

# Canadian Museum for Human Rights can change Canada, CEO Stuart Murray believes

BY DON BUTLER, OTTAWA CITIZEN    MAY 6, 2014



Stuart Murray, the President and CEO of the new Canadian Museum of Human Rights - the first national museum outside of the National Capital Region. Mr. Murray was photographed May 6, 2014 on Parliament Hill - the scene of several events depicted in the museum. (Julie Oliver/Ottawa Citizen)

**Photograph by:** Julie Oliver, Ottawa Citizen

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On the subject of Winnipeg's new Canadian Museum for Human Rights, Stuart Murray makes no bones about it: he's an optimist.

"If you're not going to be optimistic with a project of this magnitude," the museum's president and CEO said during a promotional visit to Ottawa Tuesday, "you might as well get out."

But Murray's optimism extends far beyond his conviction that the \$351-million museum, which opens Sept. 20, will be a popular success. He believes it will change Canada.

"Canada has never had a place to tell this kind of story before," said Murray, who admits he knew more about American civil rights icon Rosa Parks before starting at the museum than he did about Viola Desmond, a high-profile casualty of racial discrimination in Nova Scotia.

The new museum will change that. By the time they finish touring the museum's 11 galleries, visitors are "going to be inspired to make this a better civil society, a better human rights society," he said.

"That's our mandate, that's our goal."

The human rights museum is the first national museum ever established and built outside the National Capital Region. The federal government contributed \$100 million, Manitoba anted up \$40 million and the City of Winnipeg kicked in another \$23.6 million. The rest came from private sector donors.

Murray acknowledged that many questioned the choice of Winnipeg for the museum. He is almost

aggressively unapologetic.

“There’s such a rich history in Manitoba around human rights stories that it is a natural home for the Canadian Museum for Human Rights,” he said. Think of Riel and the Métis, the Winnipeg general strike, the battle for French-language schools.

But will people make the long journey to Winnipeg to visit the museum? The CEO has no doubt. For one thing, the building – designed by American architect Antoine Predock – looks stunning. As with Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, people will come “because of the spectacular architecture,” said Murray, who calls the museum a “once in a generation project.” One independent estimate projected 250,000 annual visitors. “We feel very comfortable with that number,” Murray said.

As befits a museum dedicated to human rights, its building will be the most accessible in North America “and maybe beyond,” he said, supplanting the Smithsonian museums in Washington. “Everyone’s going to have the same experience in this museum,” Murray said.

Thanks to new technologies, those with disabilities “will have the same experience as those who have sight, those who are able to hear, those who are not in a chair.

The museum has endured its share of controversy. Some in the Ukrainian-Canadian community, for example, fear the prominence given to the Holocaust by the museum could overshadow the Holodomor, the famine caused by Joseph Stalin that killed up to 7.5 million Ukrainians in 1932-33. Murray dismissed that as “one person’s opinion” and called the criticism unfounded, though the museum has just made an addition to the Holodomor exhibit “because we think it’s the right thing to do.”

There will always be some people who disagree with the museum’s decisions, he said, but “we have followed a very robust, very studied approach, using outside academics to peer review processes.

“We’re very confident of the process we’ve gone through. People may disagree, but that’s what we’re trying to encourage. That starts the debate.”

People are passionate about human rights, Murray said. “We want to be able to take that passion and turn it into a passionate conversation. As long as there’s a conversation, good things can happen.”

In Winnipeg, a city with new swagger, the Canadian Museum for Human Rights is one of those good things.

[dbutler@ottawacitizen.com](mailto:dbutler@ottawacitizen.com)

[twitter.com/ButlerDon](https://twitter.com/ButlerDon)

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