

Prairie Archiculture: Adaptive Reuse of Wooden Crib Grain Elevators in Saskatchewan

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ABSTRACT

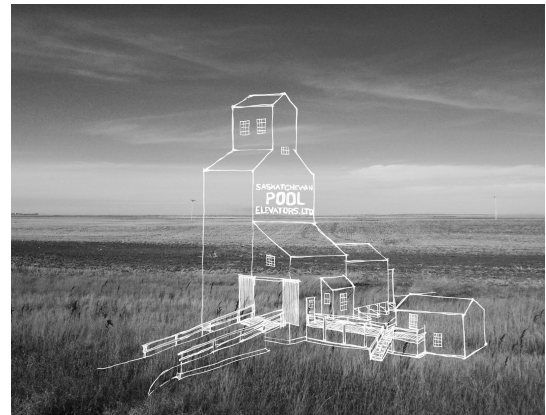
This paper studies the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of the wooden grain elevators in Saskatchewan. As wooden elevators become obsolete as a result of changing agricultural technology, they are facing neglect, abandonment, and demolition. While these elevators were once purely functional structures, their unintentional monumentality has contributed to their relationship with prairie people fostering individual and communal identity.

The wooden elevators are explored in the context of the past, present, and future using archival research, site visits, and interviews. The town of Indian Head, SK is a case study. The micro history of Indian Head permits an understanding of the relationship between elevators and other prairie towns. Further, Indian Head is the selected site for an architectural adaptive reuse project of a wooden grain elevator.

The concept of living heritage is employed to investigate the tangible and intangible cultural heritage associated with grain elevators using a temporal framework. Living heritage is both an action and theory—a way of thinking and acting towards the past. This sets the stage for a multifaceted discourse concerning place, time, and people relating to the wooden grain elevators in Saskatchewan.

Though the demolition of some wooden grain elevators is inevitable, it is crucial that the cultural value of these historic structures be

recognized through its living heritage and that adaptive reuses are considered in order to sustain their existence and usability of the elevators into the future. This thesis substantiates the importance of the wooden grain elevators to prairie people and prescribes an architectural response for adaptive reuse.



LIVING HERITAGE

Living heritage is a contemporary framework being used to explore concepts of heritage in Saskatchewan. This paper will illustrate the importance of anchoring living heritage as key to an architectural intervention for the adaptive reuse of wooden grain elevators.

For the purpose of this paper, the concept of Living Heritage is primarily explored based on the document entitled *Living Heritage and Quality of Life* (Massey). Massey recognizes living heritage as “constantly being negotiated from one generation to the next” (3). Further, she explains that “living heritage moves away from a focus on the preservation of the past to a focus on how the past is used in a contemporary context” (6). Living heritage is

significant with respect to grain elevators as it is both a methodology for an evaluation of the past as well as a catalyst for moving them into the future. The main themes identified in Massey's living heritage concept are change, memory, narrative, identity, and cultural value—which are deconstructed and linked to wooden grain elevators in the following section. Living heritage permits a multifaceted study of the architecture of the grain elevator.

The tangible and intangible characteristics of the elevator are interpreted based on perspective and experience in order to inform the architectural intervention and adaptive reuse. Living heritage bridges the gap between the cultural traditions from the past, cultural identity of the present and cultural aspirations for the future.

The elevator was more than just a tall building, important for the marketing of grain. There was an atmosphere, an intangible feeling attached to it, a feeling that it was a meaningful structure in which meaningful work was being done. Even when not selling grain, farmers tended to loiter at the elevator, sensing from its operation their role in the overall scheme of prairie life. It appealed on many levels and to almost all the senses: sight, sound, touch, and smell (Dommasch 10).

The structure of the grain elevator is evidence of the tangible cultural heritage: materiality, form, and position in the landscape contributed to the tangible character. With respect to the grain elevators, tangible heritage is instrumental in informing the intangible cultural heritage by people, actions, practices, and events associated with the grain elevator. The elevator structure validates the associated intangible ideas, creating a cultural heritage understood through physical and emotive/psychological means. "Grain elevators were, for Prairie people, more than merely a place to store grain. They were a symbol, too,

not just a way to make a living, but of an entire way of life" (Butala xiii). Both the tangible and intangible attributes of the elevators require evaluation. The goal of living heritage is to shift and adapt in order to not be frozen in time rather to be a part of the present and future. Living heritage is the translation of heritage value from past to future through *creation* rather than *protection*. The future of grain elevators is most valuable when framed in living heritage.



Image 1: Living heritage is the space *around* tangible and tangible cultural heritage.

CHANGE: Massey argues that the changing world effects heritage through its threat of loss (6). Rather than focusing solely on preservation or conservation, living heritage recognizes change as a constant and emphasizes an understanding of how the past is used in contemporary context (6-7). Massey distinguishes living heritage as the way in which change enables individuals "to place themselves within a continuum or as a point of departure" (7). Change permits the realization of passing time and creates an awareness of temporality in tangible and intangible aspects of life. Change in technology and economy over the past 100 years have lead to the disappearance of the grain elevators from the prairie landscape. With only a few hundred remaining in Saskatchewan, the threat of losing the wooden structures entirely has resulted in varied responses. It seems that, while most people have accepted the eventual demise of the wooden elevator,¹ some others

¹ Jim Mountain confirms this is the case in Saskatchewan along with other Heritage buildings and sites across Canada.

see an urgent need to freeze the elevators through photographs and heritage designation. It is the recognition of change and shared ambition and imagination from community that generates living heritage. It is inevitable that the remaining elevators will continue to change over time, however their cultural value compels a response that enables the elevators to transform with time and persevere—to change and adapt.

REMEMBERING AND MEMORY: Living heritage is activated through a realization of the past. Remembering

construct[s] identity for ourselves and our communities” while “re-remembering construct[s] new narratives that underscore mutual obligations, ... requires the creation and preservation of those places and experiences that inspire and provide spiritual sustenance, and recognize the importance of memory itself (Massey 6).

As a collective, the memories associated with the elevator begin to inform their adaptive reuse. Living heritage is then activated when memories are shared between individuals or within a community; collective memory embodies living heritage.² Memories associated with wooden elevators are fundamental in distinguishing their value and authenticity in the heritage of prairie people: the heritage of the individual; the heritage of prairie communities; the heritage of the province; and even Canadian heritage.

STORIES AND NARRATIVES: Memories can be shared through stories and narratives. Living heritage uses narratives shared between people to animate the present with the past. Experiences that are remembered

and exposed through narratives according to personal memory, subsequently allows for the development of a community’s heritage. Sharing stories about wooden grain elevators creates cultural value. The diverse perspectives generate many narratives. For numerous Canadians, the iconic form of the wooden grain elevator portrays the common story of agricultural heritage on the Canadian Prairies. While many Canadians may not have stories based on personal experiences, the wooden structures are elevated to a realm of public awareness.³ The stories about grain elevators also develop a unique Prairie identity.⁴

IDENTITY + BELONGING: Sharing stories leads to increased awareness of one’s identity and belonging. Massey explains how different experiences – re-lived in memory – form one’s sense of self (8). Living heritage encourages value in the past that cultivates identity. In referring to grain elevators and agricultural economy, Ross Keith—Regina-based developer and heritage activist— asserts, “it’s a part of what we are here” exposing a collective identity associated with belonging to the Prairies (Keith). Grain elevators were originally private structures installing tangible cultural heritage however their architecture in the public realm embraces collective identity of each prairie town presenting the intangible cultural heritage. Prairie people identify with the grain elevators: they “built them, ran them, relied on them, lived in them, and died in them” (McLachlan 6). They are examples of cultural infrastructure that anchor local identities.

³ Patricia Vervoort distinguishes the “Canadian grain elevator’ as part of Canadian History because of its extensive use” (Vervoort 188).

⁴ In personal interviews conducted for this thesis, many narratives about grain elevators were shared with me. See also *Gone But Not Forgotten: Tales of the Disappearing Grain Elevators* by Elizabeth McLachlan.

² According to UNESCO, the idea of (collective) memory predominantly appears within oral traditions and social practices.

CULTURAL VALUES: In heritage, instrumental values are the platform for which the significance of an act or object—tangible or intangible—is built and sustained. If something does not have instrumental value, it is not heritage. The instrumental values of grain elevators generate purpose and significance for the individual, the community, the province, and the nation of Canada in a variety of ways. The instrumental values of the wooden grain elevators have shifted over time from a primarily economic purpose to a place-marker, monument, and iconic form distinguishing them

as uniquely prairie structures.

The individual and collective sentiments that stem from instrumental value contribute to understanding that the importance of the grain elevators is fundamentally rooted in one's perspectives and relationships with the elevators on an emotional level. The table below demonstrates the relationship between instrumental value and associated sentiments between the past and present. The six perspectives illustrated are those re-occurring perspectives revealed through research in interviews, archival data, and published works.

Table 1: Mapping of Instrumental Values and Personal and Collective Sentiments of Wooden Grain Elevators				
Perspective	INSTRUMENTAL VALUES		(PERSONAL+COLLECTIVE) SENTIMENTS	
	Past	Present	Past	Present
Farmer	Economic Purpose		Sense of Financial Security	
	Gathering Place		Sense of Community	Sense of Loss - Abandonment
	Place Marker	Monumentality	Sense of Identity and Belonging	Sense of Sadness of a Bygone Era
Elevator Operator	Economic Purpose		Sense of Financial Security	
	Place of Employment	Place Marker	Sense of Familiarity and Identity	Sense of Familiarity and Pride
	Hazardous Environment		Sense of Fear	
	Industrialization	Useless Structure	Sense of Accomplishment/Progress	Sense of Annoyance at Dated Technology
	Gathering Place		Sense of Community	
Town's Person	Economic Purpose		Sense of Prosperity	
	Place Marker	Monumentality	Sense of Identity and Belonging	Sense of Belonging and Pride
		Commonplace		Indifference
	Gathering Place		Sense of Community	Sense of Loss - Abandonment
	Economic Purpose		Sense of Hope for Financial Security	
Aboriginal Peoples	Symbol of Colonialism		Sense of Oppression and Inequity	
		Monumentality		Sense of Sadness of a Bygone Era
Passer-by/Tourist		Iconic Form		Sense of Excitement
		Place Marker		Sense of Location and Distance
	Hazardous Environment	Hazardous Environment	Sense of Fear	Sense of Fear
Friends/Family of Individuals who Died in an Elevator	Grave Site	Grave Site	Sense of Grief	Sense of Grief

ARCHITECTURAL INTERVENTION

The concept of living heritage forms a foundation in which to situate the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of wooden grain elevators on a spectrum between permanence and adaptability. The adaptive reuse of any elevator should ultimately cultivate the identity of its respective community. The opportunity for adaptive reuse of wooden crib grain elevators will be tested using the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool elevator in Indian Head as a case study. Thus, in consultation with people from Indian Head, three key programs were identified for their elevator: community space(s), a tourist information center, and guest suites (short-term stay hotel or hostel).

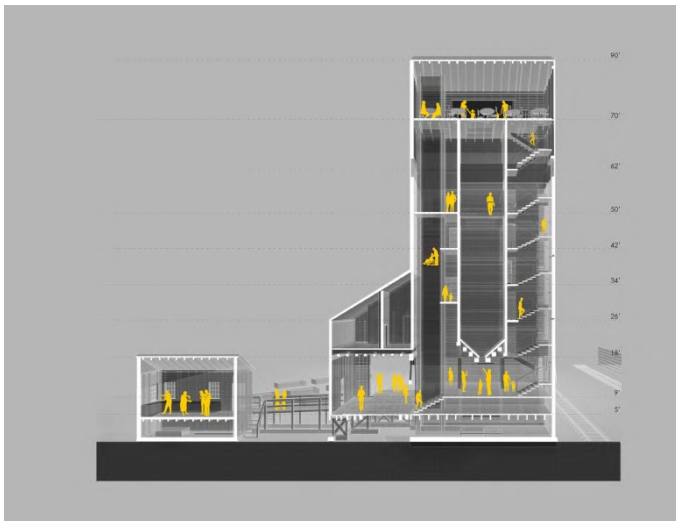


Image 2: Perspective section illustrating architectural interventions and associated activities (north-south)

The adaptive reuse also proposes a community garden, a community kitchen and interstitial spaces within the grain cribs creating an animated journey from the bottom to the top. Two guest suites have been located in the shoulder of the elevator, and a bakery/coffee shop located at the top. These programs will promote interaction between tourists and local residents, thereby stimulating living heritage. Specifically, these programs reveal the living heritage of the Indian Head elevator to be a

reflection of history, a gathering place for the community, a landmark for tourists, and a source of economic prosperity.

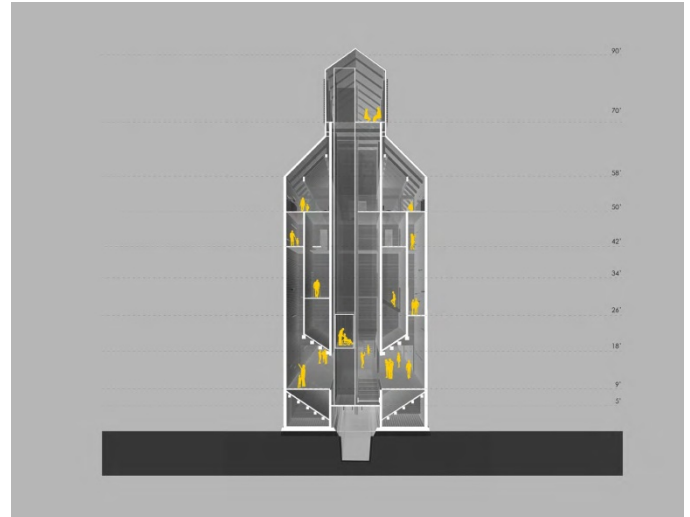


Image 3: Perspective section illustrating architectural interventions and associated activities (east-west)

An individual's experiences in different spaces of the grain elevator are vital in the evaluation of tangible and intangible cultural heritage for prescribing architectural interventions. The elevator's dramatic wooden atmosphere creates an unparalleled spatial character that will be able to be experienced by the community through the addition of floor plates and circulation in the bins. Only minor modifications to the exterior materiality and form will be made. The product will be an important public space for the town

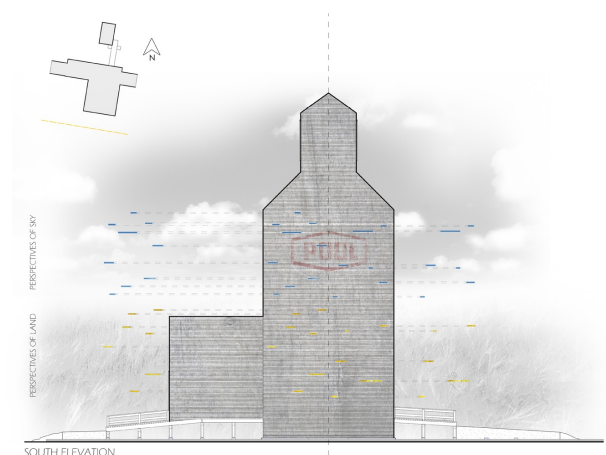


Image 4: Elevation with window opening diagram

establishing a reminder of the past.

The elevator's living heritage, through change, memory, narrative, identity, and cultural value, will continue to connect Prairie people to the land. Most importantly, the adapted architecture of the grain elevator will generate social interaction promoting co-operation and strengthening community.

URBAN ELEVATORS

There is potential for each town in the Saskatchewan to reuse their grain elevator on its existing site. However, if the community does not have the resources to transform their elevator *in situ*, it is possible to move it to a more suitable location. The structural integrity of a wooden grain elevator allows it to be moved from one site to another.⁵ Moving an elevator is not uncommon in the prairies. Selecting a wooden grain elevator from a rural town and moving it into urban Regina would sustain their presence in the Prairies for the years to come. Regina's last remaining elevator sat in downtown Regina (near the corner of Albert Street and Saskatchewan Drive) directly adjacent to the railway tracks before it was demolished in 1996. In the summer of 2014, the City of Regina purchased what is known as the 'CP Intermodal Lands' (across the tracks from the site mentioned above) from the Canadian Pacific Railway. The CPR predominantly used the site for storage of shipping containers and empty rail cars however now presents an ideal site for the urban elevators proposal.



Image 5: Proposed urban elevator site in downtown Regina

An urban site in Regina maximizes wooden elevator adaptive reuse potential. Consider an elevator row (four or more wooden elevators assembled side by side) that are repurposed as office space, banks, hostels or hotels, retail shops, restaurants or cafes, and housing. Multiple elevators on the site would respond to the larger-scale urban environment of the CP Intermodal site in downtown Regina. The project would foster prairie identity in collecting and assembling fragments of the province in its capital city. It would also have strong cultural, social and economic benefits as part of the Regina Revitalization Initiative. The urban elevator proposal juxtaposes reminiscence (thinking backward) and innovation (thinking forward). The wooden elevators would animate Regina's skyline embodying a living heritage of the collective past and future.

⁵ Jacks are placed under each corner of the elevator and it is slowly lifted from its footings. Once it is high enough, a large flat bed truck positions itself under the elevator and it is lowered on to the truck and secured. See the National Film Board of Canada documentary *Canadian Vingettes: The Move* that shows the process of moving a wooden crib grain elevator (Bauman).

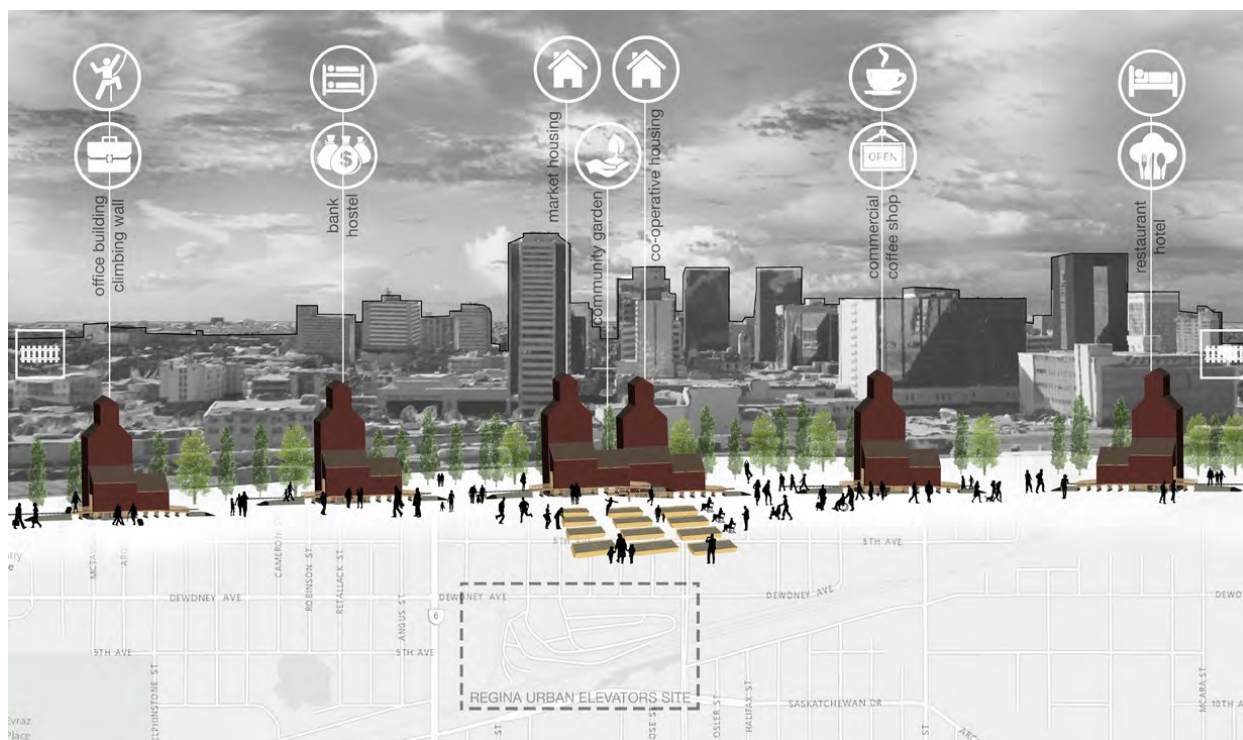


Image 6: Urban elevator row in downtown Regina comprised of a variety of programs in wooden grain elevators

There are opportunities for the adaptive reuse of wooden crib grain elevators in rural communities, such as Indian Head, as well as urban sites, such as downtown Regina. The concept of living heritage is embodied in both scenarios: these projects demonstrate that grain elevators are not just valuable to the rural communities in which they currently exist, but through time they have become integral to Prairie consciousness and valuable to the wider provincial community.

CONCLUSION

Living heritage allows values to be identified, negotiated and acted upon by individuals or a community in generating life for past in the future. It is a valuable tool for an attentive evaluation of the past as well as a catalyst for projecting the past into the future. While living heritage may not be a formal architectural concept, it does allow themes of change, memory, identity, narrative and value to be

explored in architecture.⁶ This exploration forms a deep-rooted understanding of the impact of each theme on any given architecture and allows them to be articulated and translated over time.

Through architectural interventions, such as adaptive reuse, it is possible to transform the grain elevators from a place for grain to a place for people. The case study in Indian Head demonstrates that wooden elevators can be adapted from grain-spaces into people-spaces. The people-spaces designed for Indian Head are simply one of many possible responses. Other programs can form new architectures for different grain elevators across the prairies.

To date, there have been no studies that focus on the future of the wooden crib grain elevators. Referred to as the most Canadian of

⁶ Architecture is not exclusively places or buildings; rather it encompasses human relationships that are part of the place or building.

architectural forms, the grain elevator is an iconic monument on the prairies and is worth saving. When situated on both urban and rural sites, adapted grain elevators have potential to shape vibrant communities based on their tangible and intangible cultural heritage rooted in their architecture.

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