



Location: Prince George, Fraser-Fort George
Regional District



Rebuilding after burning down

The Exploration Place was originally established in 1958 as a community heritage society focussed on the history of the Hudson's Bay Company settlement in the Prince George region. The Society was housed in a variety of buildings, including the local library and city hall, before collecting enough funds to construct its first building, a log cabin, which opened in 1974. Tragically, the building caught fire two years later and its entire collection, save for a couple of taxidermied animals, burned to the ground. In an unstable economic climate tied to a boom-and-bust lumber industry, it would have been easy for the Society to close up shop after that. Instead, they've become a pillar of a growing and



diversifying economy in a city that has made arts and culture a central part of its revitalization.

The journey: Entrepreneurship & Partnerships

The society persisted without a collection or location and, in 1981, opened a second, fireproof 23,000 square foot facility. A call for donations resulted in very few historically significant items, so the society focused instead on the digital portion of their collection that had survived - mostly photographs. By the 1990s, they had developed a proprietary database to make the existing collection digitally accessible, and suddenly The Exploration Place was on the cutting edge of a global movement toward digitizing collections, just as the Internet started becoming widely accessible.

"The loss of the collection turned out to be a blessing because we weren't mired in old-school museum thinking... instead, we created a digital collection in the pre-Internet era..."

Despite successes, the fire still haunted the museum. Artifact donations remained low due to public mistrust, and in 1992, the Centre's then Director worked to remedy this by forging a new direction for the Exploration Place as a science centre. Inspired by Science World's Search and Discover Gallery, an Explorations Gallery was added to the centre. Membership exploded as a result of the new gallery's popularity and by the end of the 1990s, the Fraser Fort George Museum Society had outgrown its space. In 2001, it officially reopened as The Exploration Place with feet in both the museum and science centre

worlds. In 2019, Prince George's economic incentive program to encourage development in the downtown area was concluded after a widespread success. The Exploration Place now stands out at the corner of a vibrant and developing downtown core. In partnership with other arts and cultural organizations, the Exploration Place has been working to redefine Prince George's downtown core as vibrant community space, combating urban sprawl retaining a diverse workforce by providing a welcoming, vibrant cultural area.

"The downtown core has become the living room of our community, and it's a large part of why people move to and stay in Prince George now."

Exploring economic impact

The Exploration Place remains an entrepreneurial organization today. With a \$2.2 million annual budget, a significant portion of their revenue comes from "typical" sources including the gift shop, admission, and memberships; however the biggest source of revenue is from their preschool and afterschool programs. The Exploration Place has been offering childcare and educational programs for years, and this arm of the organization has repeatedly ensured the organization received essential funding. With approximately twenty full-time staff who also receive free childcare, the economic footprint of the organization is easy to quantify.

Exploration Place staff are working with local First Nations to establish an Indigenous preschool program. The Exploration Place has a longstanding, good relationship with the Lheidli T'enneh First Nation, and this relationship speaks to the organization's intangible role as a leader in the community. As a designated representative for the Lheidli T'enneh on many city boards and committees, The Exploration Place helps ensure that Indigenous interests and concerns are represented in economic development and planning throughout Prince George. The Exploration Place's partnerships don't stop there - the Centre is involved with all levels of government and various boards and governing bodies to help shape the future of everything from preschool programming to train and transport regulations.

The diversity of the Exploration Place's programs and collections is no happy accident, but instead is the product of strategic leadership at both the staff and Board levels. This diversity speaks to community needs and partnerships, and has been central to the Exploration Place's growth from an organization without a building or collection in 1976 to an organization that is working hard to meet an unending demand. Physical capacity remains a key constraint, but as the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the Exploration Place discovered traffic to its website and resources increasing exponentially. The Centre navigates its new role during the pandemic as a source for scientific information and homeschooling material.

"We're a trusted organization and source of information. Now that more and more people are trying to find educational materials online, they're coming to us as a source of truth. Our role during this pandemic is becoming more and more vital, even though our doors are closed."

Sharing insights



Scale Up:

- Scaled up *physically* by adding more space and *intangibly* by integrating with more communities. Staff are at the discussion and planning tables across the city, including regional tourism agencies and governments; this approach led to them negotiating five-year funding windows, shaping the district heritage tax levy, and driving local tourism campaigns. By taking on this role, the Exploration Place isn't just a part of a growing community, it's a leader within it.



Increase Diversity:

- Working with the Lheidli T'enneh First Nation, the Exploration Place plays a vital role within the community. Their work continuing to build relationships between the Lheidli T'enneh and other cultural organizations and city groups is an essential part of a community that is moving forward with an emphasis on reconciliation.



Focus:

- Focus on community. Understanding the community beyond the museum lens and making it their primary *raison d'être* has allowed them to consistently add value to Prince George. While this means that they often need to be entrepreneurial in their approach, their desire to use their resources to serve the community is unwavering.



Train:

- Museums are leadership organizations, especially during times like the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Exploration Place takes this role seriously. Not only are they providing educational resources for students and families who are studying at home, they're also providing support for other cultural institutions who are seeking to do the same. The Exploration Place has become a barometer for a community seeking to find a new normal; as the first to close during the COVID19 pandemic, it expects to be the first to reopen, and will play a role in reintroducing people to public interactions by providing a safe and trusted place.