Internment "Homes" as Material Texts

The Architecture of Canada's New Denver Internment Camp

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Abstract

Canada's history of wartime civilian internment of the Japanese Canadian population approximates that of the US both in its colonial policies and its hostility to Asian immigration during the early twentieth century. In both these examples, exclusion and punishment was connected to the denial of 'home'. But the facilities produced to accommodate internees in each of these nations differed: purpose built barracks in rigid urban grids were used in the US and work camps and extant buildings were repurposed and individual houses built in Canada. This paper examines how the idealised model of the settler colonial home is stripped of its values of individualism and security and reproduced as a site of abjection and confinement. It follows the transformation of the home through internment interpreting the typology used to incarcerate, emplace and commemorate internment as a fragmented material text. The paper's focus is the Canadian internment, the camps at New Denver, British Columbia and the Nikkei Internment Memorial Centre, built on the site of a former internment camp.

Wartime emphasis on national security deepened racial prejudices against Japanese immigrant communities in North America and in early 1942, following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, prompted the largest civilian incarceration of the Pacific War. In the USA, some 118,110 civilians of Japanese ancestry were relocated and "incarcerated" under the Presidential Executive Order 9066. Less well known is Canada's "mass uprooting" of a smaller population of 21,460 Japanese Canadians following an order-in-council PC1486 issued by Prime Minister McKenzie King. This paper examines the architecture of Japanese Canadian spatial dislocation as revealing key differences in the internment practices of the two nations. It studies how denial of home spaces idealised in settler colonial societies was used for managing the perceived civilian threat. In advancing this argument, this paper details a specific case study of a camp in Canada.³

Both these mass expulsions displaced populations of Japanese ancestry from homes in the West Coast exclusion (no-entry) zones to remote penal encampments, which were in some (largely US) examples encircled with barbed wire fencing with guard towers, search lights and military police posts. Such defensive physical responses point to the carceral deployment of architectural elements for disciplining a population deemed threatening to state sovereignty. Internees were initially detained in Assembly Centers (horse stalls at fairgrounds or race tracks) before being moved to poorly insulated barracks and huts. Whereas in the USA barrack facilities were purpose built, in Canada extant and derelict structures were repurposed alongside new constructions – narrowing the distinction between settlement and incarceration.

This application of settler colonial military or civilian typologies is revelatory. The frontier home was a heroic construct, based on ideas of Aboriginal expulsion, colonial expansionism and land rights. The barrack home created for civilian incarceration was its antithesis — a denial of idealised settler freedoms and opportunities. The civilian internment in North America produced a carceral environment conceived without civic programs against this idealised measure of citizenship. The demolition and salvaging of camps and dispersal of internees after the war buried evidence of this history. This paper's reliance on a specific case study, where architecture has been retrieved for commemorative practices speaks to this exceptional set of conditions. It draws its findings from a Canadian example, at New Denver, in British Columbia's Kootenays region, where the continued residence of Japanese Canadians makes for a unique story. In doing so, this paper argues that simulations of settler homes reproduced for internment can be approached as material texts in a broader political narrative. The affective fragments we encounter in the commemorative landscape provide insights into the selective appropriation of the typology and its historical transformation.

North American Examples of Civilian Internment

Dispossession of Aboriginals had reduced their threat in North America so that by the twentieth century, competition with Asian immigrant and indentured labourer populations was the new focus of racist policies. Maintaining European cultural dominance, preventing miscegenation and protecting white monopolies over land, labour and enterprise shaped both exclusionary and assimilatory legislation. Wartime internment concretised strategies for maintaining a white majority against the threat of Japanese military imperialism.

In comparing internment across North America, both Greg Robinson and Roger Daniels highlight similar discriminatory policies in pre-war Canada and the USA. Legislation against Asian immigrants to the American continent during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century variously denied them naturalisation, suffrage, land ownership and access to professions, restricting their spatial mobility. Transcontinental migrations between Canada, the US and Hawaii were also restricted at times. These restrictions were fuelled by racist lobbies and were countered by second generation Nisei (US)/Nikkei (Canadian) organisations who sought to prove their patriotism to their host nations. In short, the environment that preceded the Japanese entry into the Second World War was fraught with racial tensions, generational divisions and conflicted loyalties. Japanese settlers in North America

were not natural advocates of Japanese fascism – theirs was a complex mix of collective values and individual choices. They typically engaged in agriculture, fishing and commerce and were concentrated in West Coast cities like Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, Victoria and Vancouver. Japan born immigrants (*issei*) could not be naturalised or own property in the USA, unlike their America born progeny (*nisei* – some sixty-two per cent of that population) while naturalisation remained open to immigrants to Canada. Such graduations of citizenship status made those who retained Japanese citizenship vulnerable once war broke out. Japan's attack on Hawaii and conflict with Allied troops in the Pacific placed the West Coast cities on a war footing. Japanese military atrocities in China and Southeast Asia coloured public opinion. Punitive segregation as a preventative and protective measure extended embedded social prejudices, removing the Japanese Canadian community from arenas of economic competition. Humiliated and impoverished, they were deployed as labour in farms and work camps. Military exigency and cultural hostility thus overwrote fundamental liberties.

Canada's Response to Civilian Internment

Although at a much smaller scale than in the US, civilian internment in Canada was equally harsh. Civilizational discourses that asserted European superiority over Asians and Aboriginals persisted even after legislative independence from Great Britain in 1931. Labour competition rather than blanket racial exclusion determined attitudes to Asians. Sixteen per cent of the total Japan-born population in Canada adopted British nationality. Ninety five percent of the population resided on the West Coast, some seventy-five percent naturalised or Canadian-born citizens. However, in the absence of a constitution or bill of rights, Japanese Canadians had no legal protection under Canadian law, and were not permitted to vote until 1949.

Whereas the USA had two separate agencies: the (military) Wartime Civilian Control Administration and the government's War Relocation Authority covering evacuation and relocation (respectively), Canada's "mass uprooting" under the British Columbia Security Commission (BCSC) was directed by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. 12 The Canadian government seized and sold internee land and property paying out small allowances from which internees paid for housing and provisions. The Japanese Canadian population (including those Japanese who had not been naturalised) were moved one hundred miles (approximately 160.9 kilometres) eastward from the protected coastal area. The mountainous terrain obviated the need for surrounding walls or fences in many of the camps. Ghost towns in the Kootenays region, depopulated since the closure of the silver-mining industry – an industry that had evicted and dispersed the region's Sinixt Nation during the nineteenth century were repurposed for internment camps at Slocan City, Greenwood, Sandon, Kaslo, New Denver and Rosebery. 13 New towns were built at Tashme and Lemon Creek (Slocan extension was a composite of Slocan City, Bay Farm, Popoff and Lemon Creek). 14 Apart from these housing centres, there were road work camps for males over eighteen years of age, sugar beet fields, and self-supporting projects in the interior. 15 Tashme was the only camp inside the hundred-mile zone modelled after the American grid plan. 16 Internee "trouble makers" were sent to the Prisoner of War camp at Angler, Ontario. 17

An important difference between the Canadian and US examples was the camps' physical character. US camps comprised standardised approx. 6 x 30.5 metre barracks of tarpaper and green lumber organised in rigid military lines in a rectangular urban grid. They lacked the orientation, spatial variation, individual character and hierarchies of scale that are integral to community planning. Each camp was designed to hold 10,000 persons at a scale larger than adjacent townships but without the associated civic amenities. Communal bathing and messing facilities and crudely partitioned interiors eroded the spatial cohesion of family units. Civic spaces and group amenities were contained in similar barrack structures with no distinguishing features. Many of the Canadian camps were not standardised in this manner, neither were they planned as total environments. They drew on extant settlement and work camp models. The accommodation inside the camps comprised individual or

shared units, typically tar paper covered shiplap timber cabins with separate hearths. ¹⁸ The diversity of civilian camp accommodations was evident at New Denver, which accommodated 1,505 internees in 1942. ¹⁹

The Internment Camps at New Denver

New Denver on Slocan Lake was the centre of operations for all of the camps in the Slocan Valley. Here, the Selkirks, the Purcells and the Eastern Monashee mountains acted as natural barriers and, apart from guard posts at points in the Slocan Valley, freedom of movement was permitted between camps. Cole Harris notes that there was hostility towards "cheap oriental labour" in nineteenth century Slocan, which meant that few Asians lived there; for example of the 350 Caucasians in the Village of New Denver many had never encountered a Japanese person. ²⁰ When asked to accommodate a population many times that number there were misgivings and opposition and gradual adaptation, echoed in the writings of his grandfather JC Harris, who leased his land and ranch house to the Security Commission for \$50 per month. ²¹

In total, there were five camps in New Denver's immediate vicinity with three associated with the village. The "Orchard" Camp was located on a parcel of land, south of Carpenter Creek, adjacent to the municipality's boundaries while other neighbouring camps included the sixty-acre Harris Ranch and two-acre Nelson Ranch found to the north and south of the town. Harris remarks that camps created beside well-established populations such as Harris Ranch, New Denver, Kaslo and Greenwood were different to camps without that proximity. This distinction is critical for understanding the camps as settler colonial spaces in which previously unwelcome Japanese Canadians were forcibly accommodated.

At the peak of the occupation fifty men and two cooks were accommodated in the Harris ranch house, wrote Cole Harris, with around 150-200 men, women and children in the houses on the Far Field (around 6 persons per house). In some communities like Sandon, Kaslo or Slocan, Japanese Canadian carpenters supervised by white foremen repaired unused buildings, but in other sites like New Denver, shacks for the families were constructed from scratch (Figure1). The Commission converted the covered skating rink to offer temporary accommodation (in addition to tents) and set up a carpenter shop for making prefabricated components.



Figure1. House Building, New Denver, B.C., 1942, Leonard Frank photos, Alex Eastwood Collection, Nikkei National Museum, 1994.69.4.21.

Harris wrote:

My grandfather considered the winter of 1942–43 "the hardest we have ever experienced in the Slocan," and thought conditions in the camp "awful for a time." As soon as fires were lit, the green hemlock planking that had been used on the walls (no other wood was available) shrank and sweated. The huts were wet and draughty, and with wartime scarcities there was no material to fix them. ²⁵



Figure 2. Model of New Denver, BC, Nikkei National Museum, 2010.1.1



Figure 3. Japanese evacuees find themselves in new settlement - Slocan area; New Denver, BC, c1942, Photograph by Leonard Frank for the British Columbia Security Commission, Nikkei National Museum,1994.69.4.16

The camp plan at the orchard was a loose domestic arrangement of 8.5 x 4 metre shiplap timber shacks, built by internees under boat builder Phillip Matsumoto. This plan was later reconfigured as a loose suburban grid (Figure 2). ²⁶ Shizuye Takeshima described their house as a "summer bungalow" of two rooms flanking a kitchen – shared by two families (four adults and three children) (Figure 3). ²⁷ The central hearth and chimney enabled family cohesion – unlike the communal messes in the US

camps. But consequently, families had to provision themselves and women were consumed by domestic labour.

A one hundred-bed Tuberculosis Sanatorium was built adjacent to the camp to receive patients sent there from Vancouver's Hastings Park (the former Pacific National Exhibition grounds), the first collection point in British Columbia for the Japanese Canadian evacuees. By January 1943 the Japanese Canadian population New Denver had risen to 1500 persons. As noted by Takeshima, a child's universe was made up of the camp population – there was limited social interaction between townspeople and internees. While they met the townspeople at the Bosun Hall in New Denver and in theatrical events, dances, sporting competitions, school productions and church activities, the locals did not frequent the internees' homes.²⁸

Takashima wrote of multiple appeals to the BCSC by her father and other internees for plumbing, lamps, a bath house, all of which would be given incrementally over the three-year period. They highlighted their needs during visits by Red Cross representatives. Wood sheds were added to keep the poorly insulated homes warm in sub zero temperatures. A communal bath house constructed in 1943 was converted into a community Kyowakai Hall with an *Otera* ((Buddhist temple/shrine) at one end.²⁹ In the spring and summer months, the spaces around the internment shacks would transform into vegetable plots and ornamental gardens.³⁰



Figure 4. Elevated Photo of New Denver, BC, Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre Archives, 2001.9.6.

Whereas their austere physical facilities were predetermined by the BCSC, the spaces around the internment shacks were transformed by internees.³¹ Takashima wrote of the men of the two families who shared their shack clearing, turning and hoeing the ground that first spring - creating flowerbeds in the front and vegetable plots at the back and planting a row of fir trees to separate their two gardens (Figure 4).³²

The gardens around the ranch house benefited from an elderly resident population with time on their hands. Cole Harris noted that when his grandmother, Mrs Harris, returned to visit her former home in July 1943, she wrote:

I have never seen it [the ranch house] look more beautiful than it does now. I went to see it yesterday and never in my best days did I have such a flower garden. I asked for some flowers to take to the cemetery and got an arm full. The rows and rows of vegetables certainly look splendid.³³

He continues:

The old men divided the banks of the creek into small plots, each no bigger than the area of a double bed, and turned them, one by one, into a mosaic of ornamental gardens. They scoured the shores of Slocan Lake for wave-worn rocks and twisted, weathered roots. They built small waterwheels that turned in the creek, and bridges, one of which was big enough to walk across. They cut patches of grass with scissors, and planted flowers...they were dazzling. ...When the old men left, their gardens were soon overgrown; their remainder to this day is a tough, spiky, feral grass. ³⁴

Gardens such as these, replicated across the Japanese incarceration environments have been theorised variously as signs of defiance or resilience. They are powerful means for emplacing and humanising carceral facilities, all the more potent in the Canadian case with its metaphor of uprooting. Gardening was a means to escape the monotony of confinement and homogeneity imposed by the architectural template. But these gardens were also ephemeral spaces dependent on human effort and ceased to exist with the closure of the camps. It was the sanatorium that would continue to treat invalid Japanese Canadians after the war, until 1960, which extended the camp's lifespan. Some Japanese Canadian families with invalid family members remained in the Orchard long after other camps in the valley had been dismantled and salvaged. The village also gathered other aged and invalid internees, unable to travel east of the mountains once restrictions were lifted in January 1946. The provincial administration awarded deeds to those residents who had occupied their homes for more than ten years. The provincial administration awarded deeds to those residents who had occupied their homes for more than ten years.

Despite this spatio-temporal fluidity, barriers to post war social reintegration were far greater in Canada than in the USA. The National Transitional Powers Act (which replaced the War Measures Act) in January 1946 ordered deportation of Japanese Canadians to prevent them from returning to coastal areas. By January 1947 the population had reduced to 6,776 persons; they were not allowed back to their places of origin until April 1949.³⁷ Many remained in their internment locales.

Commemorating Internment

The continued residence of ex-internees, the award to them of land tenure and the continuation of a community organisation begun in the camp – the Kyowakai (working together) Society, a benevolent organization founded in 1943 to assist internee liaisons with the BCSC – converted New Denver into a unique site for telling the internment story. The non-profit society, which was incorporated in 1977, and remains the only operational wartime Japanese Canadian internment organization to date, addressed and continues to serve the needs of the community, takes care of the elderly Japanese Canadians, promotes cultural and educational activities and develops related properties. During the early 1990s, the Society conceived of a Nikkei Internment Memorial Center (NIMC) for commemorating their history and encouraging awareness of their unjust internment. It was built on the orchard site.

By 1994 when the Center was first established, its path had been prepared by other processes and facilities. The redress movement, led by The National Association of Japanese Canadians was inspired by successes south of the border – of the Japanese American Citizens League and the US Congressional Commission hearings. A settlement was reached in September 1988. Japanese Canadian activists and Indigenous leaders had also come together to strategize their respective cases after the war. 40

Former internees now resident in the orchard area repurposed and renovated the original huts. The Kyowakai *Hall* continued to be used as a community facility until the Centennial Hall was built adjacent (in 1977) (Figure 5) to commemorate a century of Japanese immigration to Canada. The

Slocan Lake Garden Society's Kohan Japanese Internment Memorial Reflection Gardens were created in 1989 also on the former site. The NIMC, which opened in 1994 clustered three austere internment shacks brought from the West Kootenay region to a space defined by the original *Otera*. The facility consolidated the Kyowakai Society's hope of preventing future discrimination through forms of visitor education in which they had direct inputs.⁴¹



Figure 5. Nikkei Internment Memorial Centre, New Denver, with Centennial Hall in the foreground and the Kyowakai Hall behind it (photo, author, 2016)

The Japanese Canadian elders furnished the shacks with collections of artefacts and the interiors were modified on their advice. The community meeting spaces posed a particular challenge, wrote Kirsten Emiko McAllister, who studied this process. While members of the Kyowakai Society relinquished these central community spaces for visitor appropriation, they chose to partition the *Otera*, concealing it from view and retained the Centennial Hall for the community's use (Figure 6). McAllister describes how at every stage of its reinvention, the interpretation, representation and remaking of these spaces caused various anxieties around their uses and their meanings. 44



Figure 6. Nikkei Internment Memorial Centre, New Denver, showing *karesansui* garden and shacks (photo, author, 2016).

The buildings were tied together through a Heiwa Teien (peace garden) as a *karesansui* (dried-up water scenery) garden designed by the renowned landscape designer Roy (Tomomichi) Sumi, himself an internee at the Tashme, Rosebery, New Denver Camps and Blue River Road Camp (Figure 5). Sumi had worked with Mr Kannosuke Mori, a distinguished landscape architect on the Nitobe Memorial Garden at the University of British Columbia, where his main task was to use Canadian practices and materials to interpret and coordinate traditional Japanese garden design. This synthesis of local materials and traditional design elements were reflected at New Denver where the internment shacks, some of them with additions and alterations, appear like uncanny tea houses crowded with period objects. These abject artefacts, which have special value to the internees both during and after internment, are juxtaposed by the astounding beauty of the carefully choreographed aesthetics, a continuation of an internment tradition of, when possible, creating beautiful ornamental gardens outside their shacks. The Village of New Denver took over NIMC operations in 2010.

Emplacing Internment

As demonstrated in this paper, architecture speaks to this internment narrative in multiple ways. Planning of the internment sites and constructing and maintaining the buildings required architectural knowhow. Their demolition or repurposing after the war dispersed and diluted this knowledge. The success of subsequent commemorative efforts depended largely on material residue. The resultant memorial spaces sought forms of creative reinvention that selectively recuperated aspects of the past. Former ways of living were interpolated into the materiality of everyday lives during and after internment, as internees struggled to secure the hostile spaces to which they were removed. In these scenarios, the idealised settler home, abandoned and lost, provisionally recreated, claimed and emplaced and simulated and memorialised was their point of reference; a material text that resonated other secure ways of dwelling. Its metamorphosis echoed the processes of decolonisation that would transform Canadian societies in the post war decades.

The NIMC at New Denver is historically emplaced by three distinct features: the use of a portion of the actual camp site, the existence of the concealed *Otera* within the community hall and the invention of a landscape comprising huts and Japanese garden elements that invoke the place-making strategies of the former internees. These elements are reinforced through social emplacements such as the continuing involvement of the Kyowakai Society members resident in the neighbourhood. The memorial space resonates globally with other Japanese peace gardens that became a feature of post war diplomatic efforts, but is, in this example, a uniquely Japanese Canadian construct. The more important contribution is its provision of a civic space for education and reparation omitted in the design of the camps. The collaborative maintenance of this facility by the village council and the Kyowakai Society is a core reconciliatory practice. Its hybrid of civic and domestic spaces melds race, place, culture and ethical practice against future cycles of racial discrimination.

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Endnotes

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¹⁰Miki and Kobayashi, *Justice in Our Time*, 16-18.

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²⁵ Harris, *Mist and Green Leaves*, 14. Based on his grandfather's writings.

²⁶ The camp was reconfigured in approximately 1942/43 and again between 1957-1960 when title was deeded to occupants by the BCSC.
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- ²⁸ Dr. Henry Shimizu, *Images of Internment: Life in the New Denver Internment Camp, 1942-46* (Victoria, BC: Ti-Jean Press, 2008), 14, 20, 30, 32.
- Nikkei Internment Memorial Center, visitor pamphlet, Village of New Denver.
- ³⁰ Shimizu, *Images of Internment*, 16, 34.
- The term "shack" is consistently used to describe these buildings at the NIMC.
- ³² Takeshima, A Child in Prison Camp, 39-40.
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- ³⁶ Communication from Amanda Murphy.
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- 44 McAllister, Terrain of Memory, 205, 244.
- ⁴⁵ Emiko Sumi and Howard Shimokura, "Roy Tomomichi Sumi: Renowned Designer and Architect of Japanese Gardens", Nikkei Images 20, no. 3 (2015): 16-18 (Burnaby, BC: Nikkei National Museum and Cultural Centre).
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- ⁴⁷ As numbers in the Society dwindled, operations were handed over to the Village of New Denver, although the Society is consulted on interpretation of the histories at the site and other issues.