

The Evolution of the Workers Arts and Heritage Centre: Transcript

Note: Tara Bursey's answers have been edited down from a larger interview to suit the format and time limits of the podcast. Her original answers were not necessarily given exactly as they appear in this transcript.

Intro music

Megan Cumming, Host: Hello and welcome to my podcast, where we are exploring the realm of Canadian public history. I'm your host Megan Cumming, and today we will be taking a look at the unique blend of history, art, and community found at the Workers Arts and Heritage Centre in Hamilton, Ontario.

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The Workers Arts and Heritage Centre — also known as the W.A.H.C., or “WAHC” for short — is a place that transcends the traditional definitions of a history museum. Their mission is to bring together and showcase the diverse stories of labour through art, history, and culture, while fostering solidarity, equity, and dignity. I recently had the privilege of speaking with Tara Bursey, the Executive Director of the Heritage Centre, who was happy to elaborate:

Tara Bursey: “The Worker’s Arts and Heritage Centre’s Mission is to honour, preserve, and protect the history of working people in all of their diversity. We are interested in conveying through our programs and our exhibitions that all people work, and all work matters. So what this means is that you don't necessarily need to work for wages in order to work.”

MC: Bursey says that, especially in the last three years, the Centre has been committed to documenting and celebrating types of work that have traditionally gone unrecognized at major labour institutions; things like unpaid care work, working in the home, volunteer work and mutual aid, as well as indigenous understandings of work and labour.

TB: We were interested in...opening up people's understanding of what it means to work in the world...So for us that was a very important shift that we made about three years ago, in terms of our mission and our mandate.

MC: So, what about *before* three years ago? Well, the Workers Arts and Heritage Centre was originally founded over 25 years ago, and back then, its focus was on preserving the labour history of Ontario, with a strong emphasis on union history, industrial workers, and the iconic labour struggles of the 20th century. But, over the years, this standard labour narrative has become increasingly, well, out of touch with the needs and interests of modern Canadians.

TB: Now if I could if I had to describe what our permanent exhibits were like before ... they were created about 20 years ago, so they weren't necessarily compliant with contemporary accessibility standards, they were very wordy, and, profoundly, they lacked in diversity; so they overwhelmingly privileged a male worker, a white worker, and a worker in an industrial context...Really, the faces and the workers that we honour through our quote unquote “permanent” exhibits really were not a reflection of the community we serve, and we felt that it was very critical to change that.” Work has changed so much in 10 years, let alone 30 or 40 years, so we felt like having static exhibits that were ultimately quite out of date, was a real missed opportunity”

MC: So then, what updates can be made to dated, wordy, exhibits, that would both appeal to modern visitors, and still fulfill the Heritage Centre’s mission to preserve and educate about labour history? Well, Bursey says, it starts with art.

TB: You know, when I think about what's really exciting about some of the art that we show at WAHC, that history can be the seed of contemporary, objects, artistic objects that have a kind of an educational function for our visitors. Another thing is, you know oftentimes history holds up a mirror to the contemporary moment, and artists are in a really good position to be able to show that...Art is incredible in that you don't have to relate to everything in a work of art something can resonate with the viewer, and, you know, that can be a conversation starter

MC: A great exhibit that demonstrates this focus shift is a recent showing in the Main Gallery featuring artist Tabitha Arnold. This solo exhibition represents modern labour concerns through a surprisingly traditional medium — lush, hand-woven tapestries. Arnold’s textile work centres contemporary workers, celebrates the power of protest, and also finds beauty in the modern working experience.

TB: Tabitha Arnold is a really interesting artist, in that she identifies as both a contemporary artist, but also a labour activist ... We were a match made in heaven, in terms of the way that she weaves the contemporary experiences of workers with workers’ history. So right now as we’re we're chatting we're sitting in her exhibition and I believe there are about 10 works in this show called *The Peoples Cathedral*, which opened in September 2023, where there's an amazing kind of collision of contemporary issues for working people and also labour history and workers’ history...you know she has created this work called Gospel that shows historic workers in the textile industry; but to the right of that piece is a work called Hot Labour Summer, which is really about our contemporary moment specifically last summer and all of the labour activism that happened in both Canada and the United States.”

MC: An even greater example of the Centre's broadening mission is the current Community Gallery exhibit entitled *Work in Progress*. Bursey says this exhibit is part of a long-term plan to redevelop the Centre’s permanent exhibits through a process called “museum prototyping”.

TB: ...and what museum prototyping is, is it's kind of a deeply interactive, scrappy way of making exhibits, where it's really less about conveying information and more of that information gathering. So it's a great way to know your audience, but also learn about what interests them, and what they would like to see in your space. It's just a great way to gather information that you can then take into the next phase of the project”

MC: And so, prioritizes interactivity. A piece called *Workers Rights Cafe* serves up common requests like affordable childcare and health insurance, while encouraging visitors to pick up a piece of chalk and write their own suggestions on the menu board. Another piece, called the *Talk-Back Wall*, lists all different types of work, and asks visitors to chart themselves on the wall with stickers.

TB: I don’t know, I’ve talked to some colleagues and I've talked to people who’ve visited us, and they've some have said that the way that these exhibits have been presented they seem naïve, but the thing is, is they're doing a lot of heavy lifting for us and what they're also showing is that people have an appetite for interactivity in museums. They don't necessarily want to be told histories or told, have narratives dictated; they are interested in sharing their experiences, and it can be a two-way street museum compared to a street it can also be a work in progress”

MC: So, with this evolution of the Centre’s mission, and the new focus on art and interactivity, you might start to wonder: is there still room here for traditional history education?

TB: I think that that's an existing tension that we're always working through here. You know, we've often said over the years, that we’re a labour history Museum, and increasingly we are seeing less historic content. It's not to say that it's not there; for example, we do have a small exhibition of trade union banners in one of our small galleries, and that's really important, because we do have an incredible collection of about 2000 objects from Canada’s labour movement, past and present, so you know history is alive and in everything we do. Always, there will always be people who want to come and see maybe the history of their union logo represented, they're going to want to see the you know Hamilton's long storied history of steel production in this in the space, and you know that something that we will always a visit and revisit and revisit, is how can we optimally honour you know labour history and workers history with, you know, in a way that's relevant and then also honour the experiences of contemporary workers.

MC: So don’t worry, the museums permanent collection of labour history artifacts isn’t going anywhere. At the Workers Arts and heritage Centre, there is room for both the old and the new. Plus, the longer I spoke with Bursey, the clearer it became that the Heritage Centre has become so much more than just a space for art and artifacts. It's also a thriving community centre that offers a bunch of great services and initiatives. Bursey and her team are always busy hosting conferences, providing educational programming for schools, building community outreach programs, developing digital exhibits for their website, and so much more! And perhaps the most impressive part of all? Its all *free*.

TB: We've always had programs for families and for children, that were free or low cost, but you know its funny even saying low cost because I don't think we charged for, I don't remember the last time we charged for anything, outside of a fundraiser.”

MC: The Heritage Centre is funded through a combination of government grants, Union contributions, and private donations — so you can visit the site, and use most of its programs, totally free of charge. This funding model can be a little complex, and does create some challenges for the staff, but Bursey says freedom of access is central to the Museum’s identity. So, the more I learned about everything going on at this site, the more a fundamental question began to emerge. When I first began my research for this podcast, I thought I was writing about a history museum...But now, I’m not so sure. With its new mission and direction, this focus on art and community and outreach...*is* it still a museum? Or is it more of an art gallery, or more of a community centre? Could it be transformed into something else entirely?

TB: That's a really great question and I think that that's really, it comes up again and again and again at the Workers Arts and Heritage Centre... I guess I have two things to say about this really; that we can be the best of both worlds, that we can, you know, under one roof, we can embody history and the arts and they can work together. Something else is, you know, are we this or are we that — you know, we’re both in a way, but maybe we’re neither...maybe the definition of museum, the definition of art gallery, maybe they're not of use to us, maybe we really need to embrace...that we're neither, and that we are something more holistic and something different ...maybe the answer is in the word centre in our name. ”

MC: So, maybe its not a museum after all. Or, maybe its time to reconsider what that word means in the first place? Either way, it doesn’t sound Bursey and her team are going to let a little thing like semantics slow them down. The Centre’s 30th Anniversary is fast approaching, and they’ve got a lot planned.

TB: You know the big one in our conversation about work in progress...the results of all of this amazing research will see the light of day, you know through an eventual, like an exhibition revamp.”

MC: They’ve also got a new digital exhibit to launch this year, and a full slate of incoming art exhibitions booked through 2026.

TB: I think the future is bright...It’s inevitable that we’ll be very busy over the next few years, and, you know, we hope to have a lot of community engagement and continue the great outreach work that we've done over the last year.”

MC: As we start to wrap up, I want to leave you with a few final thoughts on the Centre and its role in Canadian public history. The Worker’s Arts and Heritage Centre shows that public history organizations can do much more than just preserve artifacts — they can show us how lessons from the past help us shape our future, they can encourage us to embrace the evolving narratives of our collective past, and they can challenge us to reconsider the definitions that we attach to words like “museum” in the first place. Most of all, the Workers Arts and Heritage Centre shows that our public history institutions are not set in stone; they are dynamic, they’re evolving — they’re a work in progress.

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MC: Thank you so much for joining me on this journey through the evolution of the Workers Arts and Heritage Centre. I also want to give an big extra thank you to the wonderful Tara Bursey for being so generous with her time and insights, and to the rest of the staff at WAHC who helped make this podcast happen. There is *so* much more to this incredible place than I could possibly squeeze into this one short episode, so I highly recommend giving them a visit the next time you’re in town, as well as checking out their website at WAHC-museum.ca. That URL, as well as music credits and all of my sources, can be found in the Show Notes of this digital exhibit. Thanks again and bye for now!

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