

# Decolonization of Indigenous Communities through Collaborative Planning: Study of Merchants Corner Redevelopment Project, Winnipeg

Deepa Chandran, MCP Candidate, University of Manitoba  
 Noah Yauk, Planner, (Planning, Property and Development Department), City of Winnipeg  
 Robert Nufeld, Executive Director, North End Community Renewal Corporation (NECRC)



Source: [www.linkedin.com](http://www.linkedin.com)



Source: [www.themerch.ca](http://www.themerch.ca)

## Abstract

Keywords:  
 Collaboration,  
 Decolonization,  
 Indigenous commu-  
 nities

Colonization of Indigenous communities has had irreversibly damaging impacts on various dimensions of their lives. The Government policies have significantly contributed to the present day challenges faced by these communities both directly and indirectly (Mc Kinnon, Silver, 2015, 2). Therefore, processes towards decolonization of Indigenous communities can play a major role in reversing, at least partially, the negative impacts of the colonization processes (Mc Kinnon, Silver, 2015, 5). It is also regarded as a key strategy to capacity building by enabling them to resolve issues (Aquash, 2011 May 10) in an efficient and culturally appropriate manner.

North End of Winnipeg, an area known for its high concentration of Indigenous population, significantly lags behind the city averages in terms of major socio-economic development indicators including educational attainment. The ongoing Merchants Corner Redevelopment Project is a unique experience of Indigenous decolonization in the North End where the notorious Merchants Hotel is transformed into an educational hub. It is a project that will enable the community to regain a lost community space and to drastically alter it from a symbol of decline to a centre of capacity building and hope. It is regarded as the most exciting development in the area and a project that celebrates the beauty and strength of Indigenous culture. The project is the ultimate outcome of successful collaboration between stakeholders, active community participation, and creative architecture. Above all, it is a unique example of how the process of Indigenous decolonization can be taken forward in urban contexts through community-oriented collaborative planning.

## Background

Merchants Hotel, which is locally known as the Merch, was established as a hardware store in 1913 and was later converted into a hotel in 1933. The building that is located at the intersection between Selkirk Avenue and Andrews Street, was part of a lively street and a major landmark in the area. As the hotel became a centre for several social menaces including alcoholism and crime in the recent years, it soon turned into an eye sore in the community and a living symbol of the region's decline.

The ever increasing incidents of violence reported in connection with the Merch, dissociated it from the community and residents. Walking along this part of the street was avoided by residents in fear, especially in the evenings. Few local initiatives were taken in the past in collaboration with organizations functioning in the area, to control the expansion of the hotel's activities and thereby to strongly express the community's discontent. Following the reporting of a murder in relation to the hotel, it was finally closed in April 2012 after being purchased by the Provincial Government.

Based on several rounds of community consultation and meetings with stakeholders, it was decided that the Merch will be redeveloped into a multi-purpose building that will play a crucial role in building a healthy North- End community. The project is also expected to have the potential to transform Selkirk Avenue into an educational hub in the North End and to become a symbol of the community's hope and strength.

### i) Project funding

In 2012, the Provincial Government had agreed to allocate \$12.8 million for the redevelopment project. As the construction cost had

### ii) Stakeholders involved

At the beginning of the integrated design process, 18 different stakeholder groups were identified. Some of the key players in the project are :

**"It is a building of capacity building and hope"**

**(Robert Nufeld, Executive Director, NECRC)**



Source: <http://news-centre.uwinnipeg.ca/all-posts/good-bye-merch-hello-merchants-corner/>

Image.1 Computer generated image of the Merchants Corner Project



Source: <http://rabble.ca/blogs/bloggers/policyfix/2014/07/beer-bottles-to-books-remaking-merchants-corner>

Image.2 Merchants Hotel building before its demolition

increased drastically in the subsequent years, this amount was raised to \$15 million. The rest of the project cost, i.e., \$3.4 million will be raised through fund raising events led by the Merchants Corner Inc. These events have been highly successful and could raise more than \$2.4 million by early 2016. It is expected that the fund raising goal will be reached soon.

- Steering Committee
- Local Residents
- Business Community
- Elders
- NECRC Board
- University of Winnipeg
- CEDA Pathways

Though the Province had a pivotal role in initiating this project, it currently it has a much smaller role while the local community plays a significantly larger role.

“The very first approach that we took is let’s hear and listen to what people want. So we decided to go door to door and to understand what people do and what people want... and what is it that makes a difference in their lives?”

(Hijab Mitra, Project Architect)

### iii) Collaborative Project Design

After the hotel was purchased by the Provincial Government, a series of community engagement programs were organized to understand the aspirations of the community and the residents’ vision about the new project. Despite the diverse nature of the project stakeholders, the creation of a building that will become a rich community space remained as the ultimate goal.

MISTECTURE, the architecture firm involved in the project played a constructive role to make this project reach the community members, and to listen and to answer to their concerns. It is the support from the community that enabled the firm to design a project that is regarded as the most exciting ongoing-project in the North End. A close look at the project design illustrates the beautiful meshing of Indigenous values in each of its design components. More than as a means to design buildings, the firm was keen to deploy architecture as a means to empowerment and community transformation.



Source: MISTECTURE Architecture and Interiors Inc, 2014

Image.3 A public consultation board explaining the project design

### iv) Project Components

The project has two components: The current Merchant hotel building that will be redeveloped into a major educational space and a second building that will comprise affordable housing units. Though primarily an educational space, the third floor of the first building will be designed as affordable housing units. The project in total will have 30 affordable apartment units. Priority will be given to single parent students who are attending one of the educational institutions on Selkirk Avenue.

The educational space will be shared by the University of Winnipeg, CEDA and the community. Urban and Inner City Studies of the University of Winnipeg will use the two floors of the building during the day time while the CEDA Pathways to education which is an after-school program, will use the same space in the evening. The concept of shared use of space has several advantages and is believed to be a unique model in Canada (NECRC, 2014, 4). The

high school students will get voluntary teaching support from the university students and will also be able to participate in the university activities.

The design of the building reflects Indigenous cultural values. The feather shaped structures on the front side of the building, depicts four feathers of an eagle. In fact, Indigenous design principles will be the soul of the new Merchants Corner. The project also has a ‘social enterprise’ component, a coffee shop. It will function as a link between the community and the newly created educational hub.

### v) Progress of the project

The demolition of the Merchants Hotel began in March 2016. It is expected that the project will be functional by the 2016 Fall Academic session. This will enable the functioning of the Inner City Studies at the new location and to provide affordable housing option to the students. The project along with other educational institutions such as Urban Circle Training Centre

and the University of Manitoba's Inner City Social Work Program will transform Selkirk Avenue into an educational hub in North End

### vi) Project's social relevance

North End has been the most culturally diverse part of the city since the 19th century. Nonetheless, this has been one of the declining areas within the city in the recent decades. Selkirk Avenue which is often described as the heart and soul of North-End also witnessed drastic decline in this period.

The North End lags behind the rest of the city particularly in terms of education attainment. The remarkably low success ratio of students from the area passing high school was a serious concern in the recent years (Silver, 2014). In this

backdrop, initiating a large-scale educational space, replacing a location known for social menaces, will be a major step towards community building. It will make higher education a normal activity for the high school students in North End (NECRC, 2014). The adult literacy programs for the parents and the services provided by the community library will be additional components to highlight the social relevance this project in the community.

## Indigenous Decolonization

The colonization policies by the Governments have done serious damages to Indigenous communities. 'Indigenous decolonization' is a process to free the Indigenous communities from their colonial status and thereby to regain their identity and values. It enables one to overcome the bitter impacts of the

colonial assimilation policies.

The Merchants Corner Redevelopment Project is a powerful initiative to reinstate the hope and confidence in the Indigenous communities. The building's transformation from a notorious place to a centre of education, not only opens doors of higher education and capacity building, but also provides an opportunity to regain a 'lost' community space. Many of the project principles reflect the elements of Indigenous decolonization process. Some of them are:

"For the first time in the North End, we are going to have a building as beautiful as our children and our dreams"

(Michael Champagne, NECRC)



Image.4: Google street view of the Merchants Corner project site

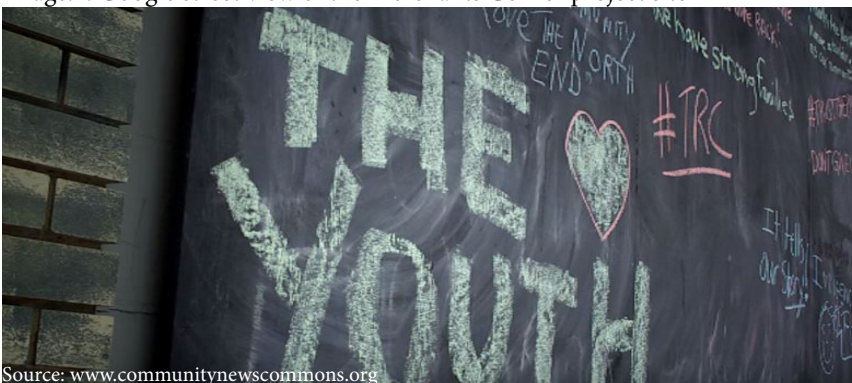


Image.5: A close view of a black board hung outside the Merchants hotel

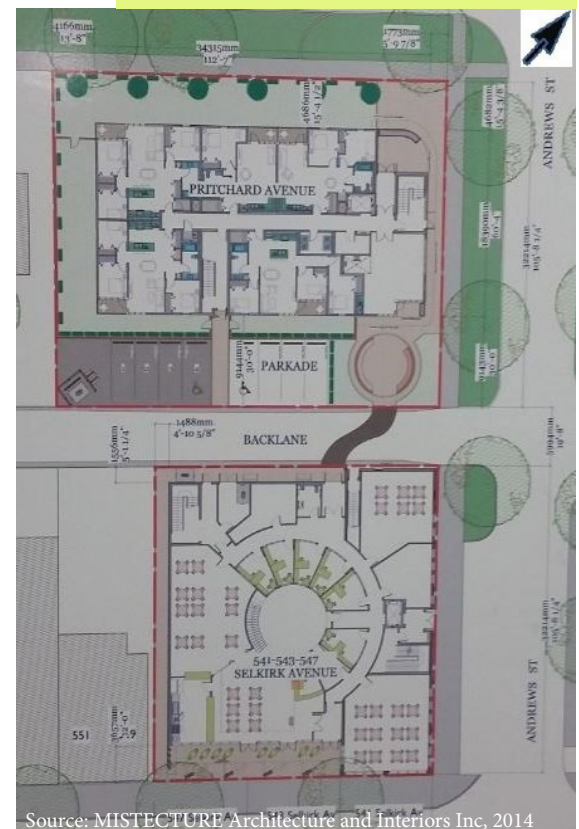


Image.6: Layout view, Merchants Corner Project

- Creation of an inter-generational space and respect for elders
- Wellbeing of seventh generation (Emphasis on long-term benefits and sustainability)
- Community Economic Development (incorporating project/design components that will benefit the local residents)
- Creation of flexible, mixed-use space, directly managed by the community



Image 7, Source: www.jantoo.com



Image 8, Source: www.pinterest.com



Image 9, Source: www.economists.com



Image 10, Source: www.mediabarrel.com

## Challenges Faced

The journey from being a building that had become a source of fear, to a building of empowerment and hope for the entire North End community was not without any challenges. Some of the important issues encountered were:

### a) Incorporating the diverse needs of stakeholders

Being a project with 18 different stakeholders, it was an overwhelming task to incorporate the interests of all partners and to reach a middle ground. For this purpose, a wide range of meetings were conducted with stakeholders either in group or separately.

### b) Balancing the community's needs against limited funds

This challenge was primarily faced while designing the affordable multi-story apartment building, behind the main building. The project team initially had to struggle to meet the strict budget of Manitoba housing)

### c) Operation cost management after the project completion

Finding funds to manage the operating cost of the project once it becomes operational was a challenge in the project. Discussions are taking place currently to fix this uncertainty.

### d) Finalizing tenants

Finalizing the tenants for the first two floors of the main building was a major challenge in the project. However, University of Winnipeg and CEDA were finalized as the main tenants by 2014. It is expected that there will not be similar difficulty to get tenants for the affordable housing units.

### e) Including social enterprise component in the design

There was strong agreement among the stakeholders that a social enterprise inside the new educational hub can function as a link between the community and the institutional space. However, there were confusions on the nature of the social enterprise and its management.

## Lessons Learnt

### a) Strength of collaboration

Meaningful collaboration between the stakeholders was a crucial reason for the success of this project. The timely intervention by the Provincial Government resulting in the closing of the notorious hotel, partnership with Manitoba Housing, and the highly facilitator role played by the City of Winnipeg are few examples of governing organizations playing a constructive role in the planning process.

Similarly, the role played by institutions such as University of Winnipeg and CEDA could elevate the outcomes of the project to a significantly high level to meet the aspirations of the community. However, the community members, and various organizations representing them were the 'real drivers' of this project and could actively contribute to the entire project design process.

“While Government put a lot of resources into the project, yet they put the community in the driver’s seat”

(Noah Yauk, Planner, City of Winnipeg)

### ii) Innovative strategies in community participation

Keeping the ‘community in the driver’s seat’ was a key to the success of the project. The one-on-one discussion that the project architect had with all the residents in the area, enabled her to translate the community’s vision into project design. A unique community participation strategy deployed in the project was through the use of huge black boards placed on the walls of the closed Merchants hotel. The residents were encouraged to write down their views on the project on the black board. This kept the participation cost low and generated excitement in the community about the project.

### iii) Moving from conventional to creative and unique

There are several project components that make it a

unique planning experience in context of urban Indigenous communities. The flexible design of the educational space not only allows its shared use but also maximizes efficiency. Similarly, the innovative collaboration between the University of Winnipeg and CEDA, will together generate synergy to promote capacity building and wellbeing of the community in the long-run.

### iv) Design community-oriented space for healthy communities

Merchants hotel, due to the social menaces associated with it was ‘a location to avoid’. The closing of the hotel was an invaluable opportunity for the community to regain control over a lost community space and to transform it into a symbol of hope and strength. The project as well as the building design

was done on the basis of the clear understanding of the community’s aspirations and needs. As a project that was designed for and by the North End community, it celebrates the values of Indigenous culture and has vast capacity building potential.

### v) Innovative strategies in project management/ownership

The project has a collaborative ownership/management strategy. After the purchase, the hotel’s ownership was transferred by the Provincial Government to the Merchants Corner Inc while the City of Winnipeg contributed to this project by allocating the city owned land for the construction of a new building. The first building will be owned by the community and operated by the Merchants Corner Inc. Interestingly, the second building will be owned and operated by Manitoba Housing while the land will be owned by the community.



Source: [www.communitynewscommons.org](http://www.communitynewscommons.org)

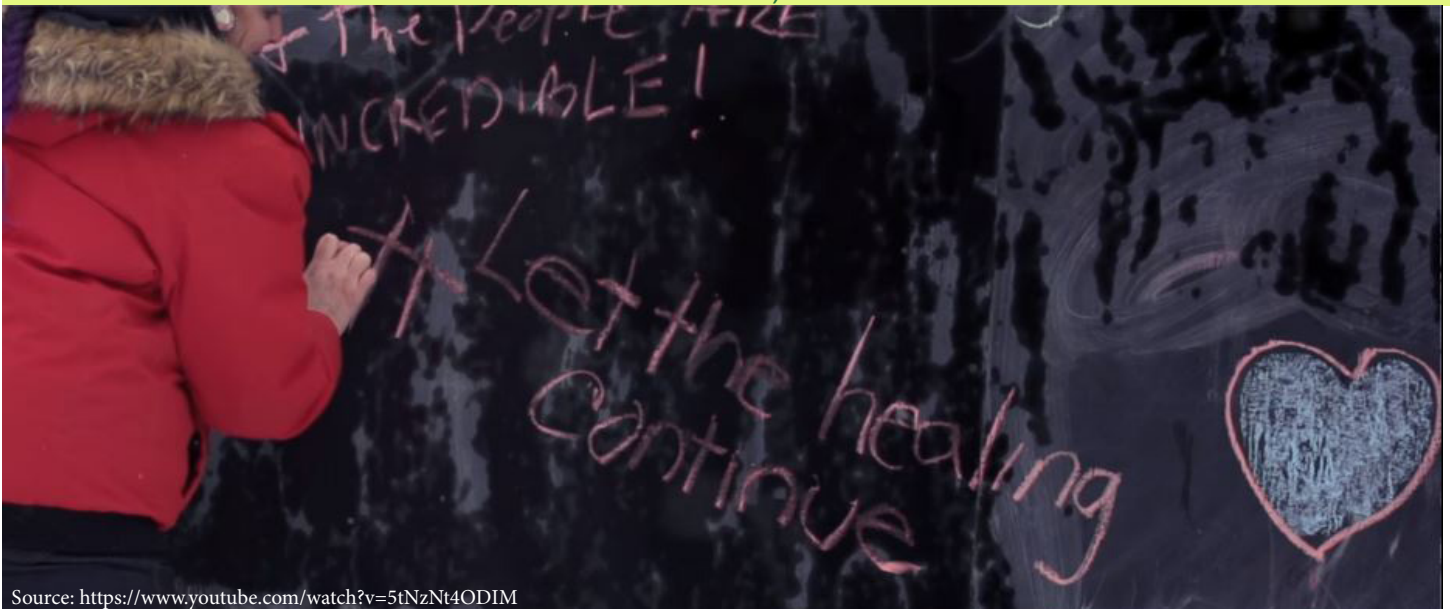
Image.11: An image of community members and stakeholders in front of the Merchants Hotel (before its demolition)

## References

- Aquash, M. (2011, May 10). Relationships with First Nations: Decolonization in Canadian Context, Available at <http://www.ideas-idees.ca/blog/relations-first-nations-decolonization-canadian-context>
- Friesen, J. (2015, July 5). Transforming a notorious Winnipeg neighborhood into a hub of education, The Globe and the Mail, Available at <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/transforming-a-notorious-winnipeg-neighbourhood-into-a-hub-for-education/article25588407/>
- McKinnaun, S.T., Silver, J. (2015). Tackling Poverty through holistic, interconnected, neighborhood based inter-generational leaning: The case of Winnipeg's Selkirk Avenue, Universitas Forum, Vol.4(2). Available at <http://www.universitasforum.org/index.php/ojs/article/view/185>
- Merchants Corner Inc. (2015). Merchant's Corner Update: Report Back to Stakeholders, Available at <http://www.themerch.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Merchants-Corner-Update-20142.pdf>
- NECRC. (2013). NECRC Update, Available at <http://necrc.org/files/Newsletter-Spring%202013%20Issue%2033.pdf>
- Silver, J. (2010 January 7). Winnipeg's North End: Yesterday and Today, Canadian Dimension, Vol. 44(1), Available at <https://canadiandimension.com/articles/view/winnipegs-north-end>
- Siver, j. (2014). From Bottles to Books: Remarking Merchant's Corner, CCPA, Available at <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/commentary/beer-bottles-books>
- University of Winnipeg. (2015). Renaissance of North End: Creating a North End Education Hub, Available at <http://www.uwinnipeg.ca/about/fast-facts/docs/merchants-corner-fast-facts.pdf>

## Acknowledgement

Special thanks to Noah Yauk, the Planner (Planning, Property and Development Department, City of Winnipeg) for providing valuable information on the project. Also, this project would not have been possible without the support and information shared by Robert Nufeld, (Executive Director, NECRC) and Martin Landy (Merchants Corner Project Liaison, NECRC). The online support offered by Hijab Mitra (Principal Architect at MISTECTURE Architecture & Interiors Inc) also have been valuable.



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5tNzNt4ODIM>

Image. 12: A close view of a black board hung outside the Merchants hotel