



Fast

FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES – MANITOBA

there is an alternative.

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Thunderbird House has potential to unite

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When award winning author Joseph Boyden announced he would donate half of his One Summit speaker fee to Circle of Life Thunderbird House to fix its leaky roof, he likely didn't fully appreciate the meaning of this generous gesture.

Circle of Life Thunderbird House is arguably the most appropriate space for Winnipeggers to engage in dialogue towards bridging the racial divide in our city. The leaky roof is just one of many issues facing the centre, which has long struggled to survive. One issue has been insufficient financial support from the City of Winnipeg. Nonetheless, by redirecting his speaking fee Boyden has unknowingly provided an opportunity for Winnipeggers to get to know Thunderbird House.

In spite of its struggles, Thunderbird House has long been a centre of Indigenous pride as well as a place of healing, cultural reclamation and reconciliation. Its location is also notable; situated a stone's throw away from two very well-funded institutions, the controversial Youth for Christ centre, and the Canadian Museum for Human Rights.

Many community organizations and other groups rent space at Thunderbird House for events that bring indigenous and non-indigenous people together in the heart of the inner city. But it isn't used nearly enough and simply doesn't generate the revenue it needs to be sustainable.

Thunderbird House has the potential to be a centre for anti-racist education in

Winnipeg. Indigenous youth have become increasingly involved in Thunderbird House, seeking ways to make it sustainable. Aboriginal Youth Opportunities (AYO) and others who engaged in the Local Racial Inclusion Summit— held parallel to the One Summit— see it as critical to Winnipeg's future. They know that there are no quick fixes to racism—systemic racism runs deep—but they also know that youth will play an important role in bridging the divide in Winnipeg's future and they want Thunderbird House to be part of the solution.

One way to use Thunderbird House as a place of reconciliation was demonstrated in 2012 when some 30 high school students participated in an action research project we called "Fixing our Divided City." Funded by the Manitoba Research Alliance and a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, it was a pilot project aimed at engaging indigenous and non-indigenous youth as well as indigenous elders in dialogue. We thought that Thunderbird House might be a safe place for difficult discussions about social justice issues.

The basic idea was simple. Fixing our divided city required non-indigenous people to venture beyond their comfort zones, by having conversations with indigenous people in indigenous spaces.

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was the perfect location. This beautiful, sacred space designed by internationally renowned indigenous architect Douglas Cardinal is an ideal venue. It is full of light. The evocative smell of sage envelops visitors in a sense of peace and timelessness. Thunderbird House invites reflection and respect.

Thanks to the willingness of a small group of innovative and open-minded teachers and youth mentors, we began our project with a series of workshops including youth from the North End CEDA Pathways to Education program, and students from the more suburban Collège Beliveau and Grant Park High School. Students shared with us their views about poverty and racism. They talked about their hopes for a more inclusive city. They viewed a film introducing them to local elders, whom they would later meet. The elders talked about their experiences growing up and the lessons they wished to share with young people.

We then brought the 30 youth, their teachers and mentors together at Thunderbird House with the elders they had met through video. It was an inspiring day of learning and sharing on a sunny, fall Saturday afternoon.

The elders shared teachings with the youth, who were then invited to participate in a traditional sharing-circle. There were laughter and tears, hugs and smiles as youth shared their thoughts and feelings about social issues as they perceived them. They listened intently to the elders' stories and some youth chose to reflect on the experience on film.

One elder later described the event as "very much-needed for us to learn about each other... I can't believe we didn't think to do this before." One non-aboriginal youth said the day was important because "if we don't share our stories, we won't be able to learn from others' mistakes or our own mistakes."

Another youth summed up the day as "an amazing experience."

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At the end of the day an elder who was clearly moved by the experience, said: "The youth have a voice and they are using it positively... they are being very proactive in their approach against racism." Another elder said, "I go home hopeful."

But like the One Summit, it was a one-off event. Some effort was made to interest school divisions and others to pick up where the project left off by supporting regular education programming at Thunderbird House. Initially there seemed to be some interest but nothing happened.

The One Summit and Local Racial Inclusion Summit provide us with a new opportunity to find local solutions. This brings us full circle to Thunderbird House. Thunderbird House is more than an interesting building on the corner of Higgins and Main. It is an important symbol of the indigenous space that we occupy. Boyden's donation reminds us that this beautiful building sits waiting to be the space it was intended to be: a place of hope, healing and reconciliation. The City should provide the financial support needed to make that happen.

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The Our Divided City project is described in the State of the Inner City Report 2012 "Fixing Our Divided City":

https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/Manitoba%20Office/2013/12/State_of_Inner_City2012.pdf

View the Breaking Barriers Building Bridges video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NIMrk8sE5tA>

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