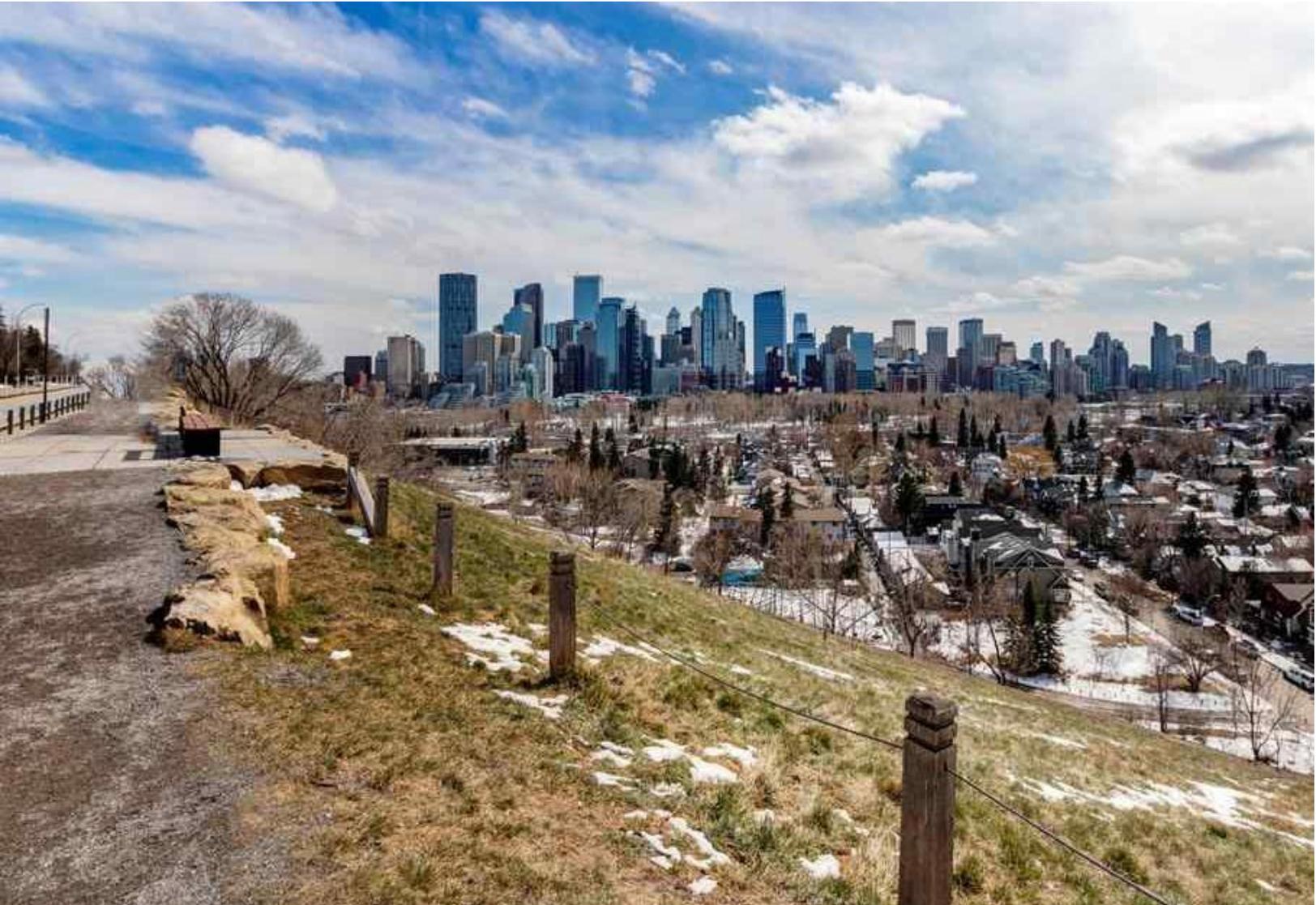


Calgary



Crescent Road Master Plan

What We Learned from Indigenous Elders

Learning about the Crescent Road Project Area, Indigenous Ways of Knowing and Culture from Blackfoot, Stoney Nakoda & Tsuut'ina Elders

July 2022



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Listen. In time you will have the chance to talk.

- Blackfoot Elder



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Why Indigenous Engagement?

It is a warm afternoon in early June. You and your closest friends have just parked along Crescent Road. You are wearing your graduation finest and have come to take pictures before your graduation dinner. As you step onto the bluff pathway you remember all those days running up and down the hill when you trained with the Crescent Heights High School basketball team. You had pushed yourself so hard on some of those runs you thought you were going to be sick. It was all worth it when the team beat Beaverbrook in the semi-finals.

As you turn to look at the view of downtown and the mountains, you smile. You think about your personal journey but also the journey of thousands of ancestors before you. Your Siksika (Blackfoot) mother, Îyâxe Nakoda (Stoney) father, aunties, uncles, and grandparents have told you so many stories of this land. As you gaze upon the glass of the skyscrapers downtown, the rippling waters of the Bow, and the snow tipped mountains, you imagine what it was like a long time ago for your people.

You take a minute to imagine you are a member of a Blackfoot clan long before this was a city. You have just spent the winter months in the foothills. As the days grow longer, you watch the plains for signs that the cold weather has passed. You note that the greening grass has drawn bison onto the plains. It will soon be time to gather with other clans to renew your sacred connection with the world.

Leaving your camp in the foothills, you and your clan follow the Bow River east, towards the prairies. After many days of travel you come to resting point along the river bluffs where you will camp for the night. Here you can survey the land while gathering water, food, and wood from along the river's edge. The band's young children laugh and play while a hawk circles high overhead. As the warm rays of the sun set behind the mountains you spot the long shadows of a herd of bison grazing in the distance. Like so many animals, they are your teachers. You thank them for teaching you how to be a strong and fearless survivor of the plains, to follow the rhythms of the seasons, and thrive along the banks of the Bow.

Your friends' laughter brings you back to today. You lean in for another photo, surrounded by friends, family, and the ancestors that stood here before you. This truly is a moment, and a place, worth celebrating.

This story was inspired by what we heard from Elders through engagement for the Crescent Road Master Plan and the [Glenbow Museum's "Niitsitapiisni, Our Way of Life" exhibit](#). Indigenous engagement for the Crescent Road Master Plan has shed light on how this area was used for millennia by Indigenous communities like the Blackfoot, Stoney Nakoda, Tsuut'ina, Cree and Métis. This way of life, dependent on movement and access to this territory, was disrupted through the colonial process. Despite the forced relocation of Indigenous communities from this space, the rich and layered history of this area is carried forward in the knowledge and stories shared by Elders.

For this project, Blackfoot, Stoney Nakoda, and Tsuut'ina Elders have taken the time to share knowledge and stories with the project team. With their permission, we can share this knowledge with you so that we can collectively learn and work towards a space that embraces the whole story and history of this area.

Project overview

Crescent Road N.W. is a special public space in our city. It provides access to natural areas, parks, paths and streets with dramatic views of the Bow River, downtown Calgary, and the mountains.

Over the years Crescent Road N.W. and adjacent parks have become popular spaces for recreation, gathering, and celebrating. The popularity of this area comes with several concerns raised by the community: late night disruptive activities, parking issues, vehicle stunting and speeding, heavy fitness use, increased garbage and littering.

The Crescent Road N.W. Master Plan will guide future investment by creating a cohesive vision for a safe, accessible street and public space for all users.

This project intends to:

- Amplify this as a special place in Calgary while balancing different uses
- Re-imagine Crescent Road N.W. between 1 St N.W and 6A St N.W. and adjacent parks spaces
- Use a variety of interventions such as expanding park space and traffic calming
- Identify opportunities for placemaking and economic development
- Recommend a long-term design concept and identify short-term investments



Figure 1. People relaxing and walking along Crescent Road

Engagement approach

Engagement at The City of Calgary is defined as a “Purposeful dialogue between The City and citizens and stakeholders to gather information to influence decision making.” The City is committed to transparent and inclusive engagement, as outlined in the Engage Policy (CS009).



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Since this space is a popular place to live and visit and lies within the territory of the Blackfoot Confederacy, Stoney Nakoda, Tsuut'ina, Métis Nation of Alberta Region 3, the project team is committed to learning and working with Indigenous communities as outlined in the The City's Indigenous Policy (CP2017-02) and explore opportunities for Truth and Reconciliation as outlined in the White Goose Flying report.

The engagement approach and activities are facilitated by the project team with guidance from The City's Indigenous Relations Office (IRO). The engagement can be grouped into two phases:

- Phase One focuses on listening and learning about the historical, traditional, cultural, and contemporary connections to the project area.
- Phase Two focuses on confirming what was learned in phase one and identifying opportunities for truth and reconciliation in the design and direction of the master plan.

Due to the ongoing pandemic, COVID restrictions, and concerns for the safety and wellbeing for participants and facilitators, engagement activities for Phase One were held either outside in a distanced environment or online. Three small group site visits were held in February and March followed by three small group online discussion sessions. Wanting to create a safe space for open and honest conversations, the online discussion sessions were grouped by gender. Two online sessions were held with male Elders and one online session was held with female Elders.

Who we learned from

The Indigenous Relations Office identified and invited Elders from Blackfoot, Stoney Nakoda, Tsuut'ina, and Métis Nation of Alberta Region 3 to take part in engagement activities for this project. A total of 10 Elders were engaged in Phase One including Blackfoot (Siksika, Kainai, and Piikani), Stoney Nakoda, and Tsuut'ina Elders.

What we asked

Both Phase One and Two are focused on listening and learning from Elders. In Phase One we explored the following questions: What are connections to this landscape or similar landscapes, such as high points, bluffs, and rivers? What are opportunities for Truth and Reconciliation in this project?

In Phase Two we asked Elders to validate the What We Learned Report and about opportunities to advance truth and reconciliation as part of the master plan. With the support of visual materials we asked Elders three main questions in Phase two: "Are there specific histories, stories, elements of cultural significant or people of significance that we should commemorate or embed in the design?"; "What do you think about the proposed planting palette?"; and "What do you think about the proposed material palette".



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What we learned

This section is written version of knowledge shared by Elders during site visits and online discussion sessions by the project team. These are not verbatim comments, but a way to summarize and document and share back with Elders, the greater project team, stakeholders and the public.

Each Elder brings history and stories passed down from generation to generation. These stories may be more recent or may span millennia. For a variety of reasons, some stories or histories are similar while others differ and diverge. Additionally, Colonialism intentionally created conflict between Nations, some of which persists today. We want to acknowledge that there are many truths. To respect and honour what we learned, we are summarizing what we heard in the way it was told to us.

Territory

We heard from several Elders that this land is shared among a collective group of Nations that have stewarded this land long before colonization. It was noted that Blackfoot are the longest standing inhabitants and stewards of this area. Proof of this comes from artifacts such as Beaver bundles have been carbon dated to 7,000 years ago (+/- 500 years). Stoney likely moved to the area after separating from the Dakota/Lakota Nation during the fur trade. Tsuut'ina likely split from a northern nation and moved to the plains. While this land was forcibly taken by colonizers and boundaries established during the Indian Act (reserve system) there remains a respect for all groups that call this area home today.

Elders noted that the notion of inclusivity and culture of sharing the land continues today. There are observations that this space has been used in recent times by numerous cultural groups for ceremonial or celebratory purposes. The bluff or park spaces may now be tied to cultural practices or traditions by many different groups, so creating an environment that can support multiple cultures and traditions is important.

Treaty

Treaty 7, declared on September 22, 1877, is the last of the numbered treaties. The Treaty is made between the Blackfoot Confederacy, Stoney Nakoda, and Tsuut'ina and the Government of Canada. It is important to note that treaty was *made* and not simply *signed*. Making of Treaty involves discussion and ceremony involving around 160 leaders from various Nations.

Different understandings of the treaty's purpose, combined with significant culture and language barriers and attempts to mislead the First Nations on the part of the government negotiators, have led to ongoing mistrust, conflicts, and claims. It was noted that the treaty was discussed as a peace and sharing agreement; however, what was put in writing was a land cessation proposal.

Resources and opportunities for further learning: [Great Blackfoot Treaties by Hugh Dempsey](#) and [Our Betrayed Wards by R.N. Wilson](#).



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Indian Act

The Indian Act had an enormous impact on Indigenous communities. The Indian Act is a Canadian federal law that governs matters pertaining to Indian status, bands, and Indian reserves. It is described as a system of control and exclusionary policy.

The Indian Act has been highly invasive and disruptive. It authorizes the Canadian federal government to regulate and administer in the affairs and day-to-day lives of registered Indians and reserve communities. This authority has ranged from overarching political control, such as imposing governing structures on communities in the form of band councils, to control over the rights of community members to practice their culture and traditions.

The Indian Act has also enabled the government to determine the land base of these groups in the form of reserves, and even to define who qualifies as Indian in the form of Indian status. While the Indian Act has undergone numerous amendments since it was first passed in 1876, today it largely retains its original form.

There are feelings that just as peace was made through the Treaty all hell broke loose with the Indian Act. It was noted that the Indian Act was like apartheid. Like apartheid, it considered Indigenous peoples as animals and attempts to dehumanize First Nations.

Changing First Nations governance structure was one of the major disruptions to ways of life. Under the Indian Act, the hereditary appointment of Chief and Council shifted from a lifetime membership to a limited two-year term. This is an example of one of many impositions of European and Christian systems imposed on First Nations, mirroring Christ and his disciples.

Language, Oral Tradition and Storytelling

The oral tradition of knowledge and information sharing continues today. Language is sacred for Indigenous communities. The ability to share in First Nation languages is important part of history, tradition, and culture. Some stories are sharable while some are not, that sharing is determine by Elders and customs. There are stories that are considered common knowledge that are appropriate to share with the public.

It was noted that languages are evolving. The forced separation of groups and restrictions on travel imposed by the Indian Act isolated of communities. This caused an evolution in language that persists today. For example, there is old Blackfoot and new Blackfoot and old Stoney and new Stoney.

Storytelling is part of the oral tradition, and a backbone of knowledge transfer. Learning is embedded in memory, history, and story. At the heart of every story is a lesson in relationship, a relationship with self, with others, or with the environment.

For those that were separated from their families at an early age, language is a way to connect with culture and community. Elders that were forced into residential schools or taken from their homes as part of the 1960s scoop were restricted and often forbidden from learning Indigenous languages. As adults, learning the language is a way to connect more deeply to the community and culture they were once removed and disconnected from. Linguistics is a primary source of cultural revitalization and preservation.



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Hide Mapping

There are accurate hide maps of the territory made by clans like Many Swans and Bear Child. These maps cover lands from the Rocky Mountains to Yellowstone. Information on these maps included place names, ceremonial sites, and tributaries and sleeps in between. When colonizers arrived Metis scouts would not bring surveyors into the area. For a long time, there was a blank space on colonizers maps where there was Blackfoot territory. The Blackfoot maps were eventually copied by colonizers. Copies of these maps can be found at the Glenbow Museum.

Landscapes

High plains are areas where people lived. This landscape pre-settlement was a grassed prairie with few shrubs and trees. Any trees or shrubs would have been flattened by bison. All trees we see today were planted.

People would live close to rivers as these were key water sources and habitats for food and medicines. High points like Crescent Road area would have been used as lookouts for herds or for surveying the land in times of war.

Stewardship of the Land

There is a rich and deep understanding of the interconnectedness of the land and ecosystem. Elders explained that what is done to one part of an ecosystem affects another. These lessons learned are gained from lived experience but also from storytelling and observation of the environment and animals like the bison.

There is a strong culture of protection, stewardship, and safeguarding of the environment, rather than a culture of dominion or ownership over the landscape. Ownership of the land is a colonized notion. Plants and trees, for example, are relatives that need protection. Plants and other elements in the landscape, even rocks, are animate and have their own spirit. The river has a spirit and called "Namahka" in Blackfoot.

Interaction with the landscape is approached in a way to preserve its integrity. For example, there are sustainable ways to harvest plants to preserve and maintain their roots system. Moccasins are soft soled shoes that can minimize impacts to plants that are tread on, unlike more aggressive footwear of today. As one Elder said, "the earth looks strong but many plants are fragile". Erosion along the bluff area may be due to use but also invasive or non-native plants that have affected the integrity of the soil and slope.

Native Plants

Native plants include sweetgrass, sage, saskatoon, bull berries, willows (such as wolf willow, diamond birch willow or red bark willow), choke cherries, prickly pear, spear grass, wild rose, onions, wild mint, cactus, wild turnip, juniper, bluebells, poplars, cottonwood (poplar) trees. Some trees and plants can only be found near water bodies like rivers, others only in mountainous landscapes such as lodgepole pines, shrubs such as junipers and kinikinnick. Prairie environments were used for wintering of herds because of access to bison grass for grazing.



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Plants have names and stories in all languages. Plants and trees are considered to be sacred and have Creation stories associated with them. Cottonwoods were used in sundances and represent connections between different nations.

Some plants have specific uses. Diamond birch willows used for sweats. Many plants used for food, and others used for medicinal purposes. For example, the diamond willow bark was used to treat pain.

There are many resources to learn more about native plants, such as Galileo.org [Nitsitapiisinni Stories and Spaces Exploring Kainai Plants and Culture](#), Alex Johnston's book [Plants and the Blackfoot](#) and writing of [Ben Calf Robe](#).

Rivers as Transportation Corridors to Places to Gather and Trade

Rivers were used as transportation corridors for people traveling between winter and summer camps. While traveling along the rivers, high points were used as lookout points, rest areas, and camp sites.

Rivers connect camps and special places in the mountains to annual big camps in the foothills or prairie areas. These gatherings included ceremonies to renew protection and stewardship of traditional territories. One of the main gathering points being Blackfoot Crossing.

Rivers were also used as transportation corridors to places to trade, such as the many Forts. Calgary was often a stopping point. In more recent times, to gather at the Calgary Stampede. The idea for the Stampede came from Siksika (Blackfoot) and Stoney rodeos before 1923 as these communities had herds of thousands of horses.

Rivers also used as transportation corridors for materials. After Treaty there were logging operations. Timbers would be carefully selected and harvested from places like the Castle Mountain area. Castle Mountain Junction is known as the place "where the waters turn back". River junctions are considered sacred, like the junction of the Bow and Elbow. It was common practice that men would harvest trees and women would gather medicines. To get timbers from where they were cut in the mountains or foothills to camps down river, harvesters would follow these logs on horseback along the banks to Princes' Island. Coloured spikes would identify these timbers from others who were harvesting.

High Cliffs as Burial Sites

High points often used as burial sites. Loved ones who have passed would have been placed on branches of trees to bring them closer to Creator. Although these traditions leave little archeological evidence, it is likely that the bluff along Crescent Road was a place where local bands said farewell to loved ones that had passed.

Felix McHugh and Relationship with Indigenous Communities

Felix McHugh, after whom the bluff park space is named, was a settler that migrated to the area in the late 1800s.¹ Elders noted that there is history between the McHugh family and Indigenous communities. Elders noted that the McHugh brothers were ranchers, with a ranch on the south side of the Bow River near Siksika. The McHughs allowed their herds to free graze on Blackfoot land without permission or compensation.

It was also noted that John Joseph McHugh, Felix’s brother who also migrated to the Calgary area, married Chief Big Snake’s sister Short Woman. Their children included twins John Jack McHugh and Frank Red Crow. Pictures of John Jack McHugh and Frank Red Crow can be found in the Glenbow Museum Archives (see Image No: NA-374-1, Title: Blackfoot twins, John James “Jack” McHugh and Frank Red Crow” below). The McHugh name continues to live on in community members in the Siksika and Piikani Nations.



Image: McHugh Bluff plaque. Source: iamcalgary.ca



Image: Blackfoot twins, John James "Jack" McHugh (left) and Frank Red Crow (right,) circa 1904. Source: Glenbow Museum

More information on the McHughs can be found in the City of Calgary report, "[CPS2015-0893, Statement of Significance for McHugh House](#)" and Society of Alberta Archives "[McHugh, J.J. McHugh, Thomas P. McHugh, Felix A. McHugh \(family\)](#)".

Elements of Cultural Significance

According to Blackfoot Elders, the concept of ‘four’ is significant. This relates to the four seasons, four directions, four quadrants, and four elements. The eastern direction is also significant. Doors of tipis always

¹ <https://albertaonrecord.ca/mchugh-j-j-mchugh-thomas-p-mchugh-felix-mchugh-familyhttps://pub-calgary.escribemeetings.com/filestream.ashx?DocumentId=9163>



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face east. Ceremonies face east. Seven is also a number of interest, relating to the seven stars of the big dipper. 13 is another number of significance as there are 13 moons in a full cycle.

Colours are also an important cultural element. Some colours and colour combinations are unique to certain groups or Nations, but there are also common colours. Beadwork is a common art form; however, each group or Nation has a different style.

Some additional cultural elements and forms that could be included in the landscape include the travois. Travois was a dynamic tool used as a form of sled to move heavy objects and belongings, but also as an awning.

Trickster is also a common figure in Creation stories. There are different names for Trickster depending on the nation. Often considered cultural heroes, tricksters are credited with protecting (and in some cases, creating) human life. As their name suggests however, tricksters are also associated with rule-breaking. They are curious pranksters who frequently cross and challenge boundaries, as well as ignore social harmony and order. For generations, trickster stories have been used to entertain community members as well as to transmit traditional knowledge about society, culture and morality.

Indigenous Students and Athletic Pursuits

There is a history of Indigenous students attending high schools in Calgary, including Crescent Heights High School. Many of these students were athletes, and training would take place in the park or along the hill. The hill is also used by many past and present students for graduation photos.

Some historical athletes include Charlie McMaster, a Western Hockey League player. Charlie is an example of a person whose story has not been told. Tom Threepersons is another historical figure and athlete. Tom was a rodeo cowboy, and part of the first Stampede. He was he first to ride a bronco.

Main Themes and Opportunities for Inclusion in the Space

The knowledge shared by Elders has helped the project team understand some of the traditional, cultural, and contemporary connections to the land and project area. Below are some themes that emerged along with ideas for opportunities to advance truth and reconciliation in the design of the space.

Elders noted that as part of the next steps that there is continued Indigenous community involvement to help guide acts of Truth and Reconciliation and detailed design of cultural elements that may be integrated into the landscape.

Theme	Possible Opportunities for Inclusion in the Space
History of the land and people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • History of the land and people is not just about farming or ranching. Commemorative or educational installations such as plaques, similar to the previous McHugh plaque near the stairs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Park bench or table plaques recognizing community members or Chiefs ○ Updating existing plaques with information of a more inclusive history



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Theme	Possible Opportunities for Inclusion in the Space
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunities to layer on pre-colonial or colonial history and experience from an Indigenous perspective • Augmented reality opportunities similar to the Urban Society for Aboriginal Youth (USAY) IndigiTrails • Celebrating space or streets through Indigenous language • Celebrating this space as a historical and current day lookout point • Acknowledgement that this space may have been used as a burial site in the past • Celebrating Indigenous contributions to the war and to athletics
Relationship to the land and land stewardship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Re-introduction of native plants, as long as they are protected <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Naturalization of spaces along the bluff or in the park ○ Educational or interpretive opportunities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sharing the names and stories of these plants in Blackfoot, Stoney, Tsuut'ina, Michif, and Cree • Educational opportunities to share ways of life, in particularly, protection and stewardship of the landscape • Use of natural materials that integrate with the landscape (rather than hard/cold/industrial surfaces like the metal guard rail that exists on site today)
Art and cultural elements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indigenous art along the bluff or in the park space • Printed wraps of original Indigenous art on bins or other functional features • Indigenous motifs or designs incorporated into functional elements of the streetscape such as benches • Flexible areas that can exist unprogrammed and provide ad hoc space for gathering, celebration, and ceremony • Stories can be told as the sun moves across the sky, from east to west • Symbols of resilience • Materiality that is hard to deface and a maintenance plan that accounts for the possibility of defacing and graffiti

The project team thanks the Elders for entrusting us with their knowledge and stories. The project team will strive to honour that trust by weaving these themes and design opportunities into the project so that the area along Crescent Road can embrace and reflect the whole story of this land and play a small part in the ongoing journey towards Truth and Reconciliation.