

from qeqən: A Walking Tour of Musqueam House Posts at UBC

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The following two excerpts from qeqən are reproduced here courtesy of Jordan Wilson and the University of British Columbia's Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, which commissioned the walking tour and the accompanying publication in 2018.

The Reserve

To learn about house posts, we need to begin on the Musqueam Reserve, the main village of the Musqueam people. Many students and visitors are unaware the reserve is not far from the University of British Columbia campus: the distance between UBC's Office of the President and the Musqueam administration office, for example, is just over seven kilometres. It is one of two Indian reserves located within the boundaries of the City of Vancouver.

While Musqueam people have lived on what is now Musqueam Indian Reserve #2 for over 3,500 years, it has only been a reserve since the early 1860s. Having been reduced in size several times, the reserve is postage-stamp small, currently measuring 190.4 hectares, or 1.9 square kilometres. I often hear people describe it as one of the smallest reserves per capita in Canada.¹ Federal government agents restricted the size of the reserve, under the justification that Musqueam are a fishing people, relying on the resources of the Fraser River—whose North Arm opens up to the Georgia Strait at the reserve—and therefore did not need a large land base. It is likely that the authorities assumed

1 According to the 2016 census, Canada had a population density of 3.9 per square kilometre. Musqueam, on the other hand, at the time of the census, had a population density of 654.7 per square kilometre. Data from Statistics Canada, *2016 Census of Canada Census of Population*. Catalogue number 98-316-X2016001 in Statistics Canada database online. Ottawa, released September 13, 2017.

Brent Sparrow Jr., *qiyəplenəx*^w *house post*, 2012, installed at Allard Hall UBC

Photograph by Michael R. Barrick



Musqueam populations would diminish in the face of policies and institutions enforcing assimilation. They did not foresee that Indigenous populations would recover from disease, displacement and dispossession, and rebound as Musqueam is today.

The McKenna-McBride Commission was established in 1912 to resolve the “Indian reserve question” in BC. Over the course of four years it visited many reserves to receive testimony, ultimately modifying reserve sizes to the detriment of most BC First Nations.¹ On the occasion of their 1913 visit to Musqueam, the community adorned the entrance to the reserve catechism hall, where the meeting took place, with fresh cedar boughs, a stone being named *qəyscam* and two house posts: *tə qeqən ʔə ʔ qiyəplenəx*^w (The House Post of *qiyəplenəx*^w)

1 Reuben Ware, *The Lands We Lost: A History of Cut-Off Lands and Land Losses from Indian Reserves in British Columbia* (Vancouver: The Union of BC Indian Chiefs, 1974).

and tə qeqən ʔə ʕ̣ ʕ̣səṃlənəxʷ (The House Post of ʕ̣səṃlənəxʷ). Conscious of the importance of this encounter, the community pinned cards with the anglicized names on each respective post, indicating ownership or affiliation: “CAPILANO’S” and “TESUMLANO’S,” and the attending community representatives wore regalia to signify their authority.

Historically, house posts were typically part of the interior structure of Musqueam and other Coast Salish communities’ longhouses, used to support often-massive crossbeams. If we want to get technical, there is a distinction between a post and a carved house board, which would have been affixed to a sturdier post or a wall. tə qeqən ʔə ʕ̣ ʕ̣səṃlənəxʷ, with its high-relief sculpture set against a thin, flat backing, can be understood as a house board. House posts’ importance, however, extends beyond their architectural function: they can perhaps best be understood as a type of monument, at once memorializing a specific ancestor, while stating the ongoing inherited rights associated with that ancestor. Sometimes house posts represented the private visions or specific powers of their owner or their owner’s ancestor. According to James Point, the late Musqueam elder and historian, “they showed what kind of person you were.”¹

At the McKenna-McBride Commission hearing, Chief Johnny ɣʷəyɣʷəyələq eloquently voiced complaints on behalf of the community:

*You gentlemen know what I have said—This land here is not enough. We are anxious indeed to cultivate the land—Just like as if I am between two persons, one person is on my right and one person is on my left saying “I have a share of your reserve” and I want those two persons to let my hands go and give me the control of my own land—I don’t want anyone to bother me. [...] When I want to go fishing, the two parties are also holding onto each end of my boat—There are initials and numbers on the bow and initials and numbers on the stern, and I know that I own the water, that is the grievance that I want to bring before the Commissioners. I don’t want to have a license to do anything. When I want to catch fish for my living I don’t want to be interfered with at all.*²

1 Quoted in Susan Roy, *These Mysterious People: Shaping History and Archaeology in a Northwest Coast Community*. 2nd ed. (Toronto: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2016), 65.

2 Royal Commission on Indian Affairs for the Province of British Columbia. New Westminster Agency. *Minute Book of the Proceedings and Sitting of the Royal Commission on Indian Affairs in British Columbia, 1913-1916*, 64.

It is important to remember the pivotal moment of this hearing as we move forward, as it reveals that the Musqueam community did not disassociate what might commonly be understood as “ethnographic objects” or “art” from politics, specifically sovereignty over the land and resources. In other words, while they referenced histories they were not understood as objects of a distant past, they were of contemporary relevance. This historical moment also warrants some speculation regarding how the commissioners understood the display: did they view them as decoration, meant to welcome them to the hall? This deployment of objects in a modern political context was not unique to Musqueam — during the McKenna-McBride Commission’s visit to Alert Bay, Kwakwaka’wakw chiefs wore their regalia and displayed masks and other ceremonial gear as a means to visually declare hereditary rights.¹

This occasion also marks a slight transformation or perhaps signals the beginning of an ongoing shift in the display of house posts. Formerly, they were most often displayed in the interior of an individual family’s house for invited guests, such as those from neighbouring nations. In this instance, however, the posts faced outward and were displayed specifically for a non-Indigenous audience; the qiyəplənəx^w post was no longer supporting the weight of a crossbeam and the ɕsəmlənəx^w board was not affixed to an interior post. In some ways, the posts came to represent Musqueam *as a nation*, in addition to distinct extended families, in its dealings with the federal and provincial governments. On the reserve today, recently carved reiterations of these two posts flank the entrance to the Musqueam administration office, which includes the chambers of Musqueam chief and council, our contemporary political leadership.

As we embark on this walk, we will — in some ways — trace the various and not necessarily “complete” transformations of house posts: from architectural element to free-standing sculpture; from representations of specific ancestors and rights to “welcome posts,” and perhaps more broadly from Indigenous cultural objects to “art,” particularly “public” art for a broad audience. I see this reframing process as not simply a process of appropriation or consumption of these cultural practices by settler populations, but rather a series of responses to

1 Royal Commission on Indian Affairs for the Province of British Columbia (1913-1916), “Chiefs and Headmen of Kwakwewlth Nation in Ancient Dress,” May 1914. BC Archives, Victoria; Royal Commission on Indian Affairs for the Province of British Columbia (1913-1916), “Ceremonial Masks of the Kwakwewlths,” June 2, 1914. BC Archives, Victoria, BC.

complex and changing circumstances. Put otherwise, I hope to convey a sense of agency in Musqueam’s engagement in this reframing process.

I will also speak to Musqueam’s relationship with what is now known as UBC — the institution and the land it occupies — as well as the institution’s relationship with Indigenous peoples more broadly, although this endeavour is not meant to be exhaustive by any means.¹

I write as a Musqueam band member, but want to acknowledge my views are my own. I do not speak on behalf of my community, but I will talk about how I have come to understand the Musqueam house posts, and how they resonate with me as a Musqueam person living in what is now known as “Vancouver,” and as someone involved in the university community.

Allard School of Law

What is now known as “Point Grey” includes the site of *q̓ələx̓ən* (“stockade”), a Musqueam warrior outpost led by *qiyəplenəx̓w*. It was from here that *qiyəplenəx̓w* the second, a powerful warrior, launched a retaliation against *Laich-kwil-tach* raiders. It is an event carried forward to this day by oral tradition: the Musqueam Warriors dance group reenacts this historical event in its performances, for example. *q̓ələx̓ən* was strategically located, since from here you could look out to the Georgia Strait and see raiding parties travelling from the north. Here stands another, more recent reiteration of *qiyəplenəx̓w*, made in 2012 by Brent Sparrow Jr., one of many descendants connected to the *qiyəplenəx̓w* genealogy.

To describe *qiyəplenəx̓w* as an important ancestral name feels like an understatement. The name carries a legacy which I feel unqualified to speak to. For example, Musqueam oral history holds that the second *qiyəplenəx̓w* greeted Spanish explorer *Narváez*, who anchored west of present day Point Grey on July 5, 1791, and Captain Vancouver in 1792. Ancestral names are passed down through the generations, along with associated rights and responsibilities. Big names, or names of a high status, as one might imagine, are associated with positions of leadership and jurisdiction over lands and waters. In other words, inherited names are an integral part of Musqueam governance. *Charlie Capilano*, who also carried the name *qiyəplenəx̓w*, was present at the

1 For a more thorough history of UBC in relation to Indigenous peoples, including Musqueam, see UBC Centre for Teaching, Learning and Technology’s interactive online timeline, “Time and Place at UBC: Our Histories and Relations,” 2016.

McKenna-McBride Commission. Today, respected Musqueam elder Howard E. Grant carries the name.¹ Simply put, it is important to recognize the continuous legacy of qiyəplənəx^w and the recent post is but one expression of this.

On numerous occasions I have heard Dzawadaǵ'enuxw artist and scholar Marianne Nicolson declare that in her community, material practices such as regalia and ceremonial gear are not just “beautiful objects.” Instead, she argues, they should be understood as *legal documents*, or title documents, that confer or speak to her community’s rights and title to their ancestral territory. As she has noted, these types of objects “tell the story of how we came to be in the land, and our right to be there.”² The collection and recontextualized display of such items in museums and art galleries is a depoliticizing act, Nicolson has argued, and is tightly connected to the colonization of First Nations lands and resources. I also think about ideas expressed by Joe Martin, a Tla-o-qui-aht canoe carver, about literacy. When non-Indigenous people arrived, Indigenous peoples were illiterate in the English language, yet settlers were also illiterate, having no understanding of how to read the visual language of Nuuchahnulth totem poles.³ I find these perspectives are a useful way to think of the Musqueam house posts—they too can be read—not in the popularly held idea of telling one story, but as representative of a distinct legal system of ownership and property, both tangible and intangible.

Bearing this in mind, it seems fitting that Sparrow’s work is situated here—a representation of Musqueam law in close proximity to the University’s law school. Moreover, Musqueam has had a lengthy history of engaging with Canada’s legal system to assert its jurisdiction over our lands and waters. Musqueam’s actions in court have led to precedent-setting decisions for Aboriginal rights and title in Canada and beyond, with the *Guerin* (1984) and *Sparrow* (1990) decisions in particular being of continuous significance. Brent Sparrow Jr.’s rendition of qiyəplənəx^w elaborates on its historical precedent; he has added a large base to the sculpture, which includes a spindle whorl composition rendered in glass. The scale of the post is imposing, amplifying the post’s divergence from an architectural element to freestanding monumental sculpture.

1 For more information, see Larry Grant, Susan J. Blake and Ulrich C. Teucher, “Meanings of Musqueam Ancestral Names: The Capilano Tradition,” *UBC Working Papers in Linguistics* 14 (2004): 45–66.

2 Marianne Nicolson, untitled presentation presented at the *Carving on the Edge Festival*, Tofino, BC, September 8, 2017.

3 Joe Martin, personal communication with author, September 10, 2017.