



## **Why is this thing significant?**

(Or: *Beyond the National Dream: Significance Assessment of Large Transport Collections*)

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This presentation was based on my Master's degree in Museum Studies dissertation at the University of Leicester. My topic originates in a project I led for the Canadian Council for Railway Heritage starting around 2003 in which a task force of Canadian railway museum representatives developed a significance assessment framework for a "Decentralized National Railway Collection for Canada".

My HRA presentation covered the following areas:

- *What is significance?* Basic foundational concepts – significance, value, meaning, sustainability;
- *Why now?* Distributed national collections context and the Canadian need;
- *Why bother?* The benefits of systematic significance assessment;
- *What's the State of the Art?* Existing significance assessment philosophies and practices in Canadian, U.S. and U.K. transport museums;
- *What's the recommendation?* A Distributed National Railway Collection for Canada significance assessment framework adaptable to individual institutions.

## **Foundational Concepts**

A few foundational concepts are needed for this topic:

- Significance – my working definition was “the importance of an object as determined by the aggregate of *values* and *meanings* attributed to it”
- Value – Oxford English Dictionary (2011) defines Value as, variously:
  - *Worth or quality as measured by a standard of equivalence*
  - *The place or function of a sign within a system of signs from which it derives its meaning*
  - *Worth based on esteem; quality viewed in terms of importance, usefulness, desirability, etc.*



The significance literature emphasizes that value is assigned by society *rather than being intrinsic* to an object. It varies by collections type, frame of reference, treatment and context. Therefore, what is significant to past generations may not be significant to future ones. Values are highly consequential to objects – they impact what we collect, conserve, restore, dispose of, or don't collect at all.

- Meaning – Objects are “Polysemantic” – they have many, nearly inexhaustible meanings (Pearce, 2010). Objects are deep with different levels of data and meaning (e.g. Van Mensch, 2010; Fleming, 1974). But objects cannot speak for themselves (Crew and Sims, 1991) and objects that are not familiar to an audience can be difficult for them to “read” (Kavanagh, 2005). Whether an object is familiar or not, “The message or meaning which the object offers is always incomplete and each viewer fills in the gaps in his own way...” (Pearce, 2010).
- Sustainability – Museum sustainability has five facets – Social, Cultural, Environmental, Health and Financial. These all need to be satisfied in some way in order for a museum to be sustainable (Alberta Museums Association, 2013).

### **Significance, Meaning and Value for Future Generations**

These concepts matter because we have been able to rely on visitors whose daily lives involved railways in some way (also known as the “railway generation”) – they can find meaning and nostalgia in even the most decayed or poorly-presented railway car or locomotive. However, modern generations who did not experience railways in daily life will not find this same meaning. In fact, many of the conventional meanings and narratives of the railway in Canada (and the US) are being subjected to new scrutiny and interpretation (e.g. Monkman’s *Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resistance*, 2017 regarding the impact of the railway on Canadian First Nations peoples).

Fortunately, the railway is so polysemantic that new meanings are easily found for railway locomotives and cars. Canada’s railway story is potentially relevant to a broad and diverse future audience, packed with vastly different entry points and potential meanings for different groups and generations, e.g. race, immigration and culture, agriculture and food security, colonization and its impacts, public safety and energy security, community development and technology, and the list goes on and on.

But the railway cars and locomotives we have preserved and how we interpret them isn’t currently equal to the task. We have barely taken the wrapper off of advancing railway and transport scholarship such as *Social Construction of Technology and Mobility* which could help us develop a dramatically expanded set of new meanings and values for our railway collections.



## Canada's Railway Accumulation Tells a Confusing Story

Cranbrook Railway Museum founder Garry Anderson (1989) counted the numbers of each equipment type listed in Canada's *Trackside Guide* (current edition: Roberts and Stremes, 2019). If you were a Martian coming to study the story of Canada's railways, you would come up with a very strange story indeed, based on what is preserved.

From this national accumulation, for example, you'd think cabooses were really important and central to the Canadian railway story, because they make up about a fifth of all preserved equipment in Canada. You'd also conclude business cars were really important, because 44 of them are preserved. But you'd think colonist cars were relatively trivial, because only two of them were preserved – yet colonization is a key part of the national story and they vastly out-numbered business cars on Canada's two transcontinental railways.

Therefore, it is time for Canada to view its national railway accumulation, with its vast potential meanings for a diverse audience, through a new set of lenses to determine in a systematic, thoughtful and fact-based way which pieces are meaningful and important and which should be preserved and passed on to future generations, and why.

Significance assessment is a key factor in this process, but for practical purposes it is "hiding in plain sight" in the railway preservation field. This impacts our railway museums reaching their full potential and sustainability in:

- embracing more contemporary and relevant understandings;
- creating relevance and public value for future audiences and stakeholders;
- our collections fully supporting our missions.

## My Research and Key Findings

I conducted a literature review of over 160 scholarly articles and books and several dozen museum policies and processes and non-academic articles. I conducted 19 in-depth interviews with railway, maritime and aviation museums, sectoral associations and a distributed national collection. I reviewed 14 significance assessment frameworks in detail, and re-compiled their criteria into 36 emergent groupings, triangulated between literature and actual practice, and boiled them down into nine value categories, and a new significance assessment framework for railway equipment.

In reviewing transport museums' current practices, I found out the following:

- Significance is most often considered during acquisitions and disposals, but few museums do regular collections reviews which incorporate significance;
- Current significance assessment practices use a mixed and disorderly grouping of criteria, some of which don't relate to significance at all;
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- Across railway museums, templated -- frequently identical -- criteria, collections plans and policies aren't helpful in making the most of significance;
- Our sectoral representatives make little mention of, nor guidance for, significance assessment; the recommended criteria are pretty limited and do not consider meaning driven by modern transport scholarship.

I found two evident patterns in significance assessment:

- Systematic vs. Non-Systematic (“Systematic” means having a clear purpose for the evaluation, using clear and consistent written criteria, rigor, use of factual bases, consistent and repeatable practices, and significance permeating collections practices);
- Deductive vs. Inductive (“Deductive” approaches start with the written “big ideas” of the railway story and identify what objects matter most to this story; “Inductive” approaches lack the written big narrative and instead focuses on lots of individual characteristics);
- I also found one “outlier” institution that believed that everything in its collection was significant and all of its vehicles were equally significant.

### **Recommended Significance Framework:**

The significance framework I recommended for a Distributed National Railway Collection for Canada has the following values:

- Core Values
  - Technology and Construction Values
  - Aesthetic Values
  - Historical Association Values
  - Historical Impact Values
  - Contemporary Social Values
  - Information or Research Values
- Comparative Values
  - Rarity & Representativeness
  - Provenance
  - Integrity

The framework includes sub-values for each of the Core Values and Comparative Values, and an assessment protocol.

### **Why “Do” Significance?**

- Better sustainability and public value
- Better collections
- Better presentations (i.e. exhibits, programming, interpretation)
- Better institutional profile and participation



- Better revenues and stakeholder support
- Better control of collections cost and resource use

## **Recommendations**

As a sector, we should:

- Prescribe use of mainstream museum sector frameworks (at a minimum);
- Better yet, ratify and use our own standard set as a sector;
- Embrace evolving transport scholarship (i.e. Mobility) and reflect it in significance criteria;
- Encourage, develop and use collections registries of locomotives and cars to understand institutional holdings;
- Develop context documents enabling a deductive approach to Significance.

## **What's Next? I am working on the following:**

- Publishing this research in a peer-reviewed scholarly journal to fill the Transport and Technology significance literature gap;
- Starting the significance conversation in the Transport Museum sector;
- Encouraging development / improvement of significance and its role in accreditation guidelines and recommended practices;
- Supporting development of registries and their source documents (especially Canada's *Trackside Guide*);
- Starting to work on significance assessment projects.

