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Anette Rein



A museum on wars, but made for peace: The Canadian War Museum in Ottawa

On my museum and congress tour from Montreal to Toronto a few years ago, a visit of the Canadian War Museum (CWM)¹ on Ottawa was a one of these “musts”. As a new building for the Museum of World Cultures in Frankfurt was planned in these days, I was visiting new museums premises to become acquainted with new architectural concepts and the the newest state of the art in museum technology.



The museum in bird's eye view²

The War Museum in Ottawa was not my first contact with war museums and I was curious the expected arms show would look like this time. Would I come across a more or less boring enumeration of glorious deeds of Canada's brave soldiers in comparison with thos of defeated nations? I expected everything what justifies

war, forgetting barbarism in wartimes, and, most of all, another mystical try to glorify simple men as patriotic heroes. I was not prepared to encounter a war museum based on multifaceted and personal commemorations taking aim at peace.² The museum concept is still the same.

I would therefore make the following case: a war museum of the 21st cent. can only be regarded as justified if it is a museum devoted to peace. The Canadian War museum is a convincing example. I will substantiate this case in the following, excluding the special exhibitions of the museum, its library, shop and the Military History Research Centre.

How it all began

One can trace back the origin of the CWM to 1880, to a collection of militaria. In 1967, the museum moved to new premises, an old archival building in the west of Ottawa city. After another 31 years, the government decided to erect a new building for it. An area of 7,5 ha was selected for this purpose on the southern banks of the Ottawa River being known hitherto as LeBreton Flats. in 1900, this industrial area was destroyed by a fire inferno. In 2003, the polluted soil was decontaminated, and 2 years later, 60 years after the end of WW II and 125 years after the museum's foundation, the new building was opened.



The museum skyline with the Regeneration Tower © CWM⁴

The architecture

The aspirations for the new premises with 40,860 sqm which had been realised by Moriyama & Teshima and Griffiths Rankin Cook, were quite high. Apart from an exhibition space of 19,000 sqm for an selection from 500,000 objects and 13,000 art objects, ambitious conceptual requirements were to fulfil. The architecture was to embody the the potential of nature for regeneration even after catastrophies like Tchernobyl or wars. The formula of the architects was: *“The initial architectural inspiration for the Canadian War Museum came from the people portrayed in the Museum’s photography collections: ordinary Canadians fighting in wasted foreign landscapes, accomplishing extraordinary and heroic deeds. The second source of inspiration was nature. Ravaged landscapes have the remarkable ability to endure the devastation wrought by humans. Not does nature survive, it regenerates and hybridizes.”*⁴⁵

The building with its flat parts is fitting closely into the environment, but towers on the other hand with the Regeneration Hall with its windows resembling the morse (maximum height: 24,5 m). The whole building is charaterised by sustainable design and was erected, whenever possible, with recycled material. So, for example, the former copper plates of the Library of Congress in Ottawa have been re-used. Special tiles are to regulate the internal temperature and to help energy losses. The approach to work with cost reducing and sustainable technical systems led to the idea to make use of the fluvial water for the flush toilets and watering of plants in the garden. The roof of 10,620 sqm was sowed with grass seed typically to the Ottawa river banks. The result is a self-sustaining ecosystem without any maintenance costs. Just the contrary: the plants reduce the pollution and make a contribution to a positive microclimate. The surrounding park is made for 20,000 visitors. A trail over the roof offers, apart from the view, an approach to the different semantic levels of the museum.



View of the memorial in the foyer
Photo: Moriyama & Teshima Architects⁶

Stepping inside

The museum foyer impresses by spacious, apparently empty planes with oblique or jagged walls designed in different materials. Let’s again listen to the architects: *“Inside angled walls sharply emerge. Concrete is raw, joints are rough. Floors are sometimes sloped, creating a sense of disequilibrium. Many walls and spaces are intentionally austere, without distractions. Emptiness has profound strength. The intended effect is to encourage the thoughts, memories, and emotions of visitors to permeate and shape the space in a way that is unique to each individual.”*⁴⁷



Signpost in the foyer © Rein 30.9.2007

The following topics are presented in the galleries:⁸ The zone “Battleground” gives an introduction to the concept of war for the Canadians and their nation. The museum starts its presentation with the conflicts and combat techniques of the First Nations, the appearance of the first settlers and the resistance of the First Nations in 1885.



In “For Crown and Country” the perspectives changes and concentrates on the Canada’s military action overseas, during the Colonial Wars (1899-1902) and WW I. And in “Forged in Fire” the Canadian fight against National Socialism and Canada’s role in WW II is examined, resulting in a leading economical and political role in the globalised present.



The Mercedes-Benz cabriolet of Adolf Hitler – a present from the United States.

The 4th gallery concentrates on violence and outrage in times of peace or during peaceful missions. Also the role of Canada in the Cold War period is sketched. One of the headlines appeals intellect and emotions quite effectively. It reads “„The Savage Wars of Peace“ alluding to the ambiguity of these missions.

The old and manifold traditions of commemoration and tribute to outstanding Canadians are visualised with artefacts, documents and oral history⁹ in the Royal Canadian Legion Hall. Interactive media give more background and allow commentaries by the visitors.

The LeBreton Gallery overwhelms not only by size (3,275 sqm), but also by its glass facade to the park and the exhibited tanks and airplanes from the 18th cent to the present. It is defined as a walkable study collection and is in use also for parties and celebrations.

Finally, the Memorial Hall (81sqm) gives room for contemplation. The room contains only one object, an historical Tomb of the Unknown Soldier from WW I. At Remembrance Day (11.11.), a beam of sunlight meets this stone through the reverse window. And from the highest point of the museum, one can see the Peace Tower of Ottawa Parliament.



The Royal Canadian Legion Hall © Rein 30.9.2007



Party in front of tanks at LeBreton Gallery
© Rein 30.9.2007

Notes

- ¹ I was visiting the museum in 2007 and its website in September 2011 (www.warmuseum.ca). Thanks to Reiner Zapf brushing up my memory.
- ² <http://www.designbuild-network.com/projects/warmuseum/warmuseum3.html> (accessed 15.9.2011)
- ³ “the Museum recognizes the harsh reality of war, yet offers the hope that, like the regenerating landscape, Canadians will inherit a future free from conflict.”
<http://www.warmuseum.ca/about-us/about-themuseum/sustainable-d> (accessed 9. 9.2011)
- ⁴ http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/54/Canadian_War_Museum_new_building_2007.jpg?uselang=de
Source: Balcer. accessed 15.9.2011
- ⁶ <http://www.mtarch.com/mtacwm.html> (accessed 09.09.2011)
- ⁷ <http://www.mtarch.com/mtacwmimage9.html> (accessed 19.9.2011)
- ⁸ For a map see http://www.civilization.ca/app/DocRepository/12/Plan_your_visit/self_guided_tour/cwmvisitorguide_e.pdf (accessed 18.9.2011)
- ⁹ <http://www.warmuseum.ca/about-us/about-the-museum/about-the-canadian-war-museum/> pdf Canadian War Museum: Backgrounder, p. 1 (accessed 18.9.2011)
- ¹⁰ „A Soldier Of The Great War. A Canadian Regiment. Known Unto God.” <http://www.flickr.com/photos/warmuseum/4866293719/sizes/o/in/photostream/> (accessed 19.9.2011)



Sunbeam at Remembrance Day. Photo: H. Foster © CMW¹⁰