

The Expansion Dilemma

Museums across Canada are growing, and confronting the difficult choice between expanding on site and building new quarters off site. What can we learn from projects in the space-crunched Netherlands?

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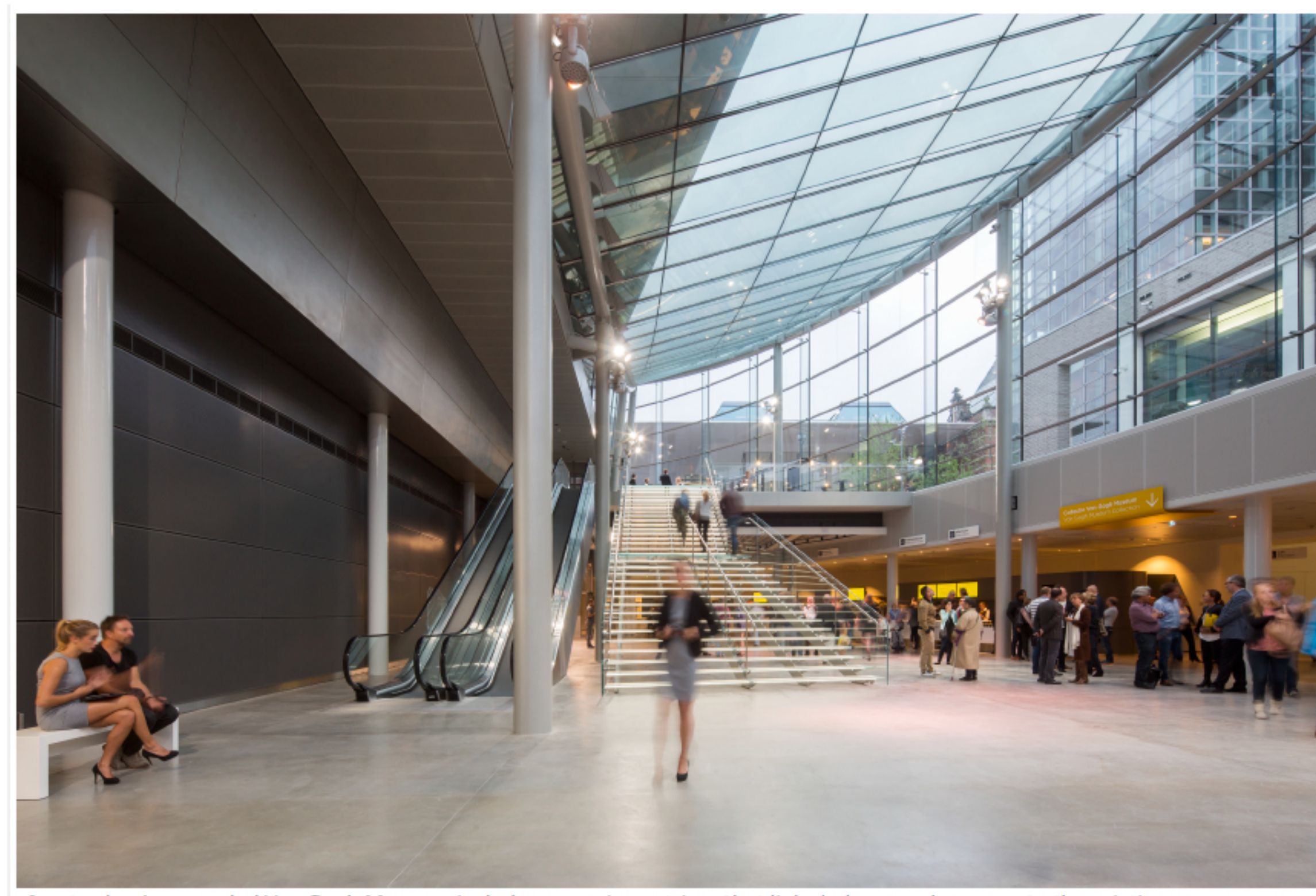
If the past is a foreign country, Canadian museum boards might do well to look both to the past and to foreign countries. I recently toured the work of Dutch architect Hans van Heeswijk, who is riding a wave of acclaim for museum expansions across the Netherlands, garnering the kind of attention that in North America is more typically reserved for new builds. Continental Europe has long been obliged to work this way, filling in rather than flailing out, as its buildable land pretty much ran out somewhere around the last colony-shucking.



The pavilion-like expansion of Amsterdam's Van Gogh Museum faces the city's Museum Plaza.

Is there something to be gleaned from the Dutch experience? As Canadian cities reach a critical density and our museums outgrow their 1970s homes, museum boards and architects from coast to coast are facing tough choices between expanding on site or creating larger quarters farther afield.

Van Heeswijk's latest oeuvre is the expansion of the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, which he took over from Kisho Kurokawa after the Japanese architect's death in 2007. Added on to a fairly mundane 1973 building (itself a posthumous completion of a Gerrit Rietveld design), the new double-height glazed entrance wing resolves the popular museum's longstanding issue of endless lineups and bottlenecks. Beyond the pragmatics, the new foyer offers what Amsterdam critic Jaap Huisman calls "a rite of passage for visitors to shake off the impressions of the street and prepare themselves spiritually for the art that awaits them."

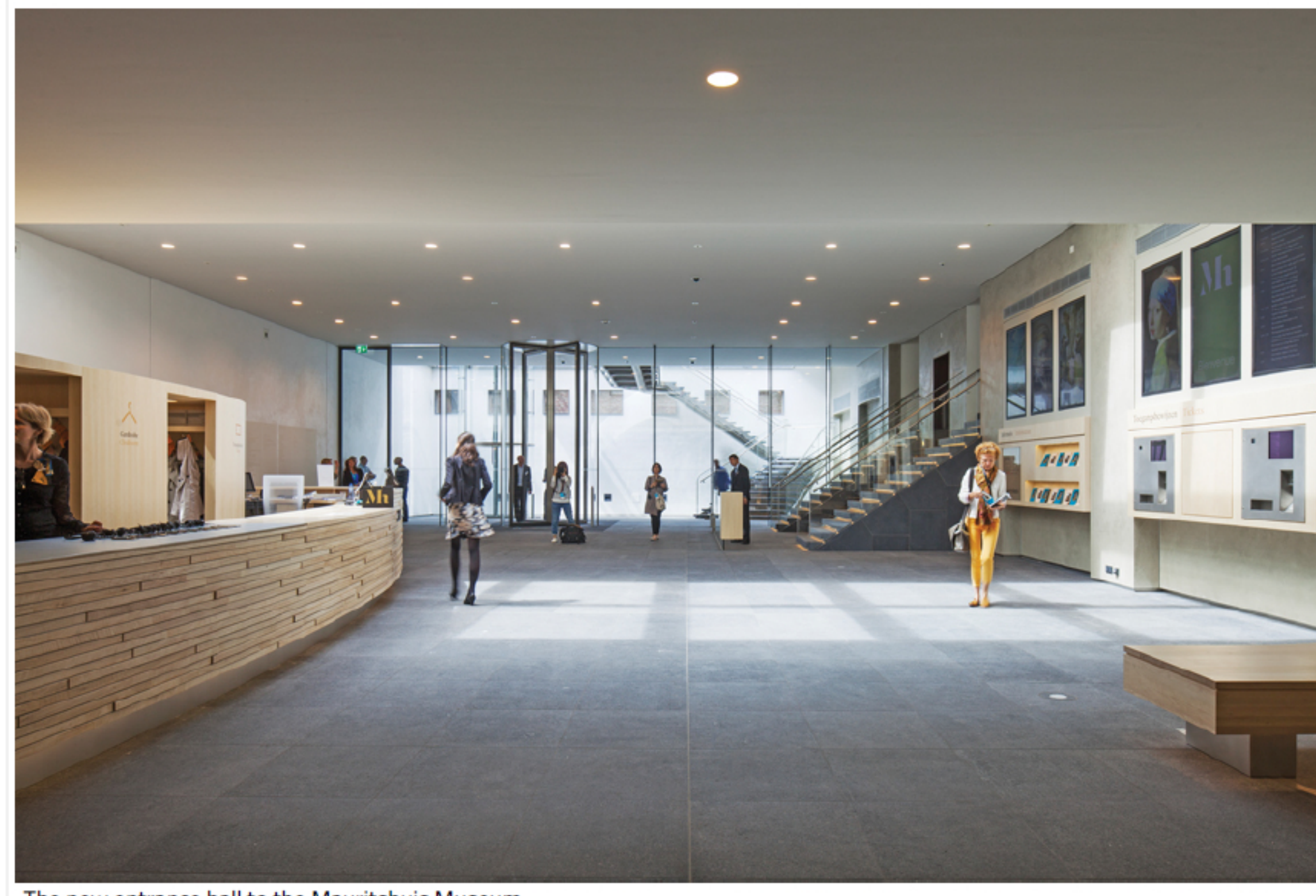


Amsterdam's expanded Van Gogh Museum includes a spacious atrium that links below-grade spaces to the existing museum.

Given the institution's severely constricted location on Museum Square in the centre of historic Amsterdam, it might have seemed impossible to expand the original building, let alone bring it up to the current standards of global tourism. The Kurokawa/van Heeswijk scheme heads to the largest untapped site in modern cities: underground. It adds generous overhead fenestration to flood the new spaces with light. The subgrade extension serves not only as reception foyer but also as tunnel from the existing permanent exhibition spaces to a newly added temporary exhibition hall.



The Mauritshuis Museum expansion in The Hague also includes a below-grade atrium.



The new entrance hall to the Mauritshuis Museum.

The Van Gogh Museum is the latest in a string of van Heeswijk projects that exhibit ingenious modes of maximizing space in confined quarters. Last year, he completed an underground expansion of the Netherlands' Mauritshuis Museum in the historic district of The Hague, and in 2009 a deft renewal of a 17th-century city-owned retirement home into the Hermitage Amsterdam museum.



A section shows the connection between the existing museum and an addition occupying the building across the street.

The ingenuity of these additions offered fresh perspective on the wealth of possibilities in Canada's current wave of museum expansions. Smaller cities like Victoria and Fredericton are finding that transforming existing buildings can yield more than the sum of the old and new parts. Meanwhile, in Saskatoon, where I grew up, and in my adopted hometown of Vancouver, major museums are taking up new sites—when on-site expansions could have been viable—and, perhaps, preferable.