

# A R T S

## THE ENCAMPMENT

Bringing people together to dig up the past

visual Tina Hassannia

I have a dream. This dream involves Stephen Harper, a bunch of tents and an epiphany.

In this dream, our dear old Prime Minister decides to take a stroll behind his stompin' grounds of Parliament Hill one fine October evening. While staring into the abyss of the Ottawa River, Mr. Harper sees something unusual in the direction of Major's Hill Park: a hauntingly beautiful array of illuminated tents. Furious that someone has vandalized a city park, Harper decides to scope out the damage first himself before contacting security. Upon reaching Major's Hill Park, he is met by Thom Sokoloski, the creative director behind the landscape installation, entitled *The Encampment*.

"Are you responsible for the damage here?" Harper growls.

Sokoloski smiles, answers "Yes," and places a card in Harper's hand.

The National Capital Commission logo stares Harper in the face. Reading the card, he soon realizes, embarrassingly, that *The Encampment* is a large-scale art installation funded by the city.

At a loss for words, Harper quickly thinks back to his communication skills training and manages to mechanically apologize to Sokoloski, who gracefully accepts it. Harper ventures around the grounds, perplexed about the purpose of the tents, albeit too afraid to look inside until he is invited to do so by a "creative collaborator" – a volunteer who helped research and



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create the artwork in the tents.

Inside, Harper, expecting to see sleeping bags and bug repellent spray, instead witnesses photographs of asylum patients. A voice behind him says, "These are stories of people with intellectual disabilities, Mr. Prime Minister."

Harper wheels around. Sokoloski smiles at him.

"But why tents?"

Sokoloski explains that he was inspired by archaeology when he was asked to do the project in Toronto for the Nuit Blanche festival. The neighbourhood

he was asked to work in had a history of being populated with asylum patients. "We take the metaphor of an archaeological dig, which already has a conceptual visual form, and change the goal of it. Rather than digging into the ground for artefacts, we dig into the collective memory of a space."

Harper again found himself at a loss for words. This time he didn't say anything to Sokoloski, but kept moving from one tent to another, taking in the stories and ideas of these forgotten people. For the first time in a long time, Harper felt sad, and it wasn't in a bad-poll-numbers-day kind of way.

Harper then had an epiphany. If this tent installation could tell forgotten stories, than perhaps there was something substantial to "art," after all. Perhaps it did need funding.

Our Prime Minister left *The Encampment* a sadder man, but a better man. He increased arts funding by 25 per cent and never made ignorant comments about Canada's arts communities ever again.

Sokoloski went on to create even bigger and more ambitious projects.

Sadly, only that last sentence is bound to come true.

**The Encampment**

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