</sup> During this discussion, little or no reference was made to the 1994 Cabot proposal that led to the selection of Fort Townshend site in the first place. Whether or not objectors recalled the history behind the choice, government decision makers presumably did. Options that had been earlier rejected would not likely be convincing to decision makers now. However, the provincial government's reticence to directly enter a dialogue about alternative locations only frustrated those passionately concerned.<sup>15</sup>

Another widely held concern was that the new complex would dwarf the neighbouring Basilica which had previously dominated the skyline. An editorial writer summarized this position in *The Telegram*.

No one would quarrel with the need for one building to house the provincial museum, archives and art gallery. Indeed, such a building was long overdue. But, to my mind, it's in the wrong place and it's too big for the location where it's built. It destroys the skyline of old St. John's. What's more, buildings like the Roman Catholic Basilica of St. John the Baptist are overpowered by it (Benson 2004).

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14. Recommended alternatives included: Quidi Vidi Lake and a former military base (J. McGrath 2000); the lawn of Government House (Karasek 2000; Summers and Shortall 2000); Shea Heights, a neighborhood on the south side of St John's Harbour (Gosse 2000); the Town of Placentia (Bennett 2000c); and a development company proposed its property at the foot of Signal Hill (Baird and Sweet 2000).
  15. This reluctance was maintained until the minister wrote to the *Telegram* late in 2000, when he defended the decision taken (Furey 2000). Concurrently, government met with archaeologists (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador 2000b), released a newsletter of information about The Rooms (2000a), established a website (2000c), and placed an explanatory advertisement in the local press (2000d).

Responses to these positions covered a similarly broad spectrum. Some questioned the extensiveness of the ruins.

But let's be absolutely clear about one thing: there is no fort. There are foundations — piles of buried rocks that were once the bottom of walls. To hear the defenders of "Fort Townshend" make their case, you'd think the structure was in pristine condition and was about to be demolished by people who are the cultural equivalents of the Goths who sacked Rome (Jones 2000b).

The Deputy Minister of Tourism, Culture and Recreation raised doubts about the site's calibre by minimizing the fort's historical importance: "It's significant, but we have many of these 18<sup>th</sup>-century British forts in Canada, already interpreted, such as Signal Hill and Commissariat House in Newfoundland... This is not the Viking site and it's not of any large national or global significance" (Callahan 2000a). And the opinion that The Rooms would destroy the look of the city was countered by the suggestion it would instead be a new landmark, thus approving the visual and cultural competition it would offer the Basilica (Gushue 1999; Belbin 2003).

The Rooms debate illustrates one of the main challenges facing governments when gauging public opinion: the need to "disentangle relationship issues from substantive issues" (Fisher and Brown 1988: 16). Without strong leadership, The Rooms debate fractured into a discussion of many serious, but diverse issues. Some who waded into the fray generalized from what they considered irresponsible stewardship for provincial heritage to government mismanagement of economic development. Opponents compared the situation to the Sprung greenhouse, a short-lived and now notorious government backed initiative of the 1980s to grow cucumbers hydroponically (Clark 2000). Over the course of the debate, lack of funding for competing needs were argued, including senior citizens care, science education, school infrastructure, and a sports hall of fame (Peddle 1999; Scott 2000; Carroll 1999; Simms 1999). In making their arguments, writers strongly implied or said outright that by supporting The Rooms, government's priority was misplaced. As questions swirled around the project, within a year of its announcement The Rooms ceased to be a cause of celebration.

### Authoritative Voices

At the heart of the debate about the location of The Rooms and the interpretation of Fort Townshend lies the question of authoritative voice. Is a site representative of an idea, or representative of itself? What place does reconstruction have in understanding the past? On one side is the idea that the place itself is worthy of protection because it is the tangible and physical reminder of events in the past. Without the actual material, buildings, earthworks or artefacts, interpretation is weakened. From this view, some sites are better presented to the public through preservation rather than commemoration. On the other side is the notion that “things” are symbols of a history. Whether these survive or not, or are represented in a complete manner, is not so crucial to understanding the importance of what happened in a place. What is important depends upon who decides what parts of the past will be emphasized in the public explanation.

In the spring of 2000, the Department of Tourism, Culture and Recreation ordered a full archaeological excavation of the area where the building would sit. The archaeology, conducted over two summers, employed up to forty archaeologists and students. Newspaper reports highlighted the government’s view that the eighteenth century fort’s archaeological remains were a “resource.” How that public resource should be managed however, remained contentious. As mentioned above, some held the view that The Rooms would “destroy” the archaeological remains beneath it (Pope 2000). On the other hand, others believed that this was the best use of the site. For example, the Provincial Archaeologist assured the public: “The remains [of the eighteenth century Grand Battery Wall] will not be destroyed... To the contrary, they will be protected during and after construction.” There would necessarily be some “interference in that some sections of the wall will have to be recorded, professionally dismantled and reconstructed as part of the interpretation program.” The project was often paralleled to Pointe-à-Callière, a seventeenth century site in Montréal where a museum has been constructed over and incorporates archaeological remains in its interpretative programme (Bennett 2000a).

Beginning in June 2000, the archaeologists wrote and spoke publicly many times regarding what they saw as the centrality of their discipline

and its principles to the government's decision making process.<sup>16</sup> Their concerns were embraced by many, yet others sought different interpretative emphasis. For example, a press release positioned the newly formed group, the Friends of Fort Townshend, in relation to the archaeologists: "... a number of people realized that the MUN archaeologists were becoming identified as the only ones in favour of preserving the fort... and that's a misrepresentation" (Friends of Fort Townshend 2000a). The Friends web site alternatively highlighted the historical over the archaeological, posting several articles about the fort's relationship to Newfoundland's important Irish history (see Devlin Trew's article in this same issue).

For others, determining how the past should be interpreted and who should decide was a broader issue. Those who perceive public history and site preservation as an essentially political statement viewed Fort Townshend as simply another white man's colonial fort, representing an episode from the past better forgotten than celebrated (Hughes 2000; Power 2000). The argument that Fort Townshend was just another eighteenth century fort and that its preservation "merely glorifies 'dead white men'" was parried by emphasizing that in St. John's it is unique, and that ordinary people lived and worked there (Brown 2000b).

Indeed, if fortifications are emblematic of a history which unfolded in and around them, one observer noted that Fort York in Labrador "from a provincial perspective, [is] as important a site as the later Fort Townshend" (Major 2000). In this view, constructing a building sympathetic with what lay beneath it would not inhibit the exploration of the site's past.

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16. Among several apparent groups joining the debate, the archaeologists are among the best defined, illustrated by this quote: "Who is opposed to construction...? The nine members of Memorial's Archaeology Unit unanimously petitioned City Council to call for the relocation, following an unsuccessful attempt last June to alert the Department of Tourism to the blunder they seemed intent on making. As far as we can make out every professional archeologist working in Newfoundland and Labrador shared our concerns, as do heritage authorities elsewhere in Canada, the United States, England and Ireland. We've been overwhelmed by the public support we have received for our position. An informal NTV poll put support for relocation at about 80%, so this isn't a minority view, even amongst parts of the arts community" (Pope 2000).



As the public worked on the question of how to interpret a fort, it ran into a conundrum. On the one hand, constructing The Rooms on the site would defeat any possibility of future reconstruction or interpretation of the fort as a complete physical entity. On the other, rebuilding the fort invited immediate criticism that the result could only be a new representation of what may have been on site. Again, without demonstrable leadership, the public remained unresolved while the government's perspective hovered in the background.

Participants on both sides pointed to interpretative models elsewhere. Some advocated a park-like interpretation of grassed-over ruins. For example, a writer of a letter to the editor of the *Telegram* suggested moving The Rooms to nearby Shamrock Field, a playing field scheduled to become a supermarket and a place of contention, arguing that this would serve the twofold purpose of maintaining open space in the city core and keep the potential for future interpretative and/or reconstructive projects should the political will and finances exist (Phelan 2000). A leading archaeologist advised this plan might in fact be the best way to develop the site, since doing otherwise would be inadequate (Pope 2001). Others looked to the Plains of Abraham and even Hadrian's Wall as examples of how to deal with the fort site (Brown 2000a; Booth 2001). Others favoured more elaborate reconstructive examples. Nova Scotian examples of the Halifax Citadel and the Fortress Louisbourg were frequently mentioned as was the Newfoundland Viking site at L'Anse aux Meadows (J. McGrath 2000; Parsons 2000; Pike 2001). Opponents of reconstruction likened Louisbourg to Disney World, accusing it of creating more historical fantasy than reality.

When people talk about the "rehabilitation" of Fort Townshend (a euphemism for "reconstruction"), or compare it to the Fortress of Louisbourg in Cape Breton, it makes me want to pick up a sledgehammer. Let's get another thing straight: the Fortress of Louisbourg is a fake, a fraud, a sham. The real structure was destroyed in the mid-1700s. The current fortress is no more "historical" than any of the rides at Disney World... By all means, preserve as much of Fort Townshend's foundations as possible. But please cease the accusations that by building The Rooms on that site we are somehow destroying or showing a lack or respect for Newfoundland's history. On the contrary. As the Greeks and Italians wisely realize, history is comprised of stories, not stones (Jones 2000b).

The Minister of Tourism, Culture and Recreation also relied on the Disney analogy: "... those who think we can build a Fort Louisbourg or

build something Nova Scotia has are in Disneyland with a capital D...” (Vaughan-Jackson 2000a). Relying on its professional curators and interpreters, and drawing on the experience of museums in North America and Europe, the government clearly felt it had made the right decision. Yet their perceived reluctance to provide a direct response to the public’s suggestions for interpretation created a strong sense that government would break its own rules in support of its vision (Brown 2000b; Short 2000).<sup>17</sup>

### **Holding the Government Line**

The issue of The Rooms and how a positive development disintegrated into a negative one dynamically illustrates two features of modern government. First, initiatives which seem to have wide support, as well as less popular ones, require some level of public information and/or public input prior to any final announcement. In the case of The Rooms, the decision to limit public information, especially after stakeholders were onside, proved problematic. Without providing adequate prior public information and allowing for public response, a good initiative became stained and seriously questioned by unresolved public dispute (Thomas 1995: 173).

Second is an apparent impossibility for elected leaders to openly change their mind. As a rule, government does everything it can to avoid making a public mistake or be seen as indecisive. As Delacourt and Lenihan write in their essay on collaborative government,

excessively partisan politics forces complex issues into simple moulds that portray them as black and white. Admitting an error in such circumstances is usually construed as admitting failure and, ultimately, defeat. For politicians, this can be disastrous... A minister thus feels obliged to defend his or her government’s policies and programs as “the right ones” and “the only viable solution to the problem” regardless of the evidence or the circumstances. Ensuring that the minister is not embarrassed, that is, that he or she is not forced to retract a statement, retreat from a policy or admit an error thus becomes a major concern for his or her staff and for senior officials in the department (1999: 116).

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17. Arguments were made that government circumvented archaeological protection regulations or simply ignored legislation. This theme was later revisited when the debate became politicised (Bennett 2001).

In the end, the politicization of The Rooms appears to have stimulated this very response, generating statements by government that can be seen as a signal to close the debate.

Days before stepping down to run in the 2000 federal election,<sup>18</sup> the Minister responsible for The Rooms suggested uncertainty surrounding the project.

Could the money fall off the table? Yes, a very real possibility... This is a very fragile and delicate and precarious time for these cultural institutions. We thought we got it right. I do believe we got it right. The artistic community, on balance, believes we got it right. The government believes we got it right... We are prepared to spend more on archaeology and to protect it as a living interpretation and dig... This is the best we could come up with (Vaughan-Jackson 2000a).

While site selection was contentious, the quality of the building as a state of the art cultural heritage facility was completely assured by the government's professional staff and consulting teams. The absence of demonstrable public acceptance for the project, however, led to the minister's reference to support for the project "falling off the table" and suggests government may have indeed wavered in its commitment to building The Rooms. What retrieved the project from the edge? Probably a sense that the controversy could be managed. The tendency to relate The Rooms to any number of side issues had clouded the original cause for the protest, thus creating a fragmented opposition. Combined with this, a public opinion poll indicated broad support for the project, suggesting the storm could be ridden out (Corporate Research Atlantic 2000). As well, the government argued that the archaeology accomplished over 2000-2001 demonstrated responsiveness to archaeological concerns over the site. In addition to the field archaeology, government contracted a noted conservation expert to assess and advise on the stabilisation of the stonework of the fort, to ensure its plans were workable (Weaver 2000).

A further hardening of the provincial government's position may have taken place when the debate shifted to the political realm. Taking advantage of the conjunction of leadership contests for the two largest provincial parties and a federal election, all in late 2000 and early 2001,

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18. The Premier of Newfoundland and Labrador, considered one of the key supporters of The Rooms, resigned to return to federal politics, in addition to the Minister.

candidates were openly invited to comment on The Rooms. Soon politicians from all three levels of government joined the debate.

Part of the context of The Rooms debate was a simmering dispute between the City of St. John's and the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador over grants in lieu of taxes. For several years the province rejected the city's request for an annual grant equivalent to property taxes on provincially owned buildings (Cleary 1998a; Sweet 2001). By late 1998, the city and province were in a very public dispute over the matter, with the provincial government threatening to pay the grant but to cancel other agreements. The city responded with an open "Appeal for Equity" (Cleary 1998b; 1998c). Although not directly referred to in the matter of The Rooms development, this disagreement formed part of the context of the dispute. While a new cultural heritage structure of such magnitude would undoubtedly contribute to the sustainability of tourism in the city, it would not contribute to the tax base in the near future. This thorn in intergovernmental relationship may have permitted the city council some latitude entering the debate. When archaeologists sought support of St. John's city council in finding a better site for The Rooms (Brown et al. 2000), council concurred conditionally by asking the provincial government to stop work until after a new leader/premier was chosen at the pending Liberal party leadership convention. In addition, the mayor reportedly "wouldn't say outright that he opposes the location" (Sweet 2000). Replying to the council, the acting Minister of Tourism, Culture and Recreation, addressed the implication that a new leader would feel unrestrained by previous decisions, and emphasized cabinet's unity on their position (Vaughan-Jackson 2000b). Following this exchange the Mayor requested that the National Historic Sites and Monuments Board review the impact The Rooms would have on Fort Townshend's heritage designation, an action which drew a heated public response by the acting Minister who accused the Mayor of misleading the public (Bennett 2000d).

Candidates running in the federal election were sent a questionnaire to determine their positions. In response, opposition candidates responded favourably to the concept of relocating The Rooms, while government candidates remained silent (Friends of Fort Townshend 2000b; Bennett 2000d). With little federal funding for the project, however, parliamentary candidates had little to promise.

Provincial leadership conventions took place for both the governing Liberals and opposition Progressive Conservatives at the end of 2000 and early 2001. For the Liberal convention, opponents of The Rooms site called on the public to write candidates for the premiership and “Let politicians know you’re defending Fort Townshend” (Brown 2000b). Similarly, the sole candidate for leader of the then opposition party was invited to comment. When “asked to go on record,” he replied that the building should be moved off the Fort Townshend site and that the question be brought to debate in the next session of the legislature (Hillyard 2001). The newspaper titled the exchange as “Minister attacks Tory on Rooms stand” leaving no doubt that the issue was now partisan<sup>19</sup> (Bennett 2001). With the distraction of the federal election and provincial leadership contests, however, public discourse diminished. In large part, the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador had weathered the storm. Within a few weeks, they announced the general contractor for The Rooms and construction began (Sullivan 2001; Vaughan-Jackson 2001).

### **Finding the Way to Collaborative Government**

The need for a new cultural heritage complex for the province of Newfoundland and Labrador was never in question. In fact, this was a well recognized need in 1999. The physical conditions of the provincial art gallery, museum and archive were deplorable and the proposal to build a combined cultural facility had already been floated in the earlier aborted attempt of 1995. Why then did The Rooms proposal disintegrate into a contentious public dispute that could have resulted in a second cancellation?

Protest over The Rooms demonstrates both citizens’ desire to participate in government decision making and government’s need for public involvement. Sparked by alarm from archaeologists that the building would severely damage the remains of Fort Townshend, members of the public began to feel that the site preservation for this cultural heritage project was of secondary concern to government leaders. This apparent paradox shook public confidence in the

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19. Picking up on earlier complaints from the archaeologists and public, the Minister of Tourism, Culture and Recreation said Williams is incorrect when he says that “the spirit and intent of the Historic Resources Act has been infringed” (Bennett 2001).

government's decision-making around the issue and became a focus of much subsequent discussion about The Rooms.

The debate unfolded within a context of dissatisfaction over the ongoing loss of heritage resources and the seeming indifference of governments at all levels to the advice provided by heritage consultants. Culture and heritage comprise a "weak" category for government, and therefore any financial investment is usually seen as positive. However, protest about The Rooms clearly shows that in matters of contested space and public investment, heritage and culture are not immune from the kind of dispute which often surrounds commercial development projects. The unguided nature of the public debate excluded the likelihood of resolving base issues like identifying a mutually agreeable way forward for heritage and development. Equally unresolved was the issue of interpretation as competing voices vied for authority in arguing how to best preserve and interpret the Fort Townshend site.

The Rooms debate raises questions about the types of and purposes for public consultation. When to consult and the depth of consultation differs from project to project. In general, "concerns for quality" require less public involvement, while "concerns for acceptability" recommend more consultation (Thomas 1995: 73). It can be argued that in the case of The Rooms, concerns regarding the overall quality of the physical project were met through consultation with stakeholders and augmented by professional institutional staff. However, while the Advisory Committee on Cultural Infrastructure may have felt that what stakeholders found "acceptable" would parallel what the public deemed acceptable, they were mistaken. The Rooms debate — both through objections raised to the project, as well as the widespread perception that decision makers had disregarded or selectively used expert advice — confirms that one cannot safely assume that stakeholder opinion and public opinion are one and the same.

In addressing concerns raised about The Rooms project, and in particular about site choice, the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador participated in a limited dialogue with the public. They emphasised the need for the project and the quality of the end product. Without an opportunity to confront government directly or to hear explanations for choices made, groups and individuals looked to forums like the newspaper to express their discontent. The most intense period of public criticism came in the fall of 2000, just prior to a federal election

and two provincial political leadership conventions. The debate quickly became politicised, moving from a public-to-government dialogue to a politically partisan dispute. At this level different rules of engagement further solidified the provincial government's position. Combined with the distraction of other political events, the possibility of finding a new site for The Rooms faded<sup>20</sup>.

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