



## The Canadian War Museum: Design Approach

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### Introduction

The new Canadian War Museum presents a thrilling yet complex challenge: the planning, design and construction of a new national museum dedicated to telling, interpreting, and presenting historical events that have shaped the very character of Canada. Architecturally, it will rival the major cultural attractions located throughout Ottawa. Symbolically, it will evolve into an icon through its intense, moving and brutally honest depictions of Canada's military history, from pre-European contact to modern peacekeeping missions and current military events.



H. Foster, CMC

Canadian War Museum

To achieve these goals, Museum staff had to develop a storyline: a framework defining the context, content and consequences of Canada's military history. Expressed through specific themes, artifacts and interpretive features, this storyline has guided the design and development of the Museum's various physical spaces, permanent and temporary exhibitions, displays and other features.

The design team of Haley Sharpe of Leicester, U.K. and Origin Studios of Ottawa has worked in close collaboration with Canadian War Museum historians and curators to interpret the established storyline, complement the dramatic new architecture and develop strategies to convey the varied moods and messages the curators wanted to present to visitors.



Preliminary design concept of Gallery 2

### The Challenge

In addition to producing a rich, multi-sensory, mixed-media visitor experience, Haley Sharpe and Origin Studios developed a message-driven art/graphic strategy that both communicates and manages multiple and often dense levels of information.



The design needed to achieve a balance between historical facts, hard data and the intensely personal, emotional, heroic and sometimes disturbing human aspects of military history.

## The Themes

In their brief to the design team, Museum historians explained that the interpretive storylines had been grouped into four overarching themes: Geography, Politics, Brutality and Survival. Because all conflicts are unique, combinations of all four themes needed to be integrated throughout the Museum. Each of these themes is woven into, and reflected in, the fundamental aims and objectives of the permanent galleries. As visitors explore the Museum, these themes are expressed to different degrees, but their presence and interwoven relationships remain constant.



Orientation hub with model

## The Pace and Timing

The team paid special attention to controlling the dramatic impact and pacing of the visual imagery, artifacts and spaces within their chronological and historic contexts. Galleries were divided into seven zones and further sub-divided into 25 themed clusters. Particular consideration was given to the clusters of graphic interpretive information to ensure that combinations of textual and visual narratives could be easily followed. The team devoted a great deal of time to how the storyline and its rhythm of peace and war, drama and pathos would unfold before visitors. With such an intense level of information, it was crucial to adopt a flowing, organic and instinctive hierarchy of messages to avoid overwhelming, confusing or numbing the visitor.



Board-form concrete

## The Architectural Considerations

The architectural design of the new Museum expresses subtle metaphors in a modern, visually striking building. The main theme of the architecture is one of regeneration; at the same time, the building has a raw, fragmentary and unfinished quality to it — one that takes the visitor outside his or her comfort zone. The exhibition and interior design harmonizes with the architecture, enhancing and amplifying the resonance and meaning of the visitor's experience.

Normally, exhibit designers need to make their concepts fit into a pre-existing space. By working with the architects, the exhibit design team for the new Canadian War Museum was able to influence the shape, arrangement and position of the permanent exhibits in a positive way.

The designers paid close attention to the transition from the public zones (such as the foyer) to the exhibition zones. The goal was for visitors to feel as if they are literally walking into a living archive. This impression is conveyed even before the visitor enters the main zones by means of an immense, seven-metre-high, audio-visual presentation of the Museum's content — a glimpse of what is to come.



**Passchendaele 1917**

The physical forms of the exhibit structures are angular and trapezoidal, echoing the Museum's architecture and themes by creating interconnecting spatial volumes that enhance the historical messages. They provide long vistas, compact rooms, large spaces and tantalizing glimpses of the artifacts, messages and images beyond. The building's austere lines are further reflected in the Spartan palette of materials used in the exhibition spaces: galvanized steel, concrete, wood, hard surfaces and strong, deep colour. This effect allows the messages, exhibits and stories to float between the building's ceiling and bare concrete floors. Little comfort or respite is offered to the visitor; the elemental, fractured structures of the exhibits are as fragmented as the story of war itself. However, strongly coloured curved structures have been strategically placed throughout the galleries. They become counterpoints to the strength of the building and the main exhibit structures, drawing the visitor into special spaces for moments of reflection and contemplation.

## The Imagery

It was clear from the outset that the Museum's outstanding collection of paintings, photographs and films was not only of great historic relevance to the storyline. War art is also iconic — the record of defining moments in military history. The design team used these powerful images to communicate the four overarching themes and their messages with great urgency and poignancy.



**Preliminary design concept of Gallery 4**

The team sorted through literally tens of thousands of images before narrowing down their selection. Upwards of 2,000 images were used throughout the Museum. Nearly 500 of these were blown up to enormous sizes, often covering entire walls, encouraging visitors to look at them with fresh eyes and to allow themselves to become part of the imagery. Some of these large images depict scenes of a graphic and potentially disturbing nature. The team needed to consider not just what they would look like

when displayed at floor-to-ceiling height, but also what messages they might convey on such an imposing, and even threatening, scale.

Using these arresting images as its key design statements, the team analyzed the spatial dynamics of each of the proposed gallery areas to determine how best to organize and integrate the various artifacts, multimedia elements, oral testimony, interpretive texts and other components around the pictures.

The designers also developed individualized colour palettes for each cluster of graphic panels. The tone, depth and value of these colours were sometimes derived specifically from those in adjacent paintings, while others were meant to evoke a specific mood, landscape or historical period, enhancing the message without words. Texture was also given a key role within the images, inspired by the structures and machines of war: concrete, rough-hewn timber and smooth steel plates dotted with rivets.



Image courtesy of Mrs. D. Joan MacPherson

## The Dynamics

History and military conflict are by their nature dynamic flowing things and the exhibits are designed to reflect and portray that effect. The sense of movement and dynamism is achieved by using filmic archival materials, photographs and artifacts, and by locating the messages in opposition to each other within the zones.



George Metcalf Archival Collection CWM 19790335-001

## Conclusion

By applying the strategies described above, the design team has successfully manipulated a diverse range of media and an equally broad range of messages. The results will present visitors with some of the most powerful, moving and harrowing records of war ever displayed in a museum environment.

The designers didn't want to create a pale or bland experience, but an intense, emotional, memorable and, above all, honest presentation of the moments which have helped define Canada's national identity. By developing innovative design solutions in close consultation with Museum staff, the team is proud of a final exhibition design which evokes Canada's military heritage with both passion and respect.