



"Coqualeetza Grounds Tours and Stó:Lō Territory Road Tours." *Stó:Lō Tourism*, [www.stolotourism.com/about](http://www.stolotourism.com/about).

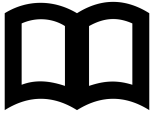
# **Cultural Diversity in Abbotsford Through Public Art**

Policy Brief - Special Topics in Sustainable Development SD499  
Pandemics and Cities: Planning for More Resilient and Sustainable Communities



Simon Fraser University, Fall 2020

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## Executive Summary

The City of Abbotsford is on the unceded traditional territory of the Kwantlen, Stó:lō, Nuxwsa'7aq, and Stz'uminus First Nations. In the 2016 census, Indigenous peoples represented about 5% of the city's population. As Canada moves towards decolonization and reconciliation in the midst of a pandemic, public art policies have a role to play in community resilience. Providing safe, open-air art can contribute to improved mental health and sense of community. And if this art is explicitly Indigenous, the built environment of Abbotsford's laneways and curbsides will better reflect the traditional history of the land.

We propose the creation of a policy which will facilitate the installation of Indigenous art in Abbotsford public spaces such as sidewalks, streets, or laneways over several years. Inclusive art for Abbotsford residents should acknowledge local First Nations cultures and art. This would provide a platform for education and meaningful discussions about Indigenous culture. As the city rethinks space as an act of healing from the pandemic, there is also potential to rethink space to be more inclusive and equitably representative. There are examples of urban policies across the country which prioritize Indigenous representation in public art, and we encourage the City of Abbotsford to adopt a version of this initiative. Cultural diversity, inclusion, and most importantly action is an important step towards reconciliation.

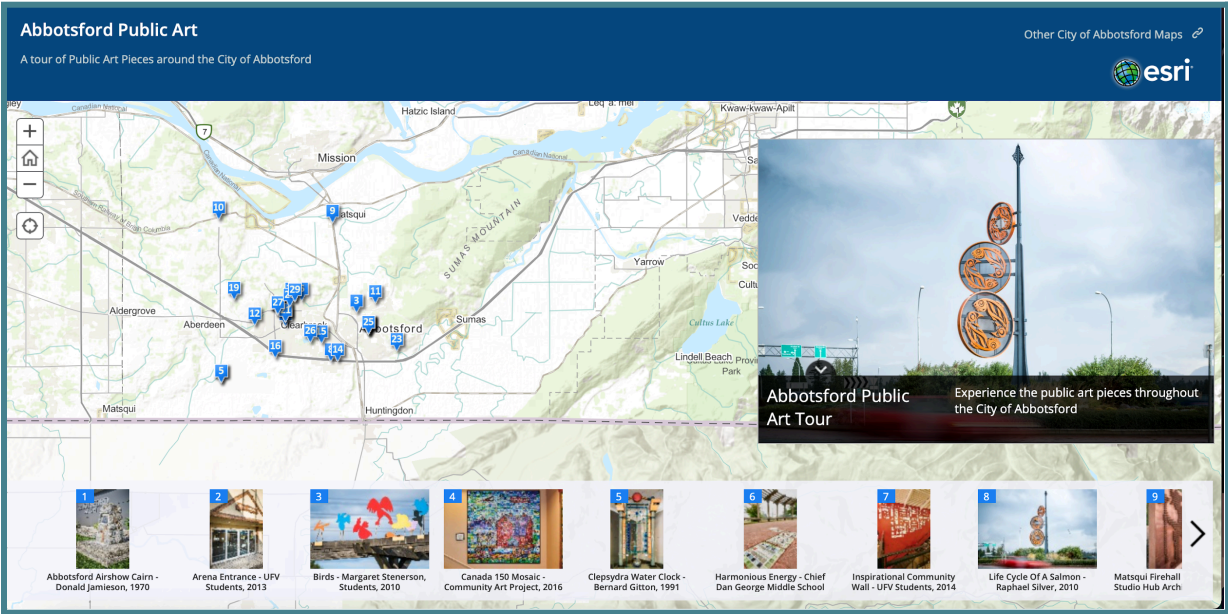


## Indigeneity in Abbotsford

In recent decades, cities across Canada have begun a process of acknowledgement and reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. This is a complex and multi-faceted social, political, spiritual, and economic endeavour. Centuries of cultural genocide inflicted through the residential

school system, foster care system, Indian Act, and other harmful structures has eroded Indigenous cultures in what is now Canada. The Canadian government's attempts to solve "the Indian problem" by assimilating them into mainstream culture has not succeeded, and we are moving towards a more accepting and collaborative era of Indigenous relations. As many First Nations try to exist in a healthy, communal, and meaningful way on these unceded Coast Salish territories today, cities like Abbotsford have a responsibility to make amends with action. There is room for public policy which addresses this issue, with the added context of COVID-19.

According to Abbotsford's current public art webmap, there is an obvious lack of Indigenous representation (City of Abbotsford Story Map). Out of 29 listed pieces, "Life Cycle of a Salmon" is the only explicit example of Indigenous public art in the city. This sculpture represents the life cycle of a salmon and was constructed a decade ago by Raphael Silver of Sumas First Nation (Castro, 2017). The metadata provided on this piece is not extensive and doesn't clearly reflect the value of Indigenous placemaking in Abbotsford.



"Abbotsford Public Art: Story Map Tour." [Abbotsford.maps.arcgis.com](http://Abbotsford.maps.arcgis.com), [abbotsford.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapTour/index.html?appid=ee7c78d08fc34e67b5a6c2bf094abcb0](http://abbotsford.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapTour/index.html?appid=ee7c78d08fc34e67b5a6c2bf094abcb0).



## Accessible Space

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 global pandemic, cities and everyday life has changed. Health authorities of Canada and British Columbia have encouraged people to reduce time in public areas and socializing in person. Coupled with economic hardship and high uncertainty, this does not come without a cost on our mental wellbeing. A survey conducted in April 2020 revealed that fewer Canadians believe they have excellent or very good mental health, particularly women and youth (Findlay, Arim, 2020). Mental health is a “necessary resource for living a healthy life and a main factor in overall health” (Government of Canada, 2020), allowing people to build resilience and positive relationships with their community. This drop in self-perceived mental health needs to be addressed with support from local institutions and within health guidelines.

Health psychologists have been researching how art may be used in mental health practices. There is evidence that observing art or engaging in artistic activities can enhance mood and emotions and alter patterns of understanding (Stuckey, Nobel, 2010, p. 254). On the individual level, engaging in art allows people to cope with psychological stress. On the community level, it can build feelings of belonging and combat loneliness and isolation (Eising, 2019). In this policy brief, we will examine public art specifically. Public art presents an opportunity to make the benefit of art accessible to members of the community. It also presents an opportunity to integrate Indigenous stories into the public space. As discussed above, the visuals of the city are not representative of the land it is built upon or its Indigenous peoples.

Public art can be defined as art concerning or affecting the community or the people (public interest), maintained for or used by the community (public place), in a place accessible or visible to the public (in public), or paid for by

the public (publicly funded) (Cartiere, 2012, p. 10). In the context of a pandemic, observing and creating art in open-air public spaces can be done within health guidelines. It is now known that transmission of the virus is less likely in open-air areas, compared to indoor spaces (Mikehall, 2020).



## Global Perspectives

Lorraine Gibson describes how urban Indigenous people in New South Wales, Australia are sometimes disconnected from their culture. Living in a city which does not reflect their cultural materials, people, and worldviews can feel isolating and unwelcoming. In this example, local Indigenous peoples are able to exclusively access previously gifted or stolen material inside a city museum. This initiative shows how “places are remade and reclaimed” in a way that challenges past racist narratives (Gibson, 2012, p. 213). Indigenous children who were able to access the museum storage felt a new sense of pride and belonging that translates to their lives outside the walls of the museum (p. 214). Also, a local artist was able to add his prints to the board room of the museum, which is inherently a very colonial institution. This was a way of claiming colonization in a physical, emotional, and political way, and connects multiple geographies. This case provides valuable insights for the urban Indigenous peoples in the Fraser Valley. Cultural expressions such as art can be a powerful act of reclaiming land and identity.

## Policy Summary

Our policy brief advocates for more Indigenous public art to address the colonial history of Abbotsford and the mental health issue due to the global pandemic. Lack of Indigenous representation and mental health support are two inequalities that can negatively affect the Abbotsford community or hold the community back from realizing its potential. Moving towards a

post-COVID-19 landscape, we believe cities must think critically about the role of policy in addressing key social issues.

Public art can be an expressive introduction for introducing Indigenous representation within the City of Abbotsford. By helping reinstate visibility to Abbotsford Indigenous communities, producing a sense of place and creating dialogue on reconciliation. The current 2020 Diversity and Inclusion Strategy by the City of Abbotsford fails to mention reconciliation efforts that will be included within this strategy or how Indigenous representation can be added within city decisions. In the 2018 Parks, Recreation & Culture Master Plan, the city acknowledges the opportunity to collaborate and support Indigenous representation.

**“The Stó:lō Nations were the first peoples in the area, and their history and culture are critical parts of Abbotsford’s history. There is a need to work with local Indigenous communities to identify opportunities for collaboration and ways the City can support the promotion of Stó:lō culture and heritage.”**

Abbotsford Parks, Recreation & Culture  
Master Plan 2018

## **Policy Alternatives**

### *Chilliwack Murals*

Not far from Abbotsford, an independent Indigenous artist has recently created murals at elementary schools in Chilliwack. Carrielynn Victor is a Sto:lo

artist who incorporates Coast Salish design elements using three dimensional geometric patterns. She also leans a lot on colour, drawing her palettes from the surrounding environments of each mural she creates. She understands the connection between her work and the place where it stands, which has included other cities in the Lower Mainland. Although the schools she works with have full control over the theme of the mural, Victor has a lot of influence on the final result. The murals are prepared on boards so that after its contracted time limit is reached, the piece can be removed from the school properly. The murals have been done at three Chilliwack schools so far and have had a positive impact on their communities. These pieces represent important Indigenous placemaking, as they are a way of remembering the traditional stories which have always been associated with the land. This is a sentiment that Victor's grandmother shared. Most importantly, "people instantly feel something good when they see her art which ignites a positive discussion together" (Hauck, 2020, p. 23). Contracting more Indigenous public art in Abbotsford could have similar positive effects on the urban core during COVID-19, when it is direly needed.



"Carrielynn Victor also painted this thunderbird outside Cheam elementary. Photo taken on Saturday, July 18, 2020. (Jenna Hauck/ Chilliwack Progress)" (Hauck, 2020).

## *Toronto Public Art*

In order to recognize the significance public art plays within the community, the City of Toronto has committed to embedding truth and reconciliation as foundation principles in their new strategy when implementing public art. We see this in several different methods and practices. Firstly, the city has a responsibility to acknowledge Indigenous history, present, and future of the land conjoined with Toronto's public art project policies. Likewise, Indigenous projects must continue to be identified by self-determination and decolonization efforts. This means that Indigenous communities and creators need to be at the center of the decision making process for any Indigenous focused initiative created by the City of Toronto. Lastly, any public art juries and advisory committees are required to have appropriate representation of Indigenous peoples. We see this through Indigenous selection panels choosing Indigenous art projects while juries and committees for non-Indigenous projects should continue to include Indigenous representation as much as possible.

*Public art sharing Indigenous stories*  
**"With continued action, public art can build on the community, cultural and educational impact of these and other projects, and create opportunities for meaningful collaboration between the City and Indigenous creators and communities, as equal partners."**

City of Toronto Public Art Report.



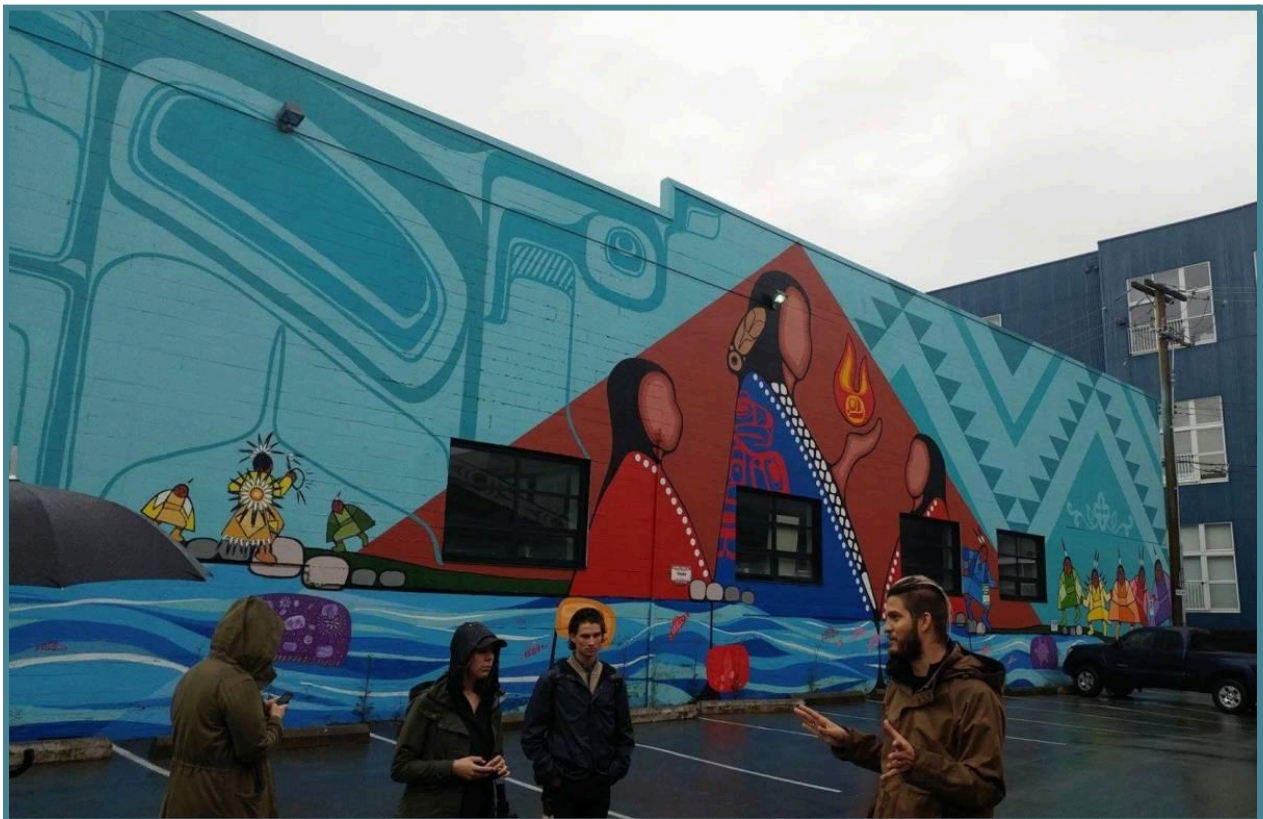
“Violetta Parra Mural at Dundas and Brock” photo by Salena Barry (Urban Toronto, 2017)

## Policy Recommendations

### *Program Logistics and Purpose*

- We propose a culturally diverse art program with an Indigenous focus to be implemented in Abbotsford
  - Multi-year art program involving the installation of open-air public art on curbsides and laneways
  - Facilitation of Indigenous placemaking through public art as an important and positive initiative for the whole community
- Indigenous artists from local First Nations would be contracted to work independently or collaboratively with community groups, schools, city departments, or businesses

- The budget would consider
  - Several projects to be installed over time
  - Materials and fair compensating for the artists' time
  - Permanence: Maintenance and security of the pieces so they can remain
- Funding for this program could be drawn from the Public Art Reserve Fund Bylaw: Established in 2011 in Abbotsford's Public Art Policy, allowing private cash donations from the private sector (Abbotsford Plan for 200K, p. 178)



“Vancouver Mural Festival director David Vertesi stops outside last year's mural on Native Education Centre. work on this piece was done by artists Corey Bulpitt, Sharifah Marsden, Jerry Whitehead as well as students and community members from the Centre” photo by Holly McKenzie-Sutter (The Georgia Strait, 2017)

- The pieces may be interactive, functional (such as seating or a covered bus stop) or simply aesthetic and educational to facilitate placemaking

- Each piece should have clear educational material published online and installed next to the piece itself
  - An informational plaque, for example, that is also aesthetically pleasing
  - The process of how these are written should be outlined in the policy, including the perspective of the artist (even their own words) as well as sentiments which reflect the colonial history of the city may be appropriate to add
- Consulting the artists and their communities is key to this process
- A staff working group that includes external stakeholders should be created

### *Benefits to the Community*

Abbotsford's current public art policies lack an emphasis on Indigenous representation within the built environment, and this program aims to be a collaborative solution.

- Having a sustained presence of Indigenous art in Abbotsford would create a long-lasting narrative of cultural inclusion on the landscape for current residents, newcomers, and visitors
- If the art in Abbotsford's public spaces reflect Indigenous expression, emotion, skill, and sense of belonging, public attitudes may improve. The legacy of Indigenous discrimination is very real and far-reaching into the present day.
- Settlers across the Lower Mainland have a part to play in accepting Indigenous presence and worldviews - only once this is achieved in a meaningful way is reconciliation possible

## Recommended Resources

“Abbotsford Public Art: Story Map Tour.” *Abbotsford.maps.arcgis.com*, [abbotsford.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapTour/index.html?appid=ee7c78d08fc34e67b5a6c2bf094abcb0](http://abbotsford.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapTour/index.html?appid=ee7c78d08fc34e67b5a6c2bf094abcb0).

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