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VANCOUVER MARITIME MUSEUM PLANS FOR FUTURE MOVE AND EXPANSION

On May 29th, the Vancouver Maritime Museum unveiled plans for an exciting new future for the 45-year old institution. Constructed in 1958 as Canada's first purposely-designed and built maritime museum, the VMM has matured over the last four decades into a popular regional landmark and port of call for local families. As well, the museum remains popular for people of all ages who thrill to the stories of the sea, our ongoing relationship with the water, and the important role of maritime industry and labour in our gateway ports. The museum's collection – which started in 1958 with one artifact, albeit a big one – the RCMP ketch *St. Roch* – has now grown to thousands of items valued at nearly \$12 million. Many of the artifacts in the museum's collection are national treasures, and some rare objects are internationally significant, like the hand-drawn charts kept by Captain James Cook on his third and final voyage of exploration. They include the last chart the famous navigator was working on when he was killed in Hawaii in 1778.

But the museum's popularity with locals – many of whom call the small Kits Point facility a "gem" – has not translated into huge crowds of tourists. Public transit or tour buses do not connect the museum, nestled in the heart of a residential district outside the downtown core. Its beautiful English Bay locale is simply out of sight and out of mind in Vancouver's tourism market. As well, 95% of the collection rests in storage, most of it never displayed. "It's not just a question of putting things out in the gallery," explains executive director James Delgado. "Most of the artifacts have amazing and evocative stories behind them. Without the artifacts on display, there are entire aspects of the maritime experience and our heritage that go untold in the museum. Immigration to Canada by sea, the role of waterfront labour, the story of the Union Steamships, the story of the First Nations and their interaction with the sea, and the uniquely maritime nature of our coastal communities are just a few of the major themes we do not get a chance to display or interpret because of lack of space."

That will all change by 2010 with the support of government, the public and maritime industry and business. On May 29th, the museum unveiled drawings for the "National Maritime Museum of the Pacific," a bold new venture that will showcase all the museum's treasures, tell the stories, and chart a more sustainable future for the museum. The plans, developed by VIA Architecture of Vancouver (whose other projects have included planning and the development of Southeast False Creek, Concord Pacific Place, the Roundhouse Neighbourhood, and the West Vancouver Civic Centre), with exhibits planned by Andre & Knowlton of Victoria (whose portfolio includes the Royal British Columbia Museum, the Royal Tyrell Museum of Paleontology, and the new Hong Museum of History), offer a stunning visual concept of what the new museum will offer.

The plans call for a dramatic clam-shell shaped building inspired by Bill Reid's amazing "Raven and the First Men," which depicts the Haida creation story of Raven finding the first humans inside a clam shell, the architectural form of the clamshell opening up to reveal the treasures and stories within the museum is a reminder, as shown in the Haida story that inspired Reid, that we British Columbians have been intimately linked with the sea since creation. Inside the museum, in an open, flowing space with two floors of galleries that interconnect and flow into each other like the inlets and waters of British Columbia, the National Maritime Museum will enhance the popular aspects of the existing maritime museum while embarking on exciting new visual displays that feature 3-D "immersive environments that allow visitors to explore the ocean depths, visit coastal communities, experience the first class dining saloon and immigrant quarters of the original *Empress of Japan*, and visit underwater archaeologists in a laboratory as they preserve and study artifacts from shipwrecks.

Visitors will tour the museum's two historic craft, RCMP *St. Roch* and the research submersible *Ben Franklin* or relax and read in the W.B. and M.H. Chung Library and the Everett Family Gallery of Marine Art. Audiovisual and computer enhanced interpretation will be available, interwoven with the exhibits but placed in such a way that visitors can interact and learn at their own pace to choose how much they want to learn. "Anchorages" in each gallery, for example, will feature small mini-theatres and computer stations for visitors who want to take a few minutes – or longer – to delve deeper into the exhibits or research the museum's treasures.

The plans call for the new museum to occupy a 45,000-sf footprint, and in its two levels to encompass 90,000 square feet of space. That's four times larger than the current maritime museum, and it means that the new museum can take all the treasures currently hiding in storage and put them out for the public to see, as well as provide services lacking at the existing facility – like food service, a gift shop, a theatre, and room to accommodate the school programs that often fill the Vancouver Maritime Museum with hundreds of children on busy tour days. The new size is just right to make the new museum a more sustainable operation, notes Delgado. "A museum these days is much like a business, with a diverse income stream required to keep the doors open. Food service, a good-sized gift shop, and room to offer evening and daytime rentals for meetings, receptions and special events are some of the key factors in the overwhelming success of the Vancouver Aquarium, for example."

Sustainability is key to the success of the National Maritime Museum of the Pacific. A study by consultant David Russell, commissioned by the museum, reexamined an earlier KPMG study and conservatively noted that paid admissions would quadruple if the museum were sufficiently sized to make an impact but more importantly, if it were in a better location to capitalize on the flow of visitors in the downtown core on the central waterfront. Other revenues would also increase, meaning that the new museum could pay its way. That's important and welcome news.

Exactly where the new museum will be located is up for discussion. Following the May 29th announcement of the vision for the new museum, a number of suggestions from the business and development community have included Vancouver's Coal Harbour, the area east of Canada Place, Southeast False Creek, and North Vancouver. Ian Rokeby, the museum's President of the Board of Trustees, who is spearheading the new museum project with Delgado, answers that "we will go where the best business case can be made. Sustainability is key." Building the new museum on the Vancouver Maritime Museum's current site, if allowed by the City, for example, would not work for sustainability, notes consultant Russell's study. Cut off from transit and beyond the centre of activity and access to tourists, the new museum would be a landmark that struggles to remain open if it were at Kits Point.

"We are Canada's gateway to the Pacific, and the Pacific's gateway into Canada," notes Delgado. The international significance of our ports, the growth and development of western Canada and the unique multicultural ambience of British Columbia is inexorably linked to the sea. This story – our story – is worthy of a national museum that would showcase this important aspect of who we are in time for 2010, when the world's attention will be focused on Vancouver and its environs." The museum's planning continues, as do discussions with government officials and a number of private and industry funders interested in making the dream a reality. Watch for key announcements and breaking news on the National Maritime Museum of the Pacific over the next few months.

Vancouver Maritime Museum

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