

For the Indigenous, Was This Building a Gesture of Reconciliation? Or an Empty Gift?

The company chartered centuries ago to found the colony that became part of Canada last year gave a building to the Indigenous that is heavy in symbolism. The move is being criticized by some as hollow.

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Reporting from Winnipeg, Manitoba

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Near the old perfume counters on the ground floor of the Hudson's Bay department store in Winnipeg, Canada, a trade dripping with symbolism took place.

The 39th “governor” of Hudson's Bay — North America's oldest company and one of Canada's most iconic — accepted from an Indigenous leader two beaver pelts and two elk hides in exchange for the building, the company's onetime Canadian flagship.

The ceremony took place a year ago when Hudson's Bay, the company once chartered to found the colony that became part of Canada, gave away its shuttered, 600,000-square-foot, six-floor downtown building to a group of First Nations. But what seemed like an act of reconciliation has become a subject of intense debate as the building's worth and the cost of transforming it have become clearer: Was this a real gift or an empty one?

The gift of the building has focused attention on the evolving relationship between Hudson's Bay and Indigenous people in Canada, as well as their central role in the history of a country founded on the fur trade between them and the company.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and others who attended the ceremony praised the transfer of the building as an act of reconciliation between Canada and its oppressed Indigenous population. But with the ceremony's feel-good effects dissipating, the details of the deal are raising questions about economic fairness as Canada works to achieve reconciliation with its Indigenous communities.





The facade of the store, emblazoned with the Southern Chiefs' Organization logo, seen through windows in a nearby cafe.

The Indigenous owners aim to turn the sprawling structure into a multiuse building for their community that would include restaurants, a rooftop garden and a healing center incorporating Western and traditional medicine.

In 2019, commercial real estate appraisers said the building was worth nothing — or even less, because bringing it up to code alone would cost up to 111 million Canadian dollars (\$82 million).

The company declined to comment for this article and provided a general statement that did not address details of the handover.

For generations — at least for customers who were not Indigenous — a visit downtown was incomplete without a stop inside the Bay's ornate, neo-Classical monolith that spread across the shopping district's choicest blocks.

So the transfer was a potent act, especially for people like Darian McKinney, 27, one of the two Indigenous architects entrusted with the building's transformation. Like many other Indigenous Canadians, Mr. McKinney never went to the store, even though he grew up in Winnipeg.



A map in the Manitoba Museum in Winnipeg depicts the voyage of The Nonsuch, the ship that launched the Hudson's Bay Company. The Nonsuch sailed from England in 1668 to trade for furs in Hudson Bay.



An exhibit in the Hudson's Bay Company wing of Winnipeg's Manitoba Museum. The company, established in 1670, grew the fur trade in what later became Canada using knowledge from Indigenous communities.

Besides being unable to afford to shop at the Bay, he also knew that Indigenous people had often been made to feel unwelcome; from his grandparents, he was aware of a not-too-distant past when they could not leave reserves to visit cities without a pass from a so-called Indian agent.

“If you could even afford to shop at the Bay,” he said, “you felt like you didn’t belong.”

In some parts of Canada, the pass system remained in effect through the 1940s.

“The environment in downtown Winnipeg was rooted in the exclusion of Indigenous people,” said Reanna Merasty, 27, the other Indigenous architect working on the building’s makeover.

The building’s new owners, the Southern Chiefs’ Organization, which represents 34 First Nations in Manitoba, envision turning it “into a space for economic and social reconciliation” for their community in Winnipeg, which is home to Canada’s largest urban Indigenous population.

The organization is still struggling to raise 20 million of the 130 million Canadian dollars that it says is needed to renovate the building.

For now, the mammoth structure sits mostly empty, with unclothed mannequins, a poster of Justin Bieber in Calvin Kleins, and dusty signage — “Store Closing. Everything must go” — recalling the department store’s final days.



A photo of Justin Bieber on an empty floor of the closed 600,000-square-foot flagship store once owned by the Hudson's Bay Company.



A bison statue was placed at the entrance of the store a year before the building's transfer ceremony to Indigenous people.

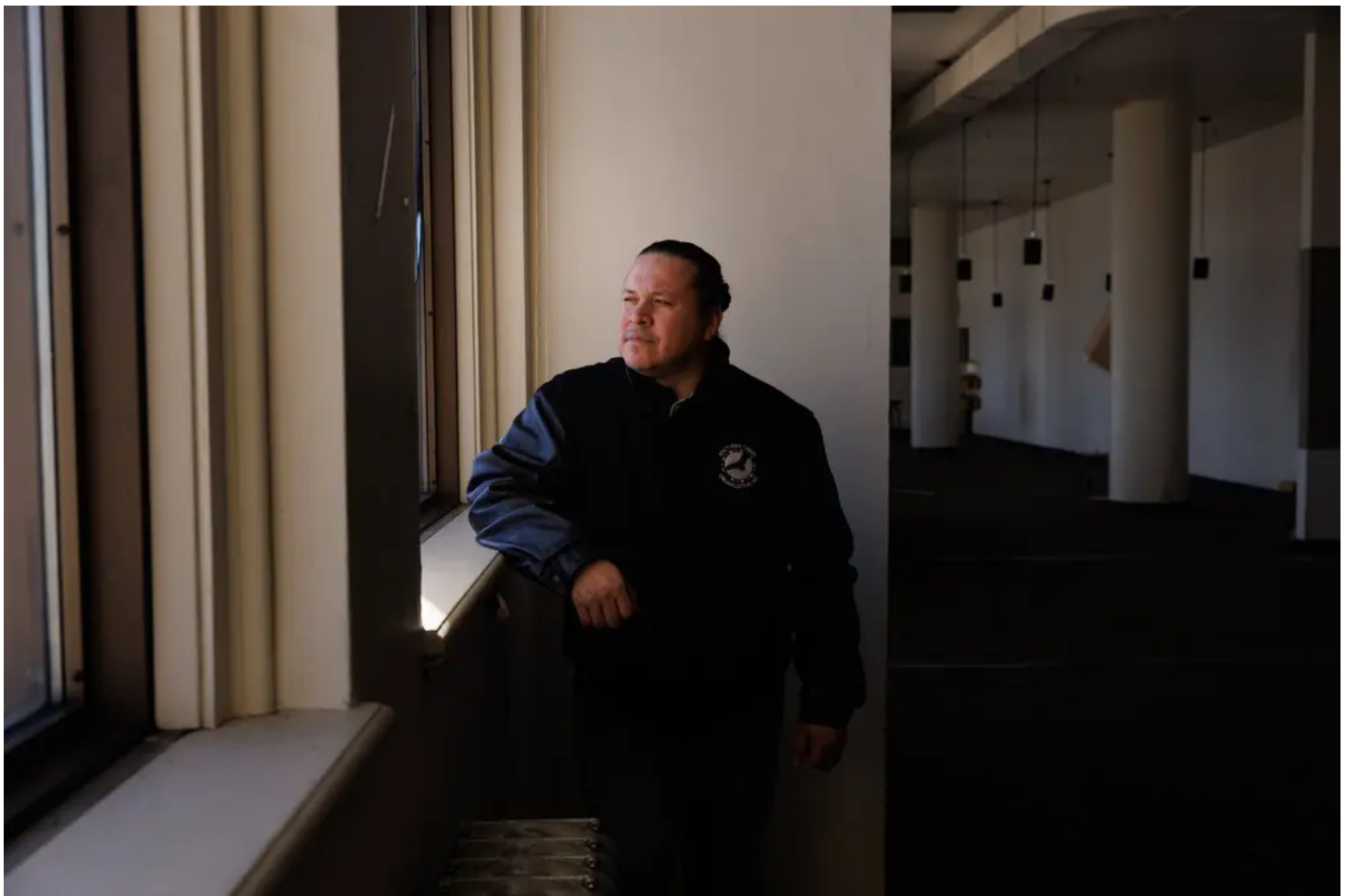
In the 20th century, Hudson's Bay had reinvented itself from fur trader to modern retailer, opening department stores in downtown shopping areas. But nearly a century after its opening, the Bay's Winnipeg store closed in 2020, the victim of the pandemic and online shopping.

By 2020, only two of the building's six floors were still in use, and its main restaurant, the Paddlewheel, had closed years before. Hudson's Bay, which had been seeking to get rid of the building for years, tried to give it to the University of Winnipeg, but the university declined because of repair and maintenance costs.

Owned since 2008 by Richard Baker, the American real estate magnate, Hudson's Bay was stuck with a worthless structure that — designated a heritage building in 2019, against the company's wishes — it could not tear down, but for which it was required to keep paying taxes.

But then the Southern Chiefs' Organization approached Hudson's Bay with an offer to take over the building and make it into a center for Indigenous life, said the organization's head, Grand Chief Jerry Daniels.

"It's quite appropriate, because it's Indigenous people who really built Hudson's Bay," Mr. Daniels said. "And that's the story that needs to be told, that we really built this country."



Grand Chief Jerry Daniels of the Southern Chiefs' Organization remembers coming to the store with his grandmother as a child.



An upside-down welcome sign on an empty floor of the shuttered store.

But others were more critical of the deal and the motivation behind it.

“The fact that the Hudson’s Bay company exploited our community, took all the resources and money they could from our community, and then left this monstrosity of a problem in the downtown core, just abandoned it — it’s colonialism personified,” said Niigaan Sinclair, an assistant professor of native studies at the University of Manitoba who is a member of the Anishinaabe First Nations.

Inseparable from the European colonization of Canada, Hudson’s Bay was founded in 1670 to exploit the fur trade in Rupert’s Land, a territory equal to about a third of Canada today.

King Charles II had claimed the territory as England’s and given it to his cousin Prince Rupert, who became the company’s first head, or “governor.” Hudson’s Bay enjoyed exclusive rights to exploit and colonize the territory until the land was sold in 1870 to the newly created country of Canada.

With trading posts in remote parts of Canada, Hudson’s Bay relied on Indigenous trappers for the beaver pelts and other natural resources that made up the company’s business, but many Indigenous say their ancestors were insufficiently compensated.

Without the Indigenous, the company would have never flourished, relying as it did on Indigenous knowledge of their ancestral lands and existing relations among different Indigenous communities.

“Hudson’s Bay Company’s wealth was rooted in Indigenous lands, Indigenous labor, Indigenous

knowledge and Indigenous governance,” said Adele Perry, a professor and expert on colonialism at the University of Manitoba.

In recent years, Ms. Perry said, Canada has been forced to “recognize that the core of Canada as an entity is a colonial project.”



Abandoned items and artwork depicting the fur trade in a storeroom of the store.



The retail behemoth had been battling declining sales for decades when it announced the store's closing in early 2021.

Mr. Daniels said his organization had secured 110 million Canadian dollars from government sources, including loans, grants and tax breaks, and was seeking funding for the remainder. He also said that he hoped that Hudson's Bay would offer assistance.

Hudson's Bay's 39th "governor," Mr. Baker, declined an interview request for this article, instead emailing a statement. "The Southern Chiefs' Organization fully owns and operates the building, with oversight and control of all aspects of its future development," he said, adding that the company supported the Indigenous organization's vision for the building.

But there is deep skepticism in Winnipeg that its makeover can be completed without significantly more financial backing. Beside the University of Winnipeg, both the provincial utility, Manitoba Hydro, and the Winnipeg Art Gallery had also rejected, as too costly, taking over the building.

Hudson's Bay jumped at the chance to get rid of a building "that was worth nothing in the first place," and the government is not supporting the building's costly conversion "with enough money to actually do it right," said Wins Bridgman, a Winnipeg-based architect who has worked with Indigenous groups, including the Southern Chiefs.

"Then we wonder why it somehow doesn't work," he said.

"Beware of what people give you and why they give it to you."



A cluster of mannequins on an empty floor of the former department store.

A correction was made on May 28, 2023: Because of an editing error, an earlier version of this article referred incorrectly to the estimated cost of bringing the Hudson's Bay department store building up to code. The cost, 111 million Canadian dollars, is equivalent to \$82 million, not \$8 million.

When we learn of a mistake, we acknowledge it with a correction. If you spot an error, please let us know at nytnews@nytimes.com. [Learn more](#)

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