

Case Study:
The Nisga'a Museum



The Nisga'a Museum: an ODYSSEY FULFILLED

The Nisga'a Museum in British Columbia, Canada, is a celebration of the culture and history of the Nisga'a Nation. The design of the building was a true collaboration, and the architect, exhibit designer, and landscape design consultant all used Vectorworks® software to bring their visions to life.





The museum serves as both a learning center and gathering place. Red and yellow cedar, which are native to the area, were used throughout the building.

For 113 years, the Nisga'a Nation in Canada fought for a treaty that would empower its people to form their own government and reclaim their land. They hoped to build a home for their sacred artifacts, a forum to share traditions and ideas, and a showcase for their unique culture. What they got was the door to their future.

Coming Home

In 1998, the governments of Canada, British Columbia (BC), and the Nisga'a Nation finally settled a land claim dating back to the late 1800s. Effective May 11, 2000, the Nisga'a Final Agreement Act granted the indigenous group 2,000 square kilometers of land and 300,000 cubic decameters of water in Northwestern BC. It also provided funds for legislative buildings to house their new government, as well as a museum, which would protect and preserve important Nisga'a artifacts.

Known as "Hli Goothl Wilp-Adokshl Nisga'a" in their native language, or "The Heart of Nisga'a House Crests," the museum opened to great ceremony on the 11th anniversary of the treaty—May 11, 2011. Hundreds of people journeyed to remote Laxgalts'ap (Greenville), a village with a population of about 500 people, and one of just four

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Nisga'a villages in British Columbia. The 930-square-meter museum and its 465-square-meter exhibition gallery now display world-class art. "The Nisga'a Museum houses one of the finest collections of Northwest aboriginal art in existence," says George MacDonald, the Director Emeritus of the Canadian Museum of Civilization. "It will attract international attention and redraw the map of cultural tourism in British Columbia."

"As they took possession [of the artifacts], you could see the elders' shoulders relax like this effort they had gone through for so long was now suddenly here and it was over. I remember the tears that were running down their cheeks."

— Peter Hardcastle, Principal, Hillel Architecture,
Vancouver Island, Canada

More than 330 items were repatriated from the Royal British Columbia Museum, the Anglican Church and the Canadian Museum of Civilization. The pieces that remain in many preeminent institutions, located in other cities around the world, serve as ambassadors for the culture. As Peter Hardcastle of Hillel Architecture explains, "the museum symbolizes the reclamation of the Nisga'a Nation. Elders who watched helplessly years earlier as artifacts were removed from their community now saw the objects—and their culture—restored. We had a Repatriation Ceremony and that was the first time I saw hundreds of people outside a museum forming a line," Hardcastle recalls. "They watched the artifacts come off of a high-security truck and be escorted by the Royal Canadian Mountain Police (RCMP) into the possession of the Nisga'a Nation. As they took possession, you could see the elders' shoulders relax like this effort they had gone through for so long was now suddenly here and it was over. I remember the tears that were running down their cheeks."

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— Alan Graves, Owner, Creative Director, and Senior Designer, Alan Graves Design, Victoria, Canada

The Design Team

While it was a landmark event in Nisga'a history, the opportunity to build this museum was remarkable for the team of designers as well. "It's very uncommon in Canada to work on a museum project from the ground up, because most museums across North America already exist—to design a museum from scratch, this is an exceptionally rare privilege," says Hardcastle. "So to also have an opportunity to work closely with the exhibit designer and the curator and interpreter, that makes it an even stronger project." He teamed up with Donald Luxton, project manager; Alan Graves, exhibit designer; Duane Ensing, landscape design consultant; Kevin Neary, curator and interpreter; Fran Johnson, manager of Ayuukhl Nisga'a Department who is responsible for language and culture portfolio; and many other talented people to bring this historic project to fruition. Graves says, "This project would not have happened without [the team we had]—absolutely, categorically. I'm speaking from 30 years of experience. It would have gone sideways. And it did go sideways many times. But it was held together by that group and as well as the amazing ability of the Nisga'a to allow us to be a part of who they are."

The design team feels strongly that people are the most important component in any project. "What's just as important as the finished product, and in many ways more important, is the people that I work with," says Graves. Over a two-year period, they melded decades of experience to create meaningful and beautiful structures, exhibits, and landscapes.



The Nisga'a Museum is home to more than 330 cultural artifacts, which were repatriated from collections around the world.

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It was a fortuitous twist of fate that brought Hardcastle into the Nisga'a Museum project. Years earlier, he had designed a special gift—a custom designed chair—for a speaker of the British Columbia Legislature to present to a speaker of the Nisga'a Lisims Government. Hardcastle strove hard to incorporate authentic Nisga'a symbolism into the chair, and it was received with great appreciation. So when his friend, Donald Luxton, a cultural and heritage resource management consultant, mentioned he was assembling a team to bid for the Nisga'a Museum project, Hardcastle could not help but smile. With a strong background in restoration and conservation of heritage buildings and decades of experience in museum design, Hardcastle was a perfect fit. "It was a pleasure for me to say, 'Museum? Me? I've only participated in 25 or 30. It would be a pleasure.' And it was a match that was very good from the start."

Hardcastle is a principal at Hillel Architecture on Vancouver Island, BC. The firm, founded by Karen Hillel, has garnered a number of awards over the years, including several that have revolved around heritage and restoration projects. "We produce very thoughtful work that allows us not to be just an architectural voice that's told to draw a solution, but instead to be part of the strategy, part of realizing the best outcome for the project," Hardcastle says. For the Nisga'a Museum, he adds, "To just participate in that project is amazing; to design something that the Nisga'a people are proud of is a whole new level of achievement."

Graves concurs. "Being asked to work on that project was an absolute privilege," he says. "The people—they're very special people, very proud people. It's universally known that their material is world class material." When he started his firm, Alan Graves Design in Victoria, BC, Graves already had over 20 years of experience designing exhibits for the Royal British Columbia Museum, as well as other museums throughout Canada. Graves also lectures at the University of Victoria. He's now spent over 35 years designing, installing, and creating graphic design for exhibits, and one of his main philosophies includes "the art of organizing and molding information and experiences, and allowing others to find their personal path to knowledge." Graves has won great acclaim for his work, and his travelling exhibit for the Chilliwack Museum, "Brewer's Gold: The History of the Hop Industry in British Columbia," won an award from the British Columbia Museum Association, which recognizes excellence within the historical agency field.

Despite the Nisga'a Museum's moniker, Graves says, it's not a traditional museum. "I don't believe it's a museum. It's a Nisga'a treasure house." One reason for this is the unorthodox requirement to display many of their artifacts outside of glass cases. Ninety-nine percent of museums, Graves argues, would lean the other way, choosing to keep artifacts behind glass for safety and preservation reasons. However, this unique display allows visitors to truly experience

Although most artifacts are openly displayed to allow visitors to truly experience the treasures, some of the smaller, more valuable pieces were enclosed in glass cases.



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the cultural pieces. "It's an interesting twist on it, and it is Nisga'a," Graves notes. "It is truly their philosophy of life." The Nisga'a wanted visitors to be able to see all of these items up close. Still, the team excluded smaller, very valuable pieces from this rule and placed them behind glass. Even with many artifacts outside of the glass, the Nisga'a Museum's security system is first-class and rivals other museums of larger size.

Duane Ensing's job was to enhance the already gorgeous landscape right outside the museum. When Hardcastle described the rich history and the absolute beauty of the Nass Valley, Ensing laughed. "You want a landscape plan for this?" he asked.

"That's easy and yet challenging to do. I knew that I needed to spend some time on it and make it special." Ensing has a BFA in Visual Arts, and his "palette is now plants and architecture." He started his own firm, Duane Ensing Landscape Design, in 1996 in Saanich, BC, and often teams up with associates for various jobs. Together with partner architects, Ensing's work has earned him a number of high marks, including partnerships in numerous Canadian Home Builders' Association awards—CARE Awards, Georgie Awards, and SAM Awards. His work has also been featured in *Architectural Digest*.

It All Started with a Bowl—And 300 Years of History

The designers were honored to convey the spirit of the Nisga'a Nation to the world. Comprised of only 6,000 people (2,500 of whom reside in the Nass Valley), this group shows tremendous pride. "When they told us their stories, they were told with passion," says Hardcastle. "It can't help but infuse what we do so that we give them back a program with our passions in it—because they taught us. They showed us what was

important to them." His design was inspired by three critical components of Nisga'a culture—their style of watercraft, their ceremonial longhouses, and their food vessels.

The river is an essential life-giving force to the Nisga'a. Their canoes not only provide transportation and sustenance, but critical communications. The building is a testament to this humble wooden canoe, with a curved roof that echoes its shape, a sweep of gunnels, and even the hint of paddlers on the side. While he was researching Nisga'a culture, Hardcastle also came across a 300-year-old feast bowl that later came to encompass the museum's meaning and layout. With a bow and stern, it was shaped like a boat, yet was made to nourish large groups of people. He was inspired. "The museum is a feast of knowledge—it's a feast of culture. This one artifact was this incredible piece that completely described the floor plan. The museum is a bowl of knowledge, and a canoe that safely transports that knowledge to the people." In fact, the Nisga'a paddled their treaty through the Nass River to the bow of the museum, which is "docked" on a gravel beach amphitheater—and symbolizes the edge of the ocean.

"That roof sweeps up from the longhouse and it sweeps up boldly and spreads out in width and in height. It's a wall of glass, so it's flooded with light and it's a really positive march towards the future—the sky's the limit and it's wide open."

— Peter Hardcastle, Hillel Architecture, Vancouver Island, Canada



The building's design was inspired by a wooden canoe and a feast bowl, both traditionally important symbols in Nisga'a history.



Visitors are greeted by an impressive sculpture of Txeemsim as Raven, the legendary grandson of the Chief of the Heavens in Nisga'a lore.

The building anticipates a bright future for the Nisga'a nation. "That roof sweeps up from the longhouse and it sweeps up boldly and spreads out in width and in height," explains Hardcastle. "It's a wall of glass, so it's flooded with light and it's a really positive march towards the future—the sky's the limit and it's wide open." Speaking at the dedication ceremony, Simon Calder, a Nisga'a youth representative, concurred. "We need to embrace our culture," he said. "And there's nothing better than this, right here, seeing our people together, happy, something historic. There's no longer darkness above us, there's nothing but light now."

The museum's storyline is "From Darkness to Light." When you enter through the incredible angled-glass front, you are met by an equally staggering presence—Txeemsim as Raven. According to Nisga'a

stories, this grandson of the Chief of Heavens brought light and many other gifts to their people, changing the river's shape and the landscape itself. With a wingspan of 9 meters, a height of 4 meters and beak of 4.5 meters in length, this imposing sculpture was created by four carvers in just three weeks. It projects out from the longhouse entrance with a wide-open beak, above the round copper-lined doorway that mirrors the sun. The longhouse is a structure typical to first nations, and Nisga'a longhouses hosted ceremonial events and large gatherings, including dancing, feasting, storytelling, and even their treasures.

The project team conceived of the longhouse gallery and raven house front, and based the design on a drawing dating back to the 1800s that featured one of the original Nisga'a longhouses. It is striking. "It's a big

house and arguably it's probably one of the greatest entrances for a small museum in North America," says Graves. It provides protection for the artifacts within the museum. Inside, the exhibit design also echoes the structural lines of the feast bowl, and longhouses. It's awash in the traditional Nisga'a colors of black, red, and earth tones, and features the red and yellow cedar native to the area.

Ensing and Neary researched Nisga'a traditions and built a landscape design with plants that were historically used by the Nisga'a for food, transportation, medical remedies, and other essential purposes. The landscapes continue the education that begins in the building, and they work holistically with the building and its setting. "We're using indigenous material to complement the building, not take away from it," says Ensing. "That's the big picture—you have a lot of competition—the mountains, all this beauty around you. I wanted to develop something beautiful that can give back to their culture when they have been stripped of so much."

The Journey

To reach Greenville from Victoria, one must travel 2½ hours by plane to Terrace and then another two hours by car. The total trip covers 150 kilometers. Guarded by five snowcapped mountains, the area is breathtaking. "It's absolutely spectacular, but what makes it totally otherworldly is that the first part of the valley is covered in lava. I've travelled most of British Columbia and it is truly one of the most amazing places in British Columbia," says Graves.

With the incredible views came incredible challenges. Typically, Hardcastle explains, he would need to tie into municipal services at the street in front of the building to get water, heat, electricity, telephone, and cable services. In this case, however, his team brought these lines 1.3 kilometers down a highway. The firm also had to plan for security and flood threats, as well as fire protection from a creeping ground fire or forest canopy fire, both for the site and its neighboring properties. He used Vectorworks Architect software to pull the comprehensive design together. "Vectorworks was there, through all of it," he says.



The landscape design, created in a hand drawn style available with the Renderworks application, included plants historically used for food by the Nisga'a people.

The Tools

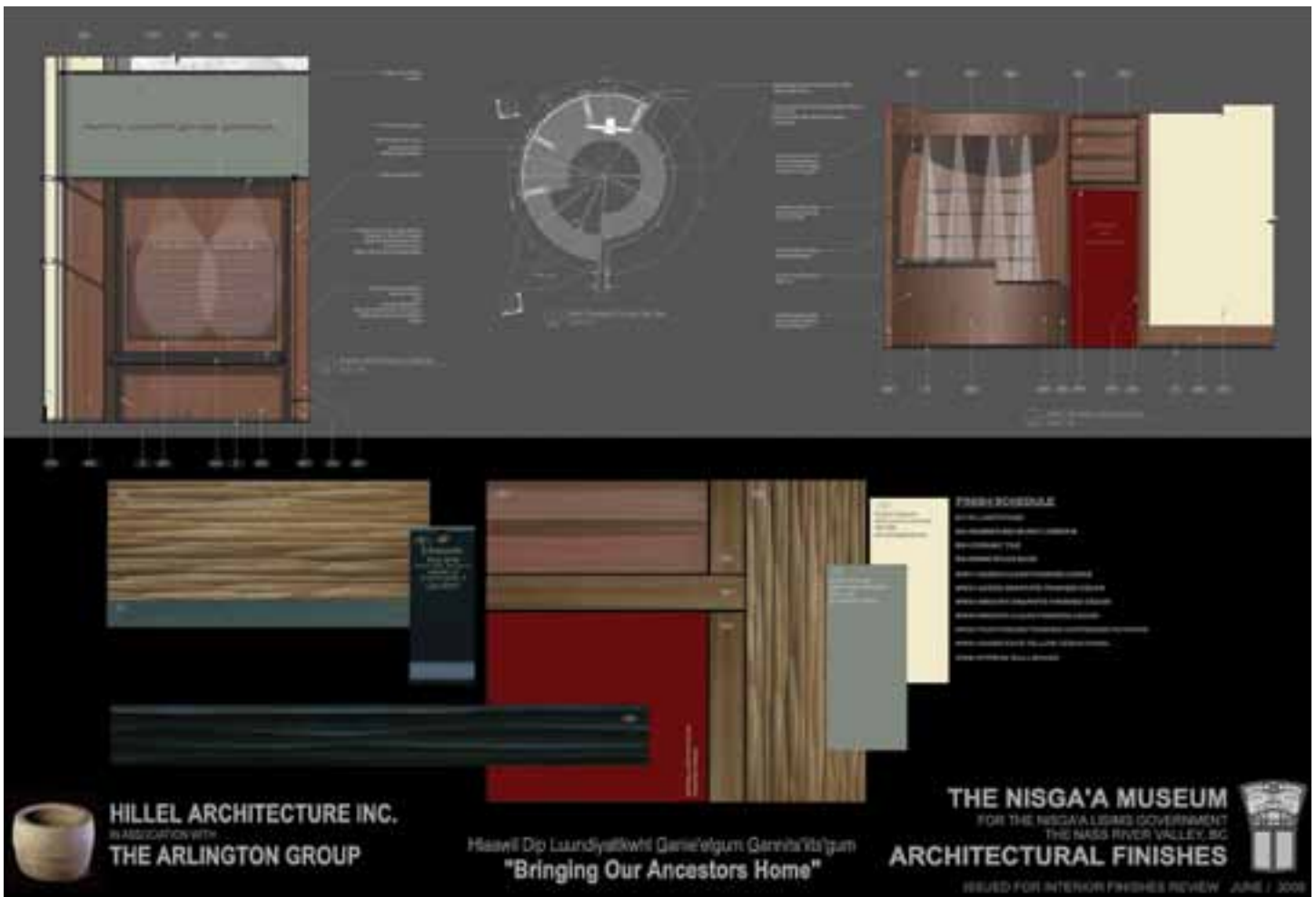
Hardcastle used his design software to build an understanding of, and gain approval for, his design. By incorporating many of the important symbols of the Nisga'a, like the canoe, feasting bowl, and longhouse, he was able to secure agreement as he built upon each design idea. Typically, Hardcastle uses digital photographs of textures and surfaces as infilled textures in order to efficiently show his clients what the designs would include. "If that client can approve something because they can so clearly understand it, then Vectorworks becomes a pretty powerful tool," he says. "What we did with the Nisga'a Museum was dramatic. When I travel to a remote community to present a building for the first time, I need a tool that's going to communicate a conceptual idea—it's those ideas that have the high energy that keep people going forward. And from the moment that building was conceived, nobody permitted a single change to occur. It's amazing."

He has used the Vectorworks program for over twenty years. By working with one file from start to finish, Hardcastle says, his firm gains a distinct advantage over the competition. "Vectorworks suits how we

think, how we design, how we work. We use some of the simple tools, but that's where I think its real power comes from. We could use layers in one moment for a purpose, transparencies in another moment for a purpose, and we can turn all the color on and print a high-resolution, fully colored presentation elevation with shade, shadows, and trees, and then literally click to another portion of the same file to print out exactly the same document without all of the design materials—but it now has all the text and the dimension associated with the tender document. It's exactly the same file. As we can fluidly move from one to the other, it means that those design drawings are always current.

"Vectorworks software is something that works better, costs less, and the drawing ends up looking exactly like I want it to; it's very controllable. I wouldn't use anything else."

— Duane Ensing, Owner and Creative Director,
Duane Ensing Landscape Design, Victoria, Canada

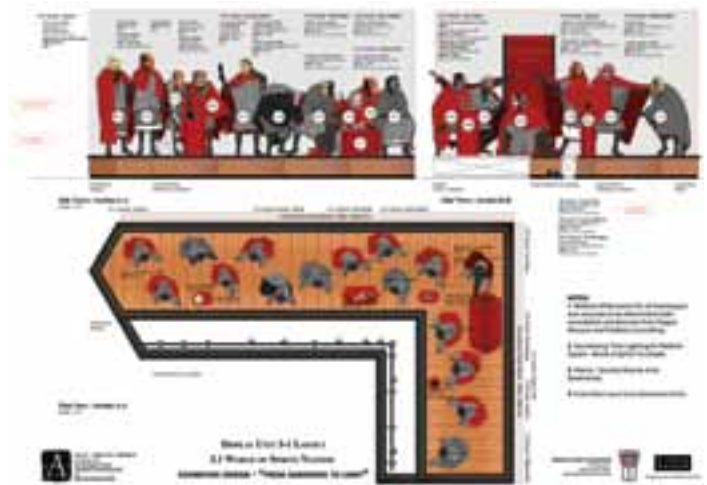


This image is one of several client presentations created to show the architectural finishes of the museum.



Ensing has been a Vectorworks software user since 2001, and he used the Vectorworks Landmark program to accurately communicate his designs to the Nisga'a. He was able to reference Hardcastle's files, saving time in the process. "It actually worked really well," he says. "Every time I got a new drawing from Peter Hardcastle, I could just import it into his own file again and update it. All my layers and classes and visibilities stayed the way I wanted them to, and I didn't have to change it in the new document anymore. That was awesome for me." Ensing also loves the hand-drawn look he can create with the Renderworks® application. "I can draw a design that has a lot more atmosphere and essence. You're not going to hang it on the wall, but you could. It has character. I didn't want the computer look—I want it to look looser, more expressive. So it's something that works better, costs less, and the drawing ends up looking exactly like I want it to; it's very controllable. I wouldn't use anything else."

Graves, a Vectorworks user since 1997, says, "Luckily, Vectorworks does everything I ever want it to do and more; probably 1,000 times more than what I would ever need it to do. The fact that it is so flexible, and I can share it with so many people so easily—is very powerful. If you can't communicate, you're nowhere. I categorically could not do my job without Vectorworks. Absolutely."



A display of 16 Nisga'a "World of Spirits" dancers, complete with masks and full costumes, is a highlight of the exhibition.

From Darkness to Light

A fight that lasted 113 years. A building that took another 2 ½ to complete. A long journey home. Working together, this team of designers honored the Nisga'a Nation with a living monument. It is a

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treasure in itself—the Nisga'a proclaim their museum to be a "gift to fellow Canadians and the world." They proudly introduce it with these lingering words: "We Nisga'a are leaders. Our art and culture tie us to this place. We have stories of wonder, tragedy, and triumph to tell. Here, we will share them with the world."



The landscape set the scene for the entire project.

Acknowledgements

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Hillel Architecture
Founded by Karen Hillel in 2002, Hillel Architecture is an award winning firm that focuses on heritage building revitalization, cultural facilities, and thoughtful residential and commercial projects.

Alan Graves Design

Founded in 1985, Alan Graves Design has planned, designed, managed, installed, and maintained over 200 exhibitions in museums and art galleries worldwide. Prior to that, Graves created exemplary exhibits for the Royal British Columbia Museum.

duane ensing landscape design

Founded by Duane Ensing in 1996, duane ensing landscape design is an award-winning firm that creates designs for residential and commercial clients. Their work has been featured in Architectural Digest.

Images:

Courtesy of Peter Hardcastle, Duane Ensing, Alan Graves, and Gary Feigehen.

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