

Journal of the Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada
Le Journal de la Société pour l'étude de l'architecture au Canada



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Volume 49, numéro 1, 2024

Architecture and Extraction
Architecture et extraction

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1115138ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1115138ar>

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Éditeur(s)

SSAC-SEAC

ISSN

1486-0872 (imprimé)

2563-8696 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Sharp, C.-M. (2024). Architectural and Curatorial Extensions of Extraction at the Royal Ontario Museum. *Journal of the Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada / Le Journal de la Société pour l'étude de l'architecture au Canada*, 49(1), 107–116. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1115138ar>

Architectural and Curatorial Extensions of Extraction at the Royal Ontario Museum

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"When I walked through the Museum (...), my eye accidentally lighted on a crystal. Quite literally, that's when I got the idea."¹ This is how architect Daniel Libeskind describes his inspiration in designing the Royal Ontario Museum's (ROM) renovated façade, the Michael Lee-Chin Crystal, which opened in 2007. Named after its primary funder—a billionaire investor—the Lee-Chin Crystal (hereinafter "the Crystal") is one of Toronto's most recognizable landmarks (fig. 1). The prismatic, deconstructivist structure was developed as part of the ROM's "renaissance,"² a multi-year revitalization initiative aimed at attracting more visitors. The contemporary glass and aluminum addition contrasts with the museum's original 1914 and 1933 Beaux Arts wings made of Queenston Limestone and Credit Valley stone (fig. 2), creating an eclectic series of imposing buildings at the corner of Bloor Street and Queen's Park. As Libeskind recalls, the Crystal mirrors objects found in one of the ROM's most expansive collections: the thousands of rocks, gems, and minerals on display in the *Teck Suite of Galleries: Earth's Treasures*.

The ROM's vast collections are standard of an "encyclopedia museum," holding nearly one million objects across the realms of natural history, art, and material culture. While the museum is often noted for its impressive dinosaur skeletons or rotating blockbuster exhibitions, the crystalline minerals of the *Teck Suite* are what captured Libeskind's attention; leading the starchitect to make preliminary "napkin sketches" while attending

FIG. 1.
EVENING VIEW OF MICHAEL
LEE-CHIN CRYSTAL, BLOOR ST.
ENTRANCE, APRIL 15, 2015.
COURTESY OF ROM (ROYAL ONTARIO
MUSEUM), TORONTO, CANADA. ©ROM.





FIG. 2.
VIEW OF THE ROYAL ONTARIO
MUSEUM, LOOKING NORTH, 1914.
COURTESY OF ROM (ROYAL ONTARIO
MUSEUM), TORONTO, CANADA. ©ROM.

a wedding at the museum,³ and eventually drawing more detailed inspiration from a Russian crystal his team “found in a shop in Berlin.”⁴ Yet, despite this connection between the ROM’s mineralogical specimens and the museum’s initially unpopular architectural addition,⁵ the Crystal is not mentioned in the *Teck Suite*, nor in any of the stories that accompany the numerous crystalline minerals on display. As journalist Kate Taylor remarked following the building’s unveiling, “artifact and architecture don’t have a lot to say to each other” at the ROM.⁶

My aim in this essay is to bring the ROM’s Crystal and its *Teck Suite* of rocks, gems, and minerals back into conversation with each other. As an architectural projection of the ROM’s mineral collection, what might the striking Crystal tell us about the museum’s entanglements in resource extraction? And how does it visually position Toronto as a global hub of extractive capital? Beginning with a broader history of museum collecting in Canada as foundational to today’s resource sector, I then highlight the ROM’s contemporary connections to mining, as made visible in the *Teck Suite*’s interpretation of specimens, its funding infrastructure, and the industry insiders to whom the museum provides exclusive access. Despite the Crystal’s apparent dislocation from the mineral exhibition, I suggest that, when read as an extension of the mining interests at play in the museum, the building emerges as a representation of extraction—the spectacle of which has already proven to inspire counter-institutional activism in the *Teck Suite*.

II

Nestled in a dimly lit, multi-room gallery on the museum’s second floor, the *Teck Suite* contains some of the ROM’s earliest acquisitions, dating back to the collections of early-twentieth-century geologists and mineralogists. Scholars Thomas L. Walker (1867–1942) and Arthur L. Parsons (1873–1957), cross-appointed in mineralogy and petrography

at the neighbouring University of Toronto, helped the ROM gradually develop its collection of earth sciences specimens, which was to become one of the largest in the world.⁷ But they were not alone in this endeavour. The systematic gathering of objects in Canada, from rocks and plants to fossils and cultural artifacts, emerged in the nineteenth century out of the efforts of the Geological Survey of Canada (GSC) in mapping the natural resources of so-called British North America and advising mining companies of potential metal-bearing formations.^{8, 9} The often-overlapping work of the GSC, the Ontario Bureau of Mines, and scientists employed at the museum meant that the ROM's mineral collection rapidly expanded following the striking of gold and silver in Northern Ontario in the first decade of the twentieth century. As ROM historian Lovat Dickson (1902–1987) writes, "Large quantities of minerals were turned over by the mining companies, and the gem collection also benefited from gifts from the mining corporations" in the aftermath of mineral discoveries at Cobalt, Kirkland Lake, and the Porcupine district in Ontario in the early 1920s.¹⁰

The intersection of the ROM's activities and Canada's mining sector were reinforced over subsequent decades. For example, Nunavut's Meen Lake was named after Victor B. Meen (1910–1971), former director of the museum's geology and mineralogy branch, who led an expedition to the crater-like lake in 1950. The lake was in fact nearly named after the ROM itself, with Meen suggesting the name "Museum Lake" to the Canadian Board of Geographical Names at the Department of Mines, explaining that "if it had not been for the efforts of myself and this museum, the expedition...might never have taken place."¹¹ Twenty-five years later, the museum would also receive a significant grant from the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources to build a laboratory that could accurately date Precambrian rock. The lab's innovative techniques, spearheaded by curator and geochronologist Thomas Krogh (1936–2008), revealed precise locations of mineral deposits and became invaluable to the mining industry.¹²

Such histories illustrate the ways that the development of museum collections in Canada, and the ROM's in particular, is tightly woven into the history of resource extraction and, by extension, colonial expansion through the dispossession of Indigenous lands. Although museums around the globe have begun to reckon with their complicity in the often violent and extractive collecting of anthropological objects like art, human remains, and material culture, geological and mineralogical exhibitions like the *Teck Suite* have remained comparatively safe from scrutiny. As geology professor Selby Hearsh and curator Carrie Robbins note, the absence of decolonial reframings of mineral displays "reflects a corresponding absence within the geological community."¹³ Equally striking against a backdrop of growing anti-fossil fuel activism in museums is the relative silence around the uncritical interpretations and legitimating efforts of extraction that occur in mineral galleries typically sponsored by mining companies. At the ROM, the celebration and legitimation of Canada's resource industry go beyond the awe-inspiring displays of the *Teck Suite* and its corporate donor plaques. They extend outward through the sharp angles of Studio Libeskind's Crystal, protruding the original Romanesque structure to assert Toronto's place as the mining capital of the world. The ROM's addition of its dramatically modern prism seems to signal a forward-looking museum eager to forget the colonial and extractive order that inspired its original architecture. However, the year that the ROM established itself as a global architectural icon by unveiling the Crystal was also the year that Canadian global mining finance "peaked," raising a high of \$4.28 billion on the Toronto Stock Exchange.¹⁴

Removed from its site in Toronto—the biggest centre for mining financing, with over 60% of the world's mining companies listed on the Toronto Stock Exchange¹⁵—the Crystal and the specimen that inspired it might seem mundane in light of Studio Libeskind's other, consistently angular designs like the Denver Art Museum (2006) or Dresden's Bundeswehr Military History Museum (2011). As Taylor suggests, this aesthetic regularity is reason to "doubt the sincerity of Libeskind's metaphor" in designing the ROM Crystal.¹⁶ Yet, taking a cue from landscape architect Jane Hutton's approach to seeing designed landscapes as models of human-nature relations that reflect cultural attitudes about land,¹⁷ the Crystal becomes inseparable from the industry that fuels the city's stock exchange, and from the specimens exhibited in the museum: gifts and loans from companies and individuals at whose bequest the various stones, gems, and minerals ignite awe and curiosity for what lies in the Earth's crust.



As they enter the *Teck Suite*, the entrance of which overlooks the ROM's Rotunda with a balcony view of the museum's 1933 mosaic ceiling, visitors are immediately immersed in a proud display of wealth and riches. Beside a large piece of purple amethyst quartz, the entrance's opening panel invites visitors to observe "the mineral wealth of nature," and upon entering the gallery, one is faced with a massive, multi-million-dollar gold coin on loan from Barrick Gold Corporation. Like in many geological exhibitions,¹⁸ the glowing specimens in the *Teck Suite* are ambiently lit against a backdrop of dark interpretive panels, strategically focusing the visitor's gaze on physical features, properties, and contrasts. Sprawling over 6,900 square feet, the exhibition is organized by various sections named after their respective benefactors, such as the Vale Gallery of Minerals and the Barrick Gold Corporation Gallery. At the back of the exhibition are the Canadian Mining Hall of Fame, featuring an interactive video of Hall of Fame inductees, and the Gallery of Gems and Gold, which is an intimate, jewelry store-like space. The thousands of specimens that make up the *Teck Suite*, from Brazilian beryl to Canadian calcite, are interpreted and arranged by scientific themes such as localities and formations, chemical composition and properties, and asteroids and meteorites.

Absent in the gallery's object labels and exhibition panels are the social, economic, and environmental implications entailed in the acts of extraction and commodification that brought these specimens to the museum in the first place. Whereas other collections in the ROM have been retold according to changing museological standards,¹⁹ the artifacts in the *Teck Suite* remain disengaged from their precarious and colonial trajectories. For example, an imposing Victorian map of the United Kingdom hangs on a side wall, dignified in its representation of the cartographic technology that facilitated extraction and supported the expansion of Canadian settler-colonialism.²⁰ Elsewhere, a display case describes Jeffrey Mine in Val-des-Sources (formerly known as Asbestos), Quebec, yet falls silent on the fatal effects of asbestos mining that plagued the miners who worked at the site for decades. In a rare mention of the actual labour that underpins the specimens on display, the label for a large piece of tourmaline from Madagascar describes the dangerous process whereby dangling miners (who are often minors, too) must crawl into the tight openings of vertical cliffs to access deposits. "But, as a result [of the dangerous process of retrieving tourmaline], some exceptional mineral specimens have been recovered," the label cheerfully concludes. That the *Teck Suite's* interpretation emphasizes celebration and curiosity over critique comes as no surprise in view of the numerous thanks given to sponsors from the mining sector along the gallery walls.

By focusing on the formal properties of rocks, gems, and minerals while ignoring the exploitative social and economic relations through which extractive networks are maintained, galleries like the *Teck Suite* work to ideologically legitimize the mining industry. As Hearth and Robbins note, since the Industrial Revolution, mineral displays have typically been used as instruments of informal public education and nationalist marketing tools—in which specimens symbolize not only wealth, but power over nature, territory, and people.²¹ However, as with most large museum exhibitions, legitimation in the *Teck Suite* extends from ideological to material, where the gallery's corporate funders (Teck Resources Limited, Barrick Gold Corporation, Vale Canada Limited, Hatch Limited, and Rio Algom Limited, to name a few) receive economic and public relations benefits as a result of their financial support; first, through the tax cuts enabled by corporate donations,²² and second, through the positive image fostered by their visible recognition on exhibit panels and donor plaques. The recognition of mining sponsors at the ROM also extends beyond exhibition panels: in the winding, behind-the-scenes hallway leading to the museum's library and archives, one can find the "Barrick Gold Learning Lab," a classroom equipped with digital learning tools about earth sciences aimed at elementary students. Curatorial labour at the museum is also indebted to extractive industry, with the *Teck Suite's* curator formally holding the position of "Teck Endowed Chair of Mineralogy." Seen through this lens of industry legitimation, the interpretation of specimens in the *Teck Suite* becomes difficult to separate from the ROM Crystal as an architectural projection of a mineral.

The economic dynamics of cultural representation are not only characteristic of the modern neoliberal museum that is dependent on private partnerships in the face of dwindling public funding, they also point to the interconnection of scientific collections, knowledge production, industrial progress, and Canada's political formation. But the politics of knowledge and display²³ within the ROM can be contextualized within an even earlier history. Commissioned to wow passersby and draw in greater visitorship, the outward spectacle of the Crystal marks a clear shift away from sixteenth-century museum prototypes: the secret *studioli* of Italian princes. Designed to be viewed only by the ruler and a select few, these cabinets gathered eclectic rarities to represent a world order dominated by the royal patriarch.²⁴ Yet the ROM's partnerships with industry facilitate a type of private access to behind-the-scenes collections that reveals remnants of an enduring *studiolo* model. Every year, for example, the museum provides exclusive showcases of its mineral collection to the Prospectors and Developers Association of Canada (PDAC) annual meeting, the largest mining conference in the world. Last year, PDAC attendees were invited to join a virtual tour of the museum's vault of gems and gold, a storage area typically closed to the public, to view some of the museum's high-value items like large gold nuggets and opal.

Despite its ostentatious presence and reflective glass panels, the Crystal thus contains an exclusive space of exchanged power and knowledge by opening its vaults to select industry insiders. The Crystal's negotiation of the in/visible is perhaps not unlike that of the very minerals housed in the *Teck Suite*. As anthropologist Shannon Mattern writes, while we illuminate stone artifacts "in order to extract and collect and classify them," she notes that "their luminescence backlights our histories of colonialism."²⁵ In other words, the *Teck Suite* shines a light on the formal properties of its specimens at the same time as it obscures the numerous colonial and exploitive histories that led to their accession and display. In museum studies scholar Michaela Giebelhausen's terms, the "architectural articulation" of the ROM might then be "seen to oscillate between two paradigms: monument and instrument."²⁶ As a monument, the Crystal memorializes and aestheticizes mined minerals; as an instrument, the

Crystal contains, produces, and preserves the knowledge required to enable their ongoing extraction. But what if such knowledge were used to *disable* the strategic fetishization of minerals and to imagine anti-extractive futures? As a recent activist intervention in the *Teck Suite* suggests, the Crystal reads as both monument and instrument—the spectacle of its structure also working to inspire local critique and resistance.

IV

On June 15, 2022, I was part of a group of researchers from the scholar-activist collective Beyond Extraction, who gathered at the Crystal to lead an unsanctioned tour of the *Teck Suite* (see fig. 3).²⁷ The “counter-tour” was developed as part of a growing tradition of “guerilla tours” and other forms of activist interventions in museums.²⁸ Positing that the ROM’s entanglement in corporate-extractive interests extends to the uncritical presentation of rocks, gems, and minerals in the *Teck Suite* and their fetishization through the architectural metaphor of the crystal, Beyond Extraction opted to reinterpret the gallery for the public in time to coincide with, and thereby resist, PDAC’s annual gathering in June 2022. Entitled “Mining at the Museum,” the in-person and online counter-tour emerged as a nod to American artist Fred Wilson’s 1992 “Mining the Museum,” an installation wherein the artist “excavated” objects from the collection of the Maryland Historical Society to highlight the buried histories of Black Americans.²⁹ In contrast to Wilson’s installation, the artifacts on display

FIG. 3.
AUTHOR DESCRIBING A
SPECIMEN DURING THE IN-
PERSON COUNTER-TOUR
AT THE ROM, 2022.
COURTESY OF ZANNAH MATSON.



in the *Teck Suite* had already been literally excavated from mines and quarries around the world. Recognizing that objects have culturally regulated social lives³⁰ and that museums are unique sites in which to enact social change,³¹ “Mining at the Museum” exposes the hegemonic interpretations of the collection through a series of critical biographies of six objects, from the multi-million-dollar coin to crystallized copper.³² For example, one stop on the counter-tour tells the critical biography of a drill bit exhibited in the *Teck Suite*’s Gallery of Gems and Gold (fig. 4). This hard rock drill bit was used to mine gold at the Dome Mine in South Porcupine, Ontario, and was donated to the ROM by Dome Mines Ltd. in 1958. We selected the drill bit, which was clogged with gold, to reveal the uneven social impact of prospecting, mining, and colonial settlement in the province. The so-called discovery of gold in Northern Ontario triggered the region’s Gold Rush, attracting settler encroachment into the lands of the Ojibwe and Anishinaabe Peoples. Despite assurances by Crown and Ontario government representatives that Indigenous communities would retain their right to hunt and fish on treaty lands and waters, the subsequent James Bay Treaty No. 9 drafted in 1904 involved no consultation with the Ojibwe and Anishinaabe, and included a likely mistranslated clause that excluded lands required for mining, among other activities.³³ Per the “Mining at the Museum” audio tour, the history of mining exhibited in Canadian museums often centres around the lucky few settler prospectors at the expense of critical reflection on contemporary treaty responsibilities: “Although these galleries of so-called ‘Earth’s treasures’ present mineral specimens as glittering gems easily plucked from the ground in a high-stakes game of finders-keepers, this humble drill bit can instead reveal the operation of deeper systems of dispossession that enable extraction.”³⁴

FIG. 4.
DRILL BIT CLOGGED WITH
GOLD ON DISPLAY IN THE
TECK SUITE GALLERY OF
GEMS AND GOLD IN 2022.
COURTESY OF ZANNAH MATSON.



Like the analyses of landscapes and geological collections referenced thus far, this application of the museological concept of “object biography”—proposed as a method of museum interpretation by historian and museologist Samuel Alberti³⁵—also offers productive avenues for critically exploring the architecture of cultural institutions. In the same way that “Mining at the Museum” reimagined mineral specimens in the *Teck Suite* according to the social, environmental, and economic relations that surround them, this article has traced a critical biography of the ROM Crystal to highlight the extractive practices it contains, conceals,

facilitates, and negotiates.³⁶ Read in light of the extractive foundations of museum collecting, the contemporary entanglements of the ROM in Canada's mining sector, and the legitimating curatorial work of the museum's mineral exhibition, it is clear that the Crystal and that which it houses are, in fact, in constant conversation. Perhaps oblivious to its own spectacle of extraction, the Crystal nevertheless works to inspire anti-extractive resistance. Until the ROM can leverage the critical potential created by the intersectoral exchanges across its collections, researchers, industry partners, and indeed, architecture, the interventions of groups like Beyond Extraction mark only the beginning of future-oriented conversations around the interconnectedness of extraction within both cultural institutions and architectural icons everywhere in Canada.

Notes

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