

Winnipeg Free Press

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Topped statues should return

THE statues of British royalty that were toppled in Winnipeg remain hidden. They shouldn't be. They should be brought back into the limelight, still in their damaged state, as symbols of an important public uprising in this city's history.

In the same way the sculpture of a tilted streetcar across from city hall marks an important moment in the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike, the statues overturned on Canada Day, 2021, vividly represent a turning point in this province's understanding of colonialism.

Provincial officials have said the statue of Queen Victoria won't be restored; that much we know. It was dethroned from its plinth on the legislative grounds when protesters hauled it to the ground, covered it with red paint and threw its head into the Assiniboine River. A smaller statue of Queen Elizabeth II was pushed over, landing face down.

Fifteen months later, officials still won't disclose the location of the damaged statues. Perhaps they're keeping mum because they fear protesters with violent intentions might seek to enter the storage site to continue smashing the figures which, to them, represent colonialism.

Or, more likely, officials won't reveal the whereabouts because they're not sure what to do with the controversial statues.

Someone who has a good idea of what to do is internationally recognized museum planner Gail Lord. She published an opinion column in the *Globe and Mail* on Aug. 20 that notes governments worldwide don't know how to proceed with statues of disgraced historical figures.

She notes the University of Ghana removed a statue of Indian independence leader Mahatma Gandhi after claims he was racist. In Mexico City, a statue of Christopher Columbus was replaced by a figure of an Indigenous woman. New Orleans removed four Confederate monuments that have now been in storage for more than a year.

Lord offers an innovative solution: she proposes a new type of public institution that is filled with fallen statues and dishonoured monuments, to further education about our changing understanding of the past. It could be the size of a warehouse, and Lord coined the apt phrase "aware-house."

Her idea seems a timely way forward for this city, and, to expand on her proposal, Winnipeg's "aware-house" could contain much more than two ruined statues. It could also include other symbols of the current social-justice fervour, such as exhibits related to Winnipeg streets, schools and parks that have been renamed.

An initial list of potential exhibits could come from Welcoming Winnipeg: Reconciling our History. This community committee, an initiative of the City of Winnipeg, considers requests to change the names of places and streets, and their recommendations go to city council.

It was this group that did the work to have council change the name of Pan Am Pool Park to Rooster Town Park last month, named for the Rooster Town community of Métis families pushed from their Red River homes in the 1880s.

This committee was behind the renaming of Wellington Park. It had been named after Arthur Wellington Ross — yes, Wellington Crescent was also named for him — a 1880s land speculator who acquired Métis script in a manner now judged unscrupulous. It is now named Theodore Niizhota Fontaine Park after an Indigenous leader who promoted reconciliation.

Winnipeg's "aware-house" could also chronicle the enlightened reconsiderations of local school divisions. Ryerson Elementary School, named after an architect of residential schools, was renamed Prairie Sunrise Schools last year. Cecil Rhodes School, named after a South African proponent of apartheid, was changed last week to Keewatin Prairie Community School. Each exhibit could be composed of whatever artistic expression is most appropriate, such as showing old and new street signs side-by-side, photographs of renamed parks and schools, and written commentary explaining the reasons for the changes.

Gathered in one place, these exhibits would show the commendable extent to which Winnipeg is rethinking its history in a time span that seems rapid by historical standards.

The central exhibit of the "aware-house" should be the statues of Queen Victoria and Queen Elizabeth II. It's time to free the damaged pieces from their clandestine confinement. Winnipeg doesn't need to hide its rejection of the ugly aspects of colonialism.

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