

Canadian Immigration Facilities and the Production of Space

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Abstract

The Canadian federal government built a network of immigration architecture across the country between 1870 and 1930. "Immigration sheds," where transoceanic liners would dock, immigrants would be processed, and trains of colonist cars would whisk them away to remote areas of Canada, were complemented by a wide range of quarantine, hostelling, and support facilities in receiving areas.

As one example of this built network, the immigration shed known as Pier 21 in Halifax was built to process people into the country. In one sense, Pier 21 was an industrial transshipment point for people and baggage, facilitating their passage across the border and onward to their destinations. At the same time, the building served as the governmental control point where immigrants were examined and questioned regarding their suitability to be new Canadians. This paper will explore the waiting rooms, dormitories, hospital, immigrant aid, and other types of spaces in Pier 21 to reveal how the building performed its two-sided role as a space of control and passage.

The paper for this conference represents part of a larger research project I am undertaking on the architectural and experiential character of Canadian immigration history. The project aims to interpret official, governmental intentions evidenced by Canadian immigration architecture, and also to trace unofficial, informal practices of people who occupied, used, and were processed through the spaces. Thus, following Henri Lefebvre, a central term and focus of my study is "spatial practice," which I consider through immigrant stories of moving. These moving stories are recorded in memoirs and oral histories, such as those collected by the Canadian Museum of Immigration that is today housed in Pier 21. The parallels between the conference venue, the National Museum of Immigration in Buenos Aires, and Canadian immigration facilities like Pier 21, promise to offer conference-goers a rich comparison between the different national architectures of policy and immigrant experience.