

# **Crossing the Red**

*Heritage Interpretation at Esplanade Riel*

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Every river city has at least one bridge story; Winnipeg has several. The great bridge building period at the end of the 19th century led to a number of idiosyncratic crossing structures that still remain, each offering its own snapshot of local environmental constraints, economics, urban patterns, and politics at the time of construction.

For example, the old swing spans and counterweights on many of Winnipeg's bridges remind us that the Red was until quite recently considered and legally classified as a commercial transportation route that needed to accommodate large ships: these old structures record changes in the role of the river within the city, technological advances, even shifts in global politics.

When structural damage from the massive 1997 flood forced the redevelopment of the Provencher Bridge, the City and the design team recognized an opportunity to capitalize on this heritage as they re-imagined one of the most storied crossings in Western Canada.

This presentation will provide an overview of the Provencher Bridge heritage interpretation process and plan. As a case study, we will show bridges as manifestations of the forces that unite and divide communities, making them valuable tools for interpreting river heritage, and a critical resource in its preservation.

### **The Process**

Like the first bridge built on this site in 1882, which washed away three days after it opened, the reconstruction project got off to a faltering and controversial start. The City of Winnipeg assigns priorities to bridge reconstruction projects based on cost and urgency, and by 1993 the crumbling Provencher Bridge was at the top of the list. Preliminary designs were drawn up, but widely varying intransigent opinions on a number of issues - not least being the impact on St. Boniface of a larger bridge - forced the project to be shelved. The City moved on to the next-in-line bridge, the Main/Norwood crossing west of the Forks.

When the City turned its attention back to the Provencher Bridge in 1996, it had learned lessons from its 1993 experience and from the Main Norwood project, which included a comprehensive public consultation process headed by Susan Freig Associates.

Susan Freig was hired again, and her work on the project earned an award from the International City/County Managers Association in 2002.

Her first step was to establish a broadly-based stakeholder group comprised of local community members representing everything from community organizations and arts collectives to parents groups and local health institutions. The Provencher Bridge Project Advisory Committee (the PAC, for short) was supported by a technical resource group composed of City department heads and consultants from each discipline on the design team.

One of the central controversies facing the PAC was whether to rebuild or restore. Engineering analysis showed that reconstruction was the most reasonable course of action in terms of economics and public safety, but there was an extremely vocal pro-restoration group that lobbied the community and politicians effectively through the early days of the project. The

bridge was a cherished icon; even Gabrielle Roy had written about it. It was not just the bridge they loved, it was the stories it embodied.

Over several months of hard work and impassioned debate, the PAC and design team reached consensus on a vision of a new bridge that in addition to being a signature attraction in the downtown, would become a symbolic, restorative link between Winnipeg and St. Boniface: two communities that had rarely found consensus on anything related to the crossing. The concept was to carry traffic on a new bridge built near the existing bridge alignment and build a separate cable-stayed pedestrian bridge to re-establish the broken link between the grand prairie avenues of Broadway and Provencher Boulevard. This link was severed by the construction of the CN rail yards and station on the west bank in 1904 – Winnipeg saw this as a progressive move, St. Boniface saw it as a significant insult.

The PAC wisely recognized that while this high tech reconstruction is forward looking, this scheme also demands a hard look at the past. Accordingly, they requested that a Heritage Interpretation Committee (HIC) be added to the resource team to ensure that historic aspects of the project were appropriately treated. The HIC was comprised of experts from local museums, the Forks National Historic Site, Provincial & Federal Heritage, Archives & Conservation. A budget was established for interpretive materials, and the HIC tasked with developing content.

The HIC began by identifying the existing heritage resources and interpretive features in the area. The bridge is surrounded by a number of Winnipeg's most significant historic sites. The committee wanted to prevent repetition and avoid subjecting visitors to 'heritage saturation'. They also identified a number of distinct research topics for the project. The designers assigned to this task – Hilderman Thomas Frank Cram landscape architects and Gaboury Prefontaine Perry architect.e.s - helped condense these topics into four primary themes:

1. History of the Crossing
2. Two Communities
3. The River
4. Bridge Engineering

Over the Christmas break of the first year, independent researchers were engaged to assemble images and flesh out each theme as a short research paper.

With four hefty research papers in hand, and the committee and design team struggling to agree on the messages we wanted to deliver to the public, it became increasingly clear that heritage interpretation is open to interpretation. The mountain of historical material and sub-storyline options was growing, rather than zeroing in on a solution. Throughout the process, there was a polite tension between the historians and the designers: the historians adding depth, breadth, and new interpretations, while the designers looked for ways to boil the material down to an accessible and workable form. The designers also had to resist steady pressure from the client and the HIC itself to establish prematurely what the interpretive features would be and where they would go; we needed sufficient agreement on the messages and sufficient deliberation to shape it all into something that fit the site and hung together.

Our strategies, which were more or less in place at the outset of the project, included:

- setting information into a coherent framework
- recognizing and relate to the high density of heritage resources in the vicinity
- integrating interpretive stories into the structure
- choosing images over words
- selecting stories rooted to the place
- using translation creatively to reinforce the interpretive messages and draw people across the bridge

## The Plan

The plan emerged through close collaboration between GPPA and HTFC. Our first action was to break down the themes and recombine them within six zones on the site. This allowed us to match individual stories to the zone that best reinforced its messages. The plan for each zone is summarized in Table 1 and 2 below.

<b>Table 1: Heritage Interpretation Plan, Zones 1 to 3</b>			
	Zone 1	Zone 2	Zone 3
Location	East Bank Interpretive Node	Vehicular Bridge Granite Band	Central Plaza (restaurant)
Themes	Crossing the Red, The River	Two Communities Multiculturalism	Historic sites ‘clearinghouse’
Medium	Steel sign integrated into seating alcove. Background black.	Sandblasted black granite	Sandblasted window glazing
Content	Timeline, historic photos, text	Artwork	Stylized images of historic sites, text
Language	French & English	French, English and Cree intro	English and French
Notes	The timeline was used to convey multiple storylines in a coherent, contextual manner. It will indicate milestones from pre-contact to present, in the context of other relevant events such as floods, wars, and economic cycles. Historic photos and text will detail only the period from 1882 to present. The sign will refer readers to its twin site on the west bank for details on the earlier years.	The centerpiece of the interpretive program. A response to the complexity and sensitivity of this storyline, this palindromic tableau of icons and multinational sash patterns represents key events, cultural clashes and reconciliations related to the bridge, arranged chronologically with the present day at the centre.	Unique panoramic vantage point where a number of major historic sites in the downtown can be seen. Images would match historic resources visible through that window

<b>Table 2: Heritage Interpretation Plan, Zones 4 to 6</b>			
	Zone 4	Zone 5	Zone 6
Location	West Bank Interpretive Node	North Side Walkways	Pedestrian Bridge Landings

Themes	Crossing the Red, The River	Homage to the 1918 Provencher Bridge	Restoration of early 'Broadway Bridge' alignment
Medium	Steel sign integrated into seating alcove. Background black.	Textured concrete, salvaged bridge artifacts, black steel sign	Black steel sign, mounted to Esplanade Riel end posts
Content	Timeline, historic photos, text	Elements to indicate former bridge alignment, girder rivet textures, sign text and photographs noting when the bridge was built, why it was replaced, and what the alignment elements represent	Map showing Broadway/Provencher alignment, text describing the significance of the alignment
Language	French & English	French & English	English on St. Boniface side, French on Forks side
Notes	The timeline will indicate milestones from pre-contact to present, in the context of other relevant events such as floods, wars, and economic cycles. Historic photos and text will detail only the precontact to 1882 period. The sign will refer readers to its twin site on the west bank for details on the later years.	Salvaged light posts painted black to match original 1918 colour, mounted on concrete plinths above the 50 yr. flood level. Textured concrete will indicate girder spacing, alignment, and the bridge's characteristic rivet pattern.	These are the only uni-lingual signs in the project. Their locations (French on the English side and vice versa) were intended as subtle challenge to visitors and residents, highlighting the cultural significance of re-establishing this link, and drawing people across the bridge.

## Lessoned Learned

Here are three key lessons relevant to river heritage interpretation:

*1. Consultation is vital, but needs to be expertly managed.*

The large committee provided expertise and a fascinating range of viewpoints. Some better 'pruning' of the research tangents by the committee chair would have saved time and effort, but in the end we were all comfortable that the interpretive messages were accurate and appropriate.

*2. You don't have to preserve the artifact to preserve its heritage.*

We believe the paired bridges demonstrate how a new facility can gain substance through an honest and thorough examination of the site's past. In this way, heritage is not reduced to token homages and plaques; it is integral to core of the design.

*3. Bridges are powerful, multifaceted symbols.*

In the movies, bridges are a favorite location whenever anything transformative happens. This is because of all urban settings, they are among the most expressive and laden with associations. It has been said that bridges are America's cathedrals. Their construction is an act of secular faith and aspiration, overcoming natural obstacles, uniting and dividing communities. This provides a fertile ground for heritage interpretation.

As historian and engineer Henry Petrowski writes, "...knowing the story of a bridge and its builder invariably reveals a rich and rewarding chapter in the history of a place, its people, and their dreams."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Petrowski, *Pushing the Limits: New Adventures in Engineering*. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2004.