

Middleground: Siting Dispossession. Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montreal, Quebec

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Middleground: Siting Dispossession. Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montreal, Quebec. February 10, 2021 – March 13, 2022. Curated by Ella den Elzen, Rafico Ruiz, and Camille Saade-Traboulsi.

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Middleground: Siting Dispossession, housed in the main hallway at the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montreal, is the product of conversations between researchers and curators Ella den Elzen, Rafico Ruiz, and Camille Saade-Traboulsi.

Middlegrounds, as the curators explain in a panel at the exhibit's start, are those charged and contested (yet everyday) spaces that reveal the processes through which architecture continues to be complicit in the dispossession of Indigenous lands. *Middleground* takes the position that settler spatial practitioners must “now work to return land that has been colonized through design.” (The ambiguity of the placement of the modifier *through design* works here: it is *through design* that land that was colonized *by design* should be returned. Both processes are demonstrated richly throughout the exhibit.) The curators note that it is the responsibility of architects to take up this process; middlegrounds, they posit, could be useful starting points.

To flesh out this ambitious task, the content of the exhibit is parsed into four broad, repeating themes, which dominate the display cases: *dispossession* (the process by which communities are dispossessed of their land to make way for settler-steered “progress”); *land* (the concept essential to architecture, which serves as the foundation on which ostensibly neutral building sites are erected); *property* (or “captured land,” the result of surveying, which lets settlers benefit

from land by transfiguring it through legal terms); and *common grounds* (those ostensibly connective infrastructures, like roads, which inevitably further fracture and divide colonized land).

A series of records, comprising mostly archival maps, architectural plans, newspaper articles, and photographs sourced from the Canadian Centre for Architecture's (CCA's) own collections, populate the cases, illustrating sets of stories that constitute each theme. The dispossession display case, marking the start of the exhibit, contains records that recount the conflict surrounding the 1960s construction of the new Montreal International Airport (later, Montreal-Mirabel). Here, settler farmer families, threatened with displacement to make way for the new facility, launched expansive protests, which – the curators note pointedly on an accompanying panel – failed to acknowledge that all 97,000 contested acres remained unceded Kanehsatà:ke territory. Blueprints for the new airport, from the architectural firm Papineau Gérin-Lajoie Le Blanc, sit smugly alongside newspaper headlines condemning the plans in defence of the settler families.

The neighbouring land display case contains Arthur Erickson's 1966 "alternative" blueprints for a Shell gas station at Simon Fraser University. The initial plans had threatened to blemish the campus's tight mountain aesthetic and led to widespread student and faculty dissent. Echoing the Montreal-Mirabel backlash, the documentation of the gas station protests and of its vista-friendly redesign contains no explicit acknowledgement of the Musqueam Nation's sovereignty over the unceded land on which the events unfolded. This time, the curators invite visitors to come to their own critical conclusions, proffering the materials by which they might evaluate the integrity of such a "solution."

The exhibition's property display case features – among other clusters of records – shots of cultivated hedges, trees, and planters that collectively work as ecologically resonant borders for suburban property owners. The final display case, *common grounds*, has been shuffled to the exhibit's outer limits in what might be read as a tongue-in-cheek offering of false hope: this is the only section of the exhibit that contains multiple records in splashy colour. The central display recounts the story of ecological landscape architect Cornelia Hahn Oberlander's attempt at community-inclusive urban planning in sites around the Northwest Territories. Handwritten feedback from schoolchildren and colour images of



FIGURE 1 Arthur Erickson, architectural drawing of a proposed service station for Shell Canada Ltd. at Simon Fraser University, unceded Coast Salish Territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh, and Kwikwetlem nations (Burnaby, British Columbia), 1966. Graphite and ink on translucent paper, 61.0 × 91.4 cm. © Estate of Arthur Erickson. Source: Canadian Centre for Architecture, Arthur Erickson Fonds, ARCH254965.

transplanted trees in Inuvik “landscape regeneration” projects, all sourced from the Oberlander fonds, demonstrate a more robust attempt to engage collaboratively with Indigenous communities within settler-initiated architectural projects.

The exhibition’s sections collectively make the same case through different currents: despite being constituted of ostensibly objective archival matter, each set of records insists on a failure of the archive – or at least, on the limits of the CCA’s own holdings – to proffer a narrative that recognizes the multidimensionality of land histories. While the backlash against the Montreal-Mirabel and Shell gas station constructions failed to acknowledge land sovereignty, the shrub borders and eco-urban projects work as meagre attempts to intervene architecturally on still-dispossessed land. Through its selection of records, *Middleground* presents a set of land projects – from large-scale industrial endeavours to personal sites and well-intentioned urban initiatives – that have distracted from or patched over the dispossession on which they are built. What is more, the



FIGURE 2 Middleground: Siting Dispossession, installation view, Canadian Centre for Architecture, 2021, © CCA. Source: CCA.

archives' offering of records that testify to these projects does not contribute to a fuller, more comprehensive narrative of land histories but, rather, replicates the absence of such histories.

While the insinuation that “the archive” may be an insufficient tool for history-telling hardly breaks ground, *Middleground* ripens the familiar argument through its self-conscious presentation. Its arrangement as a standard museum-style exhibit might lead a visitor to expect that a theme or message will be expressed through the subjective curation of objective records. Here, however, the curators imply that the records themselves – all sourced from the CCA’s own collections – are ultimately incomplete or even misleading narrative tools, and the result is uncanny: the form of the exhibition is familiar, but the visitors are immediately warned that the materials that compose it are not to be trusted. Archival records constitute actions that might at first appear to be activist or even reconciliatory but are suddenly exposed as being oblivious to Indigenous land rights and

dispossession; the visitor has been deceived. The viewing experience, then, is rendered increasingly unsettling – an appropriate feeling, given the vocabulary offered by the curators.

Journeying deeper into *Middleground*, however, it becomes apparent that it is the exhibit's uncanny geography that resounds most sharply. The exhibit itself is a middle ground, running the length of the centre's corridor between the main exhibit halls housing a more luminescent, vibrant exhibit. Visitors must make their way alongside the muted panels of *Middleground* in order to be appeased by the bright gloss of the centre's "main" exhibition room. The lure of this latter space is hardly avoidable; as upbeat messages emanating from flashing screens reflect onto *Middleground*'s stark display case windows, visitors turning toward *Middleground* must temporarily turn away from the attraction of the bright lights.

While *Middleground* might pass as a standalone exhibition – the curators succinctly draw out narrative absences and archival shortcomings into neatly parsed, cleanly populated display cases – its true richness comes from its position as a sort of exhibit between exhibits, bridging the outside world with the rest of the CCA. Each visitor must pass through, then pivot away from, *Middleground*, having arrived at the CCA's central exhibit; through this inevitable process, the exhibition is able to do its real work. The options are to proceed through, uninterrupted, or to pause and engage. On the one hand, through the curators' problematizing of material from the CCA's own collections, *Middleground* acts as a thematic buffer with the capacity to fruitfully destabilize the visitor experience, offering a productively uncomfortable set of critical lenses through which to approach the remainder of the CCA's exhibits. Alternatively, if the visitor chooses *not* to engage, the exhibit – like so many of the stories it contains – threatens to trail off, rendering *Middleground* that very "everyday space" to which, it warns us, we can become critically numb.