

# The Imaginary Colliery Project: the Future of Tourism in Crowsnest Pass

## *Introduction*

This work specifically examines a transition from resource based industries to a tourism economy in the Crowsnest Pass. *The Imaginary Colliery Project* proposal complicates this movement from mining to tourism and suggests that authentic histories, architecture and culture can be fabricated to suit the necessities of tourist industries.

## *Background*

The Crowsnest Pass is located on the mountainous border between south-western Alberta, and south-eastern British Columbia, Canada. The municipality of Crowsnest Pass consists of five former mining towns along the number three highway: Hillcrest, Bellevue, Frank, Blairmore and Coleman. These towns relied on coal mining as the primary source for employment, development and the organization of social life, but when the coal market became untenable, this industry vanished leaving the pass with a skeletal mining infrastructure and the usual assortment of decrepit motels, diners and gas stations. Unemployment sharply increased as individuals struggled to maintain their standard of living and the community.

The current state of affairs is much different. While not exactly booming, Crowsnest Pass is becoming a haven for boomers. Calgarians, living only two hours away, are flooding the real-estate market. Housing prices are exploding by two hundred percent. There is still a small town, country life feel to attract suburbanites as well as the necessary amenities to support a growing population. Couple this with the tremendous geographical and historical potential in the area and Crowsnest seems likely to become the next mountain community invested with Calgary oil money. Thus the combination of "cabin" culture and historical significance gives Crowsnest Pass something that other less fortunate small communities do not have: tourism.

Tourism is, not surprisingly, the new dominant industry in the Pass. Cumulatively its effects bring in more dollars than any other business. This tourist trade is primarily bifurcated into history-based tourism and environment-based tourism. History-based tourism developed in

response to historic architectural and industrial sites, fostering the growth of many museums, plaques, information sites and vintage or antiques businesses.

Environment-based tourism consists of primarily recreation activities such as fishing, climbing, skiing, hiking, snowmobiling, ATVing, hunting etc. All of these locations and activities commingle with each other to create a diverse and interconnected scenario.

## *The Question for Crowsnest Pass*

Given the past collapse of the primary industry in the region, Crowsnest Pass is facing a serious question. This can be stated simply: how can tourism be sustained as a stable economic base for the Municipality of Crowsnest Pass?

All environment-based tourism in the area is directly linked to the landscape and so preserving the geographical and environmental qualities of the area is a primary concern. This situation is consistently addressed through municipal planning and there are indications that the people of the region are aware that their livelihoods are directly linked to preserving the local environment in order to continue attracting tourists. In *Pass to the Future*, a statistical summary report on Crowsnest Pass administered and compiled by Norman Connolly and Matthew MacNeil, it was discovered that, "when [Crowsnest Pass residents were] asked what top three criteria should be used to evaluate new development (both economic and residential) environmental considerations ranked first." In addition, 99% of the respondents in the survey said that the environment

is an important/very important aspect of life in Crowsnest Pass.

In contrast to the attention paid to environmental concerns, the methods required to maintain history-based tourism have not been fully addressed. Certainly preserving the existing historic buildings and artifacts is fundamental to this process, but this strategy may lack long term sustainability. Local historic sites are subject to the infamously harsh weather patterns of the Crowsnest Pass. Dramatic freeze-thaw activity and high winds have resulted

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in rapid erosion of even the most sturdy of historical sites. In addition antiques and artifacts which are not preserved in museum collections are being quickly purchased by collectors. These items have a limited supply and thus will begin to run out as demand increases. The question that develops from these situations then becomes, how can a long-term plan be established for an industry that is dependent on ephemeral, decaying or fragile products?

Many would advocate in this situation for a kind of sustained development, which maintains and preserves historic buildings and locations while also providing eco-friendly access to recreational sites. The Municipality of Crowsnest Pass Municipal Development Plan prepared by the Oldman River Intermunicipal Service Agency corresponds with this attitude when it states that "[sensitive and historic sites] have both tourist and historic value for the municipality and are worth protecting" (page 43). The Imaginary Colliery proposal agrees with these positions, but also goes a step further.

Fraudulent historical sites should be created in Crowsnest Pass. These sites should emphasize minimal impact to natural surroundings and promote recreational activities, while also providing opportunities for historical inquiry, community engagement and interactive learning.

This proposal advocates the design and construction of architectural ruins which effectively mimic early twentieth century mining sites. These site constructions should not be undertaken as reproductions or recreations - but rather seamlessly embody the appearance of a real ruin to the smallest details. False histories for each site will be written and materials and architectural designs will be as historically accurate as possible. Documents and photographs will reflect early twentieth century styles, fashions and technologies. Sites will be chosen for their natural beauty, but also their geological accuracy as potential past coal mines. All of this will produce the greatest feeling of authenticity possible - not recreating the past, but making a symmetrical copy, a perfect reflection of something which never existed, but could have.

#### *Short Term Plan*

The first consideration for the *Imaginary Colliery* is site. The ideal site emphasizes natural features of the region and draws attention to the spectacular physical geography. It is also located within view of the highway, so that east and westbound traffic can see the colliery. After careful consideration a site near the Frank Slide (a tremendous natural rock slide and major tourist attraction of the region) which is elevated above the highway affords the greatest visual effect. This site also provides a viewing area for other historical features and functions within the already established infrastructure of the area.

The initial model design for the building intended for this site developed through the study of a number of architectural sites in Crowsnest Pass, most notably Leitch collieries and Mowhawk collieries near the eastern edge of the municipality. The model is a fusion between these sites and emphasizes a multi-level design which would be built into a hillside. This hillside design accommodates a number of classical and modernist elements most notably a series of "pilotti" supporting the main coal deck, a dramatic elevated position and the use of cast concrete forms for overall construction. These elements will ultimately reflect a vernacular architecture that develops from purely functional considerations. The union created through these different styles will result in a Corbusieresque Acropolis of industrial decay.

The construction of the *Imagined Colliery* will take place in two phases: the first phase being the completion of the colliery to appear as being functional; the second phase is the willful dilapidation of this building to simulate the effects of time and weather. During the first phase elements such as the tipple (a large conveyor system which moves coal from the mine cars into the colliery building) and coke ovens will be accurately constructed. The building, tipple pylons and coke ovens will be built from cast concrete and brick, as well as naturally occurring sandstone from the surrounding area. Once the building is complete extensive photographic documentation will be made in order to produce accurate historical documents of the building. After construction is finished the building will then be systematically deteriorated to give the effect of age. Roofs will be caved-in, walls smashed through and functional elements removed or destroyed. A mild acid can be used in a controlled way to produce the effect of water erosion on concrete. Any metals used in the process will be rapidly oxidized to produce rust. Once these procedures are undertaken the site will be rehabilitated back to its original condition in order to reduce impact on the surrounding environment.

#### *Long-Term Plan*

After the architectural elements of the *Imaginary Colliery* are completed every effort will be made to integrate it into the history and culture of Crowsnest as accurately as possible. This activity will require a thorough re-working of historical documents and the production of many artifacts, tools and antiques which reflect the building's role in the community. Once these documents and photographs are produced a museum or archive will be built which presents the material and objectively embeds the colliery into all facets of life in Crowsnest Pass. Additionally, products such as

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books, postcards, t-shirts, pins, collectible spoons, posters and other trinkets will be created as retail items related to the colliery.

At the site of the colliery there will be a series of interpretive trails built. These trails will include informative signs presenting the history, technical workings and social aspects of the mine. It will also be beneficial to link these trails with other trail networks in the area to create a possible walking tour which includes Leitch Collieries to the east and the Frank Slide Interpretive Centre to the west. This trail will then become a site promoting hiking and other environment-based tourism activities in the area.

*Conclusion*

The *Imaginary Colliery Project* addresses a number of the key issues facing the tourism industry in the Crowsnest Pass Municipality. The project will provide short and long term employment opportunities for many local residents and will benefit the community economically and culturally by preserving traditional arts and crafts, supporting construction workers, writers, photographers and historians and increasing the production and sales of tourism related products. In addition the colliery will be constructed in a manner which will not detract from the picturesque environment and which is developed as a long-term sustainable model. For this reason every effort will be made to produce collieries at a rate which will not over-stimulate the economy or negatively affect the natural wonders of the pass.

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*The Imaginary Colliery Project was developed from a collaborative residency in the Crowsnest Pass during August 2006. Scott Rogers worked directly with the writer and historian Carol Williams to develop a number of projects which re-examined the history and culture of the pass including a collaborative book project which will be published in 2007. The residency and publication were developed and organized by Trap/door Artist Run Centre in Lethbridge and funding for the residency was provided by the Alberta Foundation for the Arts.*

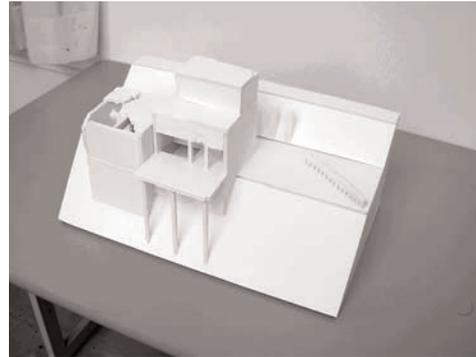
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References:

Connolly, Norman and MacNeil, Matthew, Pass to the Future Summary Report, Crowsnest Pass, 1999.  
 Municipality of Crowsnest Pass Municipal Development Plan Background Report, prepared by the Oldman River Intermunicipal Service Agency, 2001.



Mohawk colliery



Imaginary Colliery model



coal deck (detail)



coke ovens (detail)



collapsed roof (detail)