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ANALYSE | ANALYSIS

Medicine Hat Red Brick

A Tale of Extractivist Colonialism and Environmental Racism[1]

BANAFSHEH MOHAMMADI

Banafsheh Mohammadi, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of critical and cultural studies at Emily Carr University of Art + Design. As an architectural historian, theorist, and educator, her interests involve a decolonial approach to the study of architecture and the built environment that centralizes violence towards lands and local cultures as an ongoing result of petroleum-based imperialism and colonialism.

> If the academy is concerned about not only protecting and maintaining Indigenous intelligence but also revitalizing it on Indigenous terms as a form of restitution for its historic and contemporary role as a colonizing force (of which I see no evidence), then the academy must make a conscious decision to become a decolonizing force in the intellectual lives of Indigenous peoples by joining us in dismantling settler colonialism and actively protecting the source of our knowledge: Indigenous *land*.[2]

When I stand on the University of Alberta's north campus on the southern side of the northern tributary of kisiskâciwanisîpiy (the Saskatchewan River) and glance at the southern shore of downtown amiskwaciy-wâskahikan (colonially known as Edmonton), a peculiar tone of rusty red stands out, reflected by the many glass buildings that make up the Edmonton skyline. Walking along the streets of downtown Edmonton, I notice that the rusty colour of many of these landmark buildings, clustered along the banks of the River Valley, come predominantly from an ancient architectural material: red brick. The burnt orange colour of this brick, commonly known as the "Medicine Hat red" among Canadian architects, can be seen on the façades of the Citadel Theatre, the Canada Place office building, the decommissioned Rossdale Power Plant, and many of the medium-rise residential buildings that spread along the riverbank. Carefully chosen by Citadel Theatre architect Barton Myers for its colour,[3] Medicine Hat red brick is renowned for its rich pigmentation and consistency. Brick invites the touch. It may, as with the Rossdale Power Plant (1932), feel gritty; or it can be polished and smooth, as with the bricks used in the Citadel Theatre (1965) (fig. 1).

To trace this colour, I travelled 527 kilometres south from Edmonton to Medicine Hat to see the land that produces this rich red construction material. The questions I asked were: What do architectural materials do? Do they keep traces of the history of their making/makers? Can the story of their violence be carried through the years in the form of materials such

FIG. 1. MEDICINE HAT RED BRICK USED IN THE CITADEL THEATRE, FEBRUARY 2022. SAJAD SOLEYMANI YAZDI.

as brick? As I discuss in this article, the very colour that fashions many of Canada's urban spaces, including Edmonton's, are steeped in a history of clay and fossil fuel extractions similar to those that I have observed and researched on the lands of Medicine Hat. To adorn Canadian urban landscapes with that rich shade of red, many lands and lives were extracted and violated.

The imposition of factories, kilns, and soil excavation across swathes of land on the sacred Blackfoot territory of the Cypress Hills has violated Indigenous livelihood, intrinsically tied to land, in a fundamental way. Therefore, the imposition of factories, kilns, and soil excavation on the sacred Blackfoot territory of the Cypress Hills is not only a matter of the exact number of lives lost, or parcels of land stolen; it is a matter of threatening and destroying ways of life that were deeply connected to land. This is not merely a historical incident; it rather speaks to ongoing colonial systems that disenfranchise the stewards of this land. As Chief Jim O'Chiese and Tracey Poitras-Collins write, even though the Cypress Hills have been a sacred site for the Blackfoot for thousands of years, even as recently as 2016, they were denied access to their land.[4] Previous sites of pottery production in Medicine Hat, now recognized as heritage sites yet ironically carrying "no trespassing" signs, bear witness to a paradigmatic way in which settler industries have altered Indigenous landscapes, and thus lives.

Context: Interconnection of Clay and Gas in Medicine Hat

Known by its colonial name Medicine Hat,[5] an adaptation of the Blackfoot word *Saamis*, the city is in the southeastern part of the province of Alberta, close to the border with Montana. It is home to the Blackfoot, Cree, Assiniboine, and Métis Peoples.[6] With a population of 65,203, Medicine Hat is the sixth largest city in Alberta and the 89th largest in Canada.[7] It was incorporated as a city in 1906, a year after Alberta became a province, and it was at the time the largest city in southeastern Alberta. Known as the Gas City, Medicine Hat was founded and became prosperous in part due to the discovery of extensive gas wells during the first years of the twentieth century. The discovery was accidental; the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) was looking for water while building a bridge across the southern tributary of kisiskâciwanisîpiy, or the South Saskatchewan River, when their drilling hit one of the largest gas fields in North America (figs. 2 and 3).[8]

FIG. 2. SOUTH SASKATCHEWAN RIVER AND THE CANADIAN PACIFIC RAILWAY IN MEDICINE HAT, SEPTEMBER 2022. SAJAD SOLEYMANI YAZDI.

FIG. 3.
THE CANADIAN PACIFIC RAILWAY IN MEDICINE HAT, SEPTEMBER 2022.
SAJAD SOLEYMANI YAZDI.

FIG. 4.
PILES OF CLAY IN ABANDONED POTTERIES ACROSS MEDICINE HAT, SEPTEMBER 2022.
BANAFSHEH MOHAMMADI.

Access to abundant, cheap natural resources, connection to the Canadian Pacific Railway, and low tax rates contributed to the swift flourishing of Medicine Hat as a military and industrial hub.[9] In addition to the extensive gas fields, another natural resource that supported the urban development of the city was Medicine Hat's high-quality clay (fig. 4) that was extracted from a region to the south known as the Cypress Hills.[10] Cheap gas and high-quality clay were the chief reasons for the establishment and prosperity of ceramic and brick manufacturing as the main industry in colonial Medicine Hat.[11] The city's clay industry, which began as early as the 1910s, was on the rise until the late 1960s. By the late 1980s, a combination of global competition and disastrous floods led to the closure of most of Medicine Hat's clay manufacturers.[12] Remnants of pottery companies in the periphery of the city today are vestiges of that material and economic history (figs. 5 and 6).

Medicine Hat's histories of clay and fossil fuels go hand in hand, as the heat that was cheaply produced and maintained by gas wells was central to the firing of bricks and ceramics into

FIG. 5. FENCED-OFF WALL OF AN ABANDONED CLAY FACTORY IN MEDICINE HAT, SEPTEMBER 2022. BANAFSHEH MOHAMMADI.

FIG. 6. PILES OF DISCARDED BUILDING MATERIALS ON PREVIOUS SITES OF THE CLAY INDUSTRY IN MEDICINE HAT, SEPTEMBER 2022. BANAFSHEH MOHAMMADI.

building materials that would in turn spur the urban development and financial stability of the city. The Medicine Hat Brick and Tile Factory, for instance, operating today as I-XL Industries Ltd, generated energy for its plant using its own gas wells. Alberta Clay Products also used a gas well, drilled as early as 1901.[13] The same held true for Medalta Potteries Limited (now a museum) and Hycroft Potteries Limited (figs. 7–9). As historian Edward Mills noted in his November 1999 report for the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, "Medicine Hat's emergence at the centre of the clay products industry for western Canada was attributable to the unique combination of sixty local clay beds, an excellent transportation infrastructure and vast supplies of natural gas. The cultural landscape contains resources that illustrate all three of these factors [...]."[14] Natural resources in forms of gas and clay, and the Canadian Pacific Railway infrastructure, therefore, came together to form Medicine Hat

FIG. 7.
A LOW WALL MARKING THE PREVIOUS BOUNDARY OF THE MEDALTA POTTERIES LIMITED (NOW MEDALTA MUSEUM) GROUNDS, SEPTEMBER 2022.
BANAFSHEH MOHAMMADI.

FIG. 8.
ABANDONED HYCROFT POTTERIES LIMITED GROUNDS; NOTICE THE DISCARDED CLAY POTS, WALL FRAGMENTS, AND BUILDING MATERIALS, SEPTEMBER 2022.
SAJAD SOLEYMANI.

red brick. As Deborah Cowen writes, "The CPR was not simply important – it is understood to have built the nation in terms of the material connections it forged across the continent, but also because it was the very condition for the Canadian confederation."[15] The CPR and the clay industry as such underpinned the colonial dispossession of the Cypress Hills.

Imbricated Extractivist Colonialism and Environmental Racism

The Medicine Hat cultural landscape that Mills references in his report for the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada is a relatively small area of the contemporary city. Composed of the former Alberta Clay Products, Hycroft Pottery, Medalta and National Porcelain Company, and the I-XL sites, it is now named The Historic Clay District, a hub which was designated as a national historic site in 1999 (figs. 10 and 11).[16] Despite this heritage designation, the condition of the site today belies its significance as a hub of building material production. As a current dumping site for disused bricks, mounds of clay, and other

FIG. 9.
ABANDONED HYCROFT POTTERIES LIMITED GROUNDS; NOTICE THE RAILROAD PREVIOUSLY PASSING THROUGH THE FACTORY GROUNDS, SEPTEMBER 2022.
SAJAD SOLEYMANI.

FIG. 10.
WHITE-TAILED DEER ROAMING AROUND THE SOUTHERN FAÇADE OF THE FORMER MEDALTA POTTERIES LIMITED, SEPTEMBER 2022.
SAJAD SOLEYMANI YAZDI.

FIG. 11.
WHITE-TAILED DEER ROAMING AROUND THE SOUTHERN FAÇADE OF THE FORMER MEDALTA POTTERIES LIMITED GROUNDS AND ALONG THE RAILROAD, SEPTEMBER 2022.
SAJAD SOLEYMANI YAZDI.

FIG. 12.
"NO TRESPASSING" SIGN AT THE NORTHEAST ENTRANCE OF THE ABANDONED HYCROFT POTTERIES LIMITED FACTORY, SEPTEMBER 2022.
SAJAD SOLEYMANI YAZDI.

soils, the Historic Clay District is not fitting of the term "authentic ruins." Neither completely demolished nor adequately maintained, this national historic site bears signs of having aged poorly and lacks a clear preservation plan. I borrow the term "authentic ruins" from Andreas Huyssen, who suggests, "Authentic ruins, at least as they existed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, seem to have no place in late capitalism's culture of commodity and memory. Commodities in general do not age well. They become obsolete and are thrown out or recycled. Buildings are torn down or restored. The chance for things to age and to become ruins has diminished."[17] Lying at the periphery of the city limits, this once-significant economic site is marked off with signs that read "no trespassing" (figs. 12 and 13). The site demonstrates the uneven management of industrial heritage assets following a logic which designates sites of resource extraction (gas and clay) as a part of Canadian national heritage, as evidenced in Mills' report. In other words, it is not the Cypress Hills as belonging to the Indigenous Peoples that are designated as national heritage, but rather the blasted sites of a clay industry that was founded on a tripartite network of fossil fuel, clay extraction, and a railway system piercing through Indigenous lands. This is not a request to make

Indigenous lands or ways of life themselves a form of heritage, but rather an assertion that the heritage status celebrates the extractive processes and obscures the violence that made them possible.

"Preservation," notes Marisa Angell Brown, "after all, is one of many ways in which space is claimed and marked by certain groups whose histories are assigned greater value than others."[18] This assertion reverberates through the silence that envelops the abandoned Historic Clay District (fig 13). The battle over space here unveils a colonial narrative that reveres the petro-industrial prowess over the silenced voice of the affected Indigenous communities. More value is conferred upon pottery factories than sacred Indigenous sites. The Canadian heritage system values the colonial extraction while obscuring its associated violence. As noted by Catherine McBain in her article from *Oblique* titled, "De-Colonial Intersections of Conservation and Healing: The Indian Residential School System," this can be seen in the manner in which infrastructures and landscapes of former residential schools are conserved, often promoting interactions with a sanitized version of history that overlooks the systemic violence and assimilative agendas embedded in Canada's colonial narrative.[19] This heritage system does little to reveal and highlight its colonial foundations and biased ideologies. Yet, the relative abandonment of the site, despite its "heritage" status, holds within its decaying structures the palpable echoes of violence. They are not vibrant memorial sites; rather, they stand as deserted witnesses to a bygone era, their silence disrupted only by the rustle of "no trespassing" signs that stand forebodingly by the entrance to the site. The "no trespassing" signs further complicate this relationship. They do more than merely restrict

FIG. 13.
A FENCED-OFF KILN BELONGING TO THE ABANDONED HYCROFT POTTERIES LIMITED, SEPTEMBER 2022.
BANAFSHEH MOHAMMADI.

physical access; they metaphorically barricade the colonial history enveloped within the soil, the brick, and the fading structures of the Historic Clay District.

Meanwhile, just a stone's throw southeast from the Historic Clay District, the Ross Glen neighbourhood conceals what used to be a significant Indigenous archaeological site. The excavations conducted in 1981 by Ethos Consultants Ltd., at the site identified as DlOp-2, under the guidance of J. Michael Quigg, unearthed traces of at least three pre-historic occupations spanning 5,000 years, with a notable occupation from the Besant culture around 1,500 years ago.[20] Notably, most of these artifacts were in the form of pottery. Yet, while the Historic Clay District basks in its heritage status, glorifying its colonial industrial footprint, the profound Indigenous heritage encapsulated within the Ross Glen site was obliterated to accommodate a housing subdivision. This stark contrast in heritage acknowledgment, where a colonial narrative is exalted at the expense of Indigenous history, mirrors a broader societal valuation embedded in the Canadian heritage system. Amidst the celebrated colonial legacy of the Historic Clay District, the silenced stone circles of the Ross Glen site serve as a sombre reminder of a narrative stifled, an Indigenous heritage disregarded.[21]

But what is the relationship between resource extraction, violence, and racism, and what role do architectural materials play in preserving that violence? As Anishinaabe scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson observes during an interview with author and activist Naomi Klein in 2013:

> Extraction and assimilation go together. [...] The act of extraction removes all of the relationships that give whatever is being extracted meaning. [...] Actually, extracting is stealing—it is taking without consent, without thought, care or even knowledge of the impacts that extraction has on the other living things in that environment. That's always been a part of colonialism and conquest. Colonialism has always extracted the indigenous—extraction of indigenous knowledge, indigenous women, indigenous peoples.[22]

Thinking through Betasamosake Simpson's observations that "extraction and assimilation go together" is a reminder that resource extraction, be it extraction of clay, gas, or other natural resources, damages the land, but more importantly, in doing so, it destroys Indigenous livelihoods that depend on that space of life. I argue that what took place in Medicine Hat during the first half of the twentieth century was a tell-tale case of extractivist colonialism and environmental racism, which worked in harmony to erase Indigenous land-based modes of being, with traces of violence visible in Medicine Hat bricks used in urban spaces.[23] Chief Jim O'Chiese explains "our ancestors have been going to Cypress hills (also known as the Badlands Guardian located by Medicine Hat, Alberta) to practice our beliefs and values for thousands of years."[24] Indigenous livelihood and prosperity has been intrinsically tied to access to land. The Canadian Pacific Railway and the clay industry conditioned, limited, and curtailed this access while also ruining the environment for good. As such it is a given that the clay industry violated Indigenous lands and lives fundamentally. Glen Coulthard describes the land-based modes of being as "grounded normativity"—modalities of being which do not necessarily manifest themselves in modes of production limited to Indigenous labour, but more importantly manifest themselves as the main mode of Indigenous production, "Indigenous land-connected practices."[25] The post-fur trade Canadian state formation and its extractivist colonial and capitalist developments, which first required land, dispossessed Indigenous People of their land-connected practices, i.e. livelihoods.[26]

In the case of Medicine Hat, one sees how the Canadian state's relation to Indigenous Peoples has been firmly entrenched in a market-oriented policy, which has favoured corporations over the Indigenous People, and this, as Coulthard notes, has inevitably resulted in Indigenous erasure and dispossession. This narrative of accumulation by dispossession is a state apparatus, paradigmatically reflected in Medicine Hat's treatment of Indigenous communities, who are more susceptible to this strategy particularly because of their land-based modalities of being. What is, in fact, exploited is not simply the land, but the Blackfoot, Cree, Assiniboine, and Métis Peoples. Indices of such exploitations are barred from view. The bricks that form and adorn the iconic buildings of cities in the greater region will rarely be immediately associated with the exploitative ceramic industry in Medicine Hat that operated at the expense of people's land-based lives. That little historical evidence and statistical data can be found about the process of this erasure speaks to systemic violence and the logic of dispossession.

In its early decades of becoming a city, Medicine Hat was led by a group of settlers from Britain who took up the positions of mayors, lawyers, doctors, ranchers, CPR workers, and church ministers. During that period, the Blackfoot and Cree under Treaties 4 and 7 (which concerned land in southern Alberta and Saskatchewan) were displaced from their ancestral lands and relegated to reserves.[27] These dispossessions were designed to convert Indigenous lands into spaces for settler agriculture, railway expansion, as well as clay and gas extraction.[28] Through these processes, Blackfoot and Cree populations were further subjected to assimilationist systems. Despite an Indian Residential School initially failing to secure federal funding, settlers in Medicine Hat pushed forward with its planning and construction in an effort to gain support from Ottawa. First named in Blackfoot, "Sotikape Home" to attract children from faraway places, and now known as the unbuilt "Indian Industrial School," the building would have stood 40 feet high on the foothills of Medicine Hat, only three kilometres away from the clay company hub. Of interest is the fact that the building was planned to be built substantially of *concrete*, paid for by the residents of Medicine Hat. Meanwhile red brick was reserved for centres of art, homes of entrepreneurs, and other buildings aimed to lend a façade of culture to urban spaces. And while never realized due to lack of funding from the federal government, as Griffith demonstrates, these local monies could otherwise have been allocated for the "health and safety of children"[29] instead of the construction of a residential school. Returning to the Ross Glen site, whose archaeological revelations bear witness to the longstanding and intimate connection between the Blackfoot and their homeland, the lack of Indigenous historical evidence of settlement is in fact representative of a double violence—erasure and elimination of the evidence of erasure. This narrative of absence—of Indigenous heritage sites or the unbuilt residential school—does not signify a historical void but underscores a sinister historical overwrite.

Medicine Hat's clay industry was a paradigmatic example of a colonialism that relied on the extraction and transportation of natural resources from Indigenous lands. However, that was not the only extraction at play. "Although predicated on land rather than on human bodies," historian Patrick Wolfe argues, "settler colonialism is premised on a cultural logic of elimination that insistently seeks the removal of indigenous humans from the land in question."[30] As Wolfe demonstrates, land is not just a condition for life; "land *is* life."[31] Wolfe is supported by a wide range of Indigenous scholars. As Coulthard quotes from the report made from Indigenous participants of the Berger Inquiry, land is always "land as resource central to our material survival; land-as-identity, as constitutive of who we are as a people; and land-as-relationship."[32] Similarly, AM Kanngieser and Zoe Todd quote Métis scholar

Susan Styres: "Land is more than the diaphanousness of inhabited memories; Land is spiritual, emotional, and relational; Land is experiential, (re)membered, and storied; Land is consciousness—Land is sentient."[33] Extraction of gas and clay from Medicine Hat meant the extraction of Blackfoot and Cree from their lands and livelihoods. The remains of the Medicine Hat Historic Clay District, self-admittedly "supported by private and corporate donations and municipal, provincial and federal grants," are proud traces of an ecocide, a paradigmatic instance of environmental racism sustained by violent extraction of the land by clay industries and still supported by the government. [34]

An Unsettling Conclusion: Material Culture as Historical Evidence

To conclude, I quote from Hayden King's and Shiri Pasternak's Red Paper Report: "Land alienation is linked to the broader political economy of Canada that relies to a significant extent on its natural resource sector to secure jobs and investment. Thus, land alienation is a major economic driver of the Canadian economy."[35] This brings us to the larger question: What roles do architectural materials play in this scenario? Do they, too, echo this narrative of land alienation? As I explored, the very essence of Medicine Hat red brick encapsulates tales of Cypress Hill Indigenous territory now reshaped, sourced, and distributed for broader economic agendas. The narrative of their origins and potentially violent past is indelibly imprinted within these materials. Edifices like the Citadel Theatre in Edmonton, adorned with red bricks, gesture towards an unsettling history of human and natural resource extraction. The Historic Clay District of Medicine Hat, the womb of these bricks, cradles a history of violence, a history that is still poorly yet proudly upheld by government funding.

Moreover, the narrative of the unbuilt residential school and the obliterated Ross Glen site, albeit unvoiced, resonates through the red bricks, serving as a silent yet potent critique of the dispossession and erasure embedded within the process of creating and conserving "heritage." These bricks pose not merely as sites of historical import but as realms where the narrative of colonial imprints and Indigenous erasure converse with the present, urging a re-evaluation of the past in dialogue with the Indigenous ethos and a quest for a more just and inclusive narrative of the land and its manifold histories.

As Abigail Auld's research about Tyndall Stone demonstrates, use of specific architectural materials "carries the evocation of its past use and value."[36] Medicine Hat red bricks are no exception. They morph abstract notions of environmental racism and extractivist colonialism into tangible representations, perceivable through the senses, through lived experience, and vicariously as witnesses to such destructive practices. They stand as indices of colonial violence. Material culture, as delineated in postcolonial literature, is often a conduit for delving into the meanings embedded in historical evidence. Architecture, being a facet of material culture, is embroidered with materials whose meanings beckon historical inquiry. Through a meticulous examination of Medicine Hat red brick as a fragment of historical evidence, one confronts persistent land-based violence in the form of extractivist colonialism and environmental racism. They become indices of colonial violence deeply rooted in the quest for economic advancement at the expense of Indigenous communities and their lands.

Notes

1. I would like to thank the editors of this volume, Zannah Matson, Émélie Desrochers-Turgeon, and Christopher Alton, and the anonymous peer reviewers for their valuable comments and feedback. My thanks go to Sajad Soleymani Yazdi for taking the photos accompanying this piece, and for his generous reading and commentary on this article.
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23. The traditional Blackfoot culture, on whose territory Medicine Hat is situated, is based on the bison hunt, “intrinsically linking them to the Plains.” See Dempsey, Hugh A., 2010, “Blackfoot Confederacy,” *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, [https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/blackfoot-nation], accessed August 17, 2023.
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25. Coulthard, Glen Sean, 2014, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, p. 13-14.
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28. On settler agriculture in the Western provinces see Francis, R. Douglas, and Chris Kitzan (eds.), 2007, *The Prairie West as Promised Land*, Calgary, University of Calgary Press, 462 p.; see also, Carter, Sarah, 2019, *Lost Harvests: Prairie Indian Reserve Farmers and Government Policy*, Kingston and Montreal, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 323 p.
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31. Author’s emphasis. Wolfe, Patrick, 2006, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research*, vol. 8, nº 4, p. 387.
32. Coulthard, p. 62.
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