



RE-ORG: Canada

By Tyler C. Cantwell



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Figure 1. A disorganized and overcrowded storage area.

As visitors to museums wander past a myriad of collections with a wealth of heritage items on display, they may find themselves in awe of just how many heritage objects there are in Canada. It may shock visitors even more to discover that what is on display is only a small fraction of what is housed in museums. Sometimes, displays consist of “only about 5% of what a heritage institution owns and cares for,” says Simon Lambert, Manager of Preventive Conservation at the Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI). This creates a unique challenge: how to properly look after and store it all. After all, a key aspect of conservation is ensuring that preventive measures are in place to reduce the need to resort to more invasive conservation treatments. Museums and other heritage institutions can become overwhelmed by the sheer volume of objects they house. Collections become inaccessible, the knowledge they could potentially share is hidden and, in turn, a part of ourselves (our past, our history, our identity) remains locked away in a dark storage room. Moreover, disorganized conditions can put the objects stored within such a room at risk of being lost or damaged. A 2011 ICCROM–UNESCO international survey found that 60% of museum collections are at serious risk due to overcrowding and poor storage conditions.

That same year, ICCROM and UNESCO launched the [RE-ORG method](#) for reorganizing storage in small museums. The RE-ORG method is a step-by-step approach specifically designed for small and medium-sized heritage institutions. These institutions are particularly vulnerable to disorganization due to their limited resources. The method focuses on improving existing storage areas rather than planning or building new facilities.

[RE-ORG: Canada](#) was a multi-year training program launched in 2014 by CCI, in collaboration with the Museums Assistance Program (MAP). For five consecutive years, participating museums implemented the RE-ORG method in their institutions. In total, 27 successful projects were implemented across all regions of Canada. The RE-ORG: Canada program included distance instruction, face-to-face training and videoconference networking, all complemented with a year-long course held individually in each region. Over 60 heritage professionals benefited from this training.



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Figure 2. A storage space before RE-ORG.

The following quotes were pulled from post-training feedback surveys and show the value of RE-ORG: Canada to its participants and their colleagues.

“Knowing our collection better will make it easier for us to showcase it in our exhibitions.”

“The project has had a positive effect on the morale of the staff, board of directors and volunteers.”

“RE-ORG gave us the push and the confidence to make the changes [required] in the collection storage.”

Jason MacNeil, Education and Programming Coordinator at the PEI Museum and Heritage Foundation, co-designed, planned and implemented the [RE-ORG project within the province](#). He described RE-ORG as “the greatest professional development experience of my career.... By far, the three days of hands-on training ... were the most memorable part of the experience.” MacNeil went on to say that he remains most proud of the innovative approach of the program and the team (MacNeil 2022).

MacNeil co-led the project with Lesley Caseley, who was the Director and Training Coordinator of the Community Museums Association of Prince Edward Island (made up of over 30 museums) at the time. In 2016, CBC interviewed Caseley about the RE-ORG program. “Good storage is really important because you’re entrusted with peoples’ artifacts, what have become artifacts—part of their memories, part of their families,” she said (Russell 2016).

The RE-ORG program was particularly beneficial within the province, as storage has been an ongoing issue. Although discussions of a provincial museum go back many years, they have not yet resulted in a physical building. Thus, many heritage items are stored in an industrial park. With no tangible plans for a new building, reorganization was essential. “Sometimes collections have been around 50 or 60 years, and maybe something has been in storage for a while because it hasn’t come up in an exhibit, and museums are running out of space. And so, it’s really good to focus on the storage solutions—and easy simple ideas they can do to make their collections more accessible,” said Caseley (Russell 2016).

MacNeil told me that “[RE-ORG] has also been the program that keeps on giving, as we have taken part in several additional projects around it since we finished. Videos, conferences and interviews have all kept the project at the front of our minds over the years” (MacNeil 2022).

The Community Museums Association of Prince Edward Island and the PEI Museum and Heritage Foundation completed their project in nine months. During that time, team members moved and repurposed old cabinets and static shelving units. They catalogued objects, hung some in previously unused vertical spaces and created identification tags for them. Garment bags and padded hangers improved the storage conditions for textiles. “Our textile collection had countless benefits, including accessibility, ease of retrieval and reshelving and general care and well-being of the collection,” said MacNeil (2022).

From 2014 to 2019, similar outcomes occurred across the country in places such as the Haida Gwaii Museum (Skidegate, B.C.), Maison de Mère d’Youville (Montréal, Quebec), West Parry Sound District Museum (Parry Sound, Ontario), Northern Life Museum & Cultural Centre (Fort Smith, Northwest Territories) and many others. In total, RE-ORG: Canada had a positive impact on over 600,000 heritage objects across Canada.

Through the implementation of RE-ORG, CCI and MAP ensured not only the preservation of heritage objects within collections across the country, but they also improved public access to these treasures.

“That’s over \$200,000 injected into storage upgrade projects in Canada by MAP to benefit small to medium-sized museums,” said Lambert, who coordinated CCI’s RE-ORG: Canada program. “That’s very significant, given that investing in caring for collections in storage, a back-of-house activity, is often a challenging proposition for many institutions who find themselves having to focus more and more on revenue-generating activities. Participating museums now know what they have in their collection and are able to access it. This allows them to develop programs and activities to engage their communities.”



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Figure 3. Overcrowded storage shelves before RE-ORG.



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Figure 4. The same space as in Figure 3, after RE-ORG.

Now that RE-ORG: Canada has concluded, the ripple effects extend across Canada and beyond. CCI has seen a growing number of users and a growing demand for RE-ORG training. As a result, CCI is organizing its first virtual advanced professional development workshop, entitled “Becoming a RE-ORG Coach,” in the fall of 2022. The workshop will allow a group of experienced RE-ORG users from Canada and abroad to practise their coaching skills and workshop development skills so as to further support the expansion of the RE-ORG network.

“I am looking forward to seeing RE-ORG enter this next phase,” said Lambert, “and to see the network take on a life of its own and gain its own momentum, developing new tools, new initiatives and new collaborations.”

Bibliography

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