

HAMILTON THE ELECTRIC CITY, NIKOLA TESLA AND THE FIVE JOHNS PUBLIC ART PROJECT



FOCUS GROUP REPORT

Date: January 13, 2022

Location: Zoom (Online)

Time: 6:30 PM - 9:00 PM

Attendees

Florencia Berinstein	Executive Director, Workers Arts and Heritage Centre
Milena Balta	Director, Nikola Tesla Education Corp. (NTEC)
Vic Djurdjevic	President, Nikola Tesla Education Corp. (NTEC)
Heather George	Indigenous Historian and Curator
Megan Hobson	Architectural Historian
Anthony Hunt	Student, NTEC Scholarship Winner
Ian Kerr-Willson	Previous Manager, Heritage Resource Management, City of Hamilton
Juby Lee	Project Manager, Environment Hamilton
Tor Lukasik-Foss	Director of Education and Programs, Art Gallery of Hamilton / Public Artist
Petra Matar	Partner, dpai architecture inc. / Artist
Maria Topalovic	Board of Directors, Hamilton Conservation Authority
Jen Anisef	Facilitator, City of Hamilton, Public Art and Projects
Ken Coit	City of Hamilton, Public Art and Projects

Purpose

This group was brought together to review plans for a public art competition at Confederation Beach Park and to advise on specific goals and themes for the art work related to Hamilton the Electric City, Nikola Tesla and the Five Johns.

Background

Jen Anisef gave a presentation outlining the project background, public art process and context. It was noted that the project was identified in the Park Master Plan and approved in the City of Hamilton Public Art Master Plan (2016). The public art project has an overall budget of \$225,000, including a donation from the Nikola Tesla Educational Foundation for \$25,000. The art work is to address the larger theme of the story of Nikola Tesla and the 5 Johns

bringing alternating current power to Hamilton and its impact on Hamilton's past, present and future. The site for the art work is a grass area along the Hamilton Beach Trail to the east of the Go Kart Tracks – nearby to Nikola Tesla Boulevard.

A brief review of the history of the Five Johns' (Patterson, Dickenson, Gibson, Moodie, and Sutherland) successful venture to bring Nikola Tesla's patented alternating current (AC) technology (which could generate hydro-electric power and transmit it over great distances) to Hamilton in the late 19th century was shared. Context was also provided regarding the impact of AC power on Hamilton's manufacturing sector, immigration and population growth, environmental impacts as well as Hamilton's reputation as an "Ambitious City".

Vic Djurdjevic provided some additional details about Nikola Tesla's legacy.

Discussion

Members of the focus group were asked to address the following question as part of a general discussion

Considering its impact on Hamilton's past, present and future - what aspects of the story of Nikola Tesla and the 5 Johns bringing A/C of power to Hamilton do you think artists should be asked to reflect in proposals for public art?

The following responses were provided:

People don't get much out of statues

Tesla's story / the artwork should be inspiring to students - discover the history and be inspired to innovate for the future.

Innovation - focal point for inspiration.

Innovation of hydroelectric power changed society.

A catalyst for Hamilton's development.

Rapid growth meant destruction as well - such as environmental degradation.

Were the 5 Johns working for the public interest - maybe not? Cataract Power Company was driven by financial interests - was sold to industry and competed with public power i.e Hamilton Hydro

Drove social and financial inequity e.g. through inequitable distribution of power to homes.

Solar and wind activated art - exploration/celebration of what innovation can do. It is looking to the future.

Must consider unintended consequences of new technologies.

Paradigm shift re: our changing relationship to energy. Human understanding of energy and power was altered by electricity. At one time it was generated through our own efforts as individuals. Electricity meant energy became invisible. The invisibility may disconnect us from it. Perhaps we are moving towards visibility again - e.g. through solar panels.

Inventors don't always control how their ideas are used.

Balance in our understanding of innovation - good and bad consequences. Obligation and responsibility to the natural world and citizens. Three essential elements are: 1. Responsibility 2. Obligation and 3. Balance

Sometimes slow is good.

Wind power - uses the natural features of the site (shoreline is very windy).

Tree stumps carvings - already there - may want to connect with existing art.

Sensitivity to be aware of: when trees were cut on the Beach Strip for hydro towers - the community was very upset.

Invisibility of energy - tension with the site - the hydro corridor vs natural beach. "This is a Hamilton beach" (vs. a beach in Cuba).

Hydro corridor makes the power visible.

Consequence of innovation - lessons of this story and site.

Consider positive and negative effects for all innovation - e.g. wind power's impact on birds. Still need to move forward and look for better solutions.

Two sides to the coin - computers would not be possible without AC power.

Sometimes we look at the past and condemn it.

Electrical progress happened because there is starting point in the past and we have built upon it up to today.

Without that past there would be no present. Future will evolve from the knowledge of the present.

People were originally afraid of this technology. Hydro station architect tried to make the technology feel safe/ part of the neighbourhood.

Hesitancy of accepting new technology.

Innovation of the past - invisibility in the present - responsibility in the future

The tension between nature, urbanism, industry - look to a balanced future.

Hydro line on the beach is Ontario Hydro - public. Cataract Power hydroelectricity came down King's Forest.

Transmission towers are visible landmarks - could inspire artists. Some artists create art from the towers themselves.

Original Welland canal source of water for this power - may have flooded indigenous land?

Cleaner energy technology but resulted in filling in harbour, tough working conditions in the resulting industry, hydro power dams negatively affect natural areas.

Tesla's original intent with this technology was for it to be safe and cost effective - looking toward the future. He felt that we should not be consuming something (i.e. coal) to make energy. He intended to transmit power without wires. A/C power was a move forward away from fossil fuels. Tesla innovation - taken over by greed?

This technology has three components - 1. Power generation 2. Transmission and 3. Distribution.

These systems are all interconnected - transforms many things. Paradigm shift.

A/C power development and resulting industry growth brought in immigrants from different cultures/places from around the world and shaped Hamilton's diverse population.

Many felt they improved their quality of life. E.g. electric street cars - labour saving devices - power in your home.

This technology shaped the city physically and culturally - shaping the future of the city.

Grid went to industry and downtown first - then to neighbourhoods as the city expands.

A/C Power took time to reach homes in some places - in some areas of Europe it didn't arrive until the 1950s. Most homes in Hamilton had power by the early 1910s.

Focussing on individuals can be an oversimplification. E.g. The "War of the Currents" between Edison and Tesla - using fear to discredit A/C power.

Invisibility of power, where power can be understood re: electricity and political / social power.

Similarly "grounded" can refer to power and a grounding of innovation in responsibility, obligation and balance.

Sustainable technology - starting from the present as we cannot control the future, only the here and now. Responsible innovation from today forward.

Note the underlying goodness of Tesla's vision in background history as well as unintended consequences.

There is no power available at the site, however solar or wind power can be generated at the location and stored for continuous use.

Summary

The group identified what they felt to be the most important concepts as the evening ended. These are highlighted in **green** above. Based on these concepts, public art staff has developed the following Project Goal:

That the proposed Public Art work(s) reflect the complex social, environmental and physical impact that AC hydroelectric power (invented by Nikola Tesla and brought to the city by the five Johns) had and continues to have on Hamilton, as well as inspire a spirit of responsible and balanced innovation for the future.

The following Project Themes have been identified:

- **AC power as a catalyst for Hamilton's development, influencing its population through an immigration boom and shaping the city physically and culturally.**
- **Spirit of innovation embodied by Nikola Tesla - an inspiration to youth today.**
- **Our changing relationship to energy as it transitioned from the visible to the invisible; with hydroelectricity, power became quiet, cheap, constant, ubiquitous and easier to take for granted.**
- **Sustainable technology - responsible innovation from today forward; solar or wind power can be generated at the site and stored for continuous use.**

Next Steps

This focus group report will be posted on the City of Hamilton's Public Art website at www.hamilton.ca/publicart for public comment.

A Call for Artists, including the above project goal and themes, site constraints and technical requirements will be issued in winter 2022. At the focus group's request, this call will also include the following background information:

- History of Nikola Tesla and the 5 Johns bringing AC power to Hamilton.
- Social, environmental and urban industrial history outlining the positive and detrimental impacts of this technology.

A jury of citizens, local artists and arts professionals will short list up to six artists' proposals to be posted on the city website and promoted through a media release and social media.

The jury will select a winning proposal based on artistic excellence, response to the competition goal, technical concerns and the public response in summer 2022.



Hamilton

**Tourism and Culture Division
Planning and Economic Development Department**