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Historic museum is building on its heritage and strengths

Cannons, telescopes, harpoons and signal flags take their places alongside the little ships Trekka and Tillikum.



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The Maritime Museum of British Columbia, founded in 1959, has been slowly accumulating its quirky collection in the old Provincial Courthouse in Bastion Square since it moved there in 1965. A change is in the wind.

The Museum will not be getting the new waterfront complex on the harbor which was dreamed of over the past decade. Decreased government spending has made that idea impossible. The museum has the good sense, though, to build on its considerable strengths. Seven months ago Jeanne Shoemaker was hired to direct the project.

Not long after her appointment, she announced that Maritime Museum's "Infrastructure Works" project, budgeted at \$1.2 million.

Of this amount, the Federal Government has already provided \$800,973. According to the capable Shoemaker, raising the rest is "doable... It's hard work but it will happen." With luck, work on the project will start this fall. The museum will be open throughout.

The courthouse was designed by Otto Tiedeman, who was responsible for the Bird-cages, our original legislative buildings. Built in 1889, it is a gorgeous relic and even without the maritime collection would attract people to see its "cage" elevator and the antique courtroom of British Columbia up on the top floor. Restoration of the courtroom and its gallery (currently full of the blueprint collection from Yarrows Shipyards) is high on the list.

A sympathetic treatment of the entrance foyer of this grand building will do much to welcome visitors. Spacious rooms, terrific columns and mouldings, and tall windows will reappear as the displays are reconsidered. As the realtors say, this place has lots of potential.

It is a pleasure to note that



Exhibits in the second-floor hallway of the Maritime Museum

Shoemaker understands the unique charm of this place. "We want to maintain the sense of going into somebody's attic," she says, "not redo everything so its generic." This place has heaps of atmosphere. Shiny "battleship" linoleum gilded cast-iron radiators and transom windows lead visitors down memory lane.

There is a feeling of a trip back in

time. "Some of the old displays were done 40 years ago by amateurs," she continues. "They show a lot of individual creativity." Hand-made models of engine rooms, dioramas of cargo loading, and ship models ranging from the professional to funky and folksy won't be shunted aside.

A father points out to his son "Restigouche ... Kootenay ... I was

on that one... there's a picture of the Esquimalt Dockyard!" The museum has many natural constituencies.

"Children really like the museum the way it is now," Shoemaker reminds me. The school tours are always fully booked, and the new plan will incorporate hands-on activities such as the ones so popular at Science World in Vancouver. The subject areas in this museum are endless — whales, deep sea diving suits, war ships, navigation and maps, exploration, ship building, knot tying, octopi ...

The restored courtroom will make a super auditorium, a space for lectures and receptions. It could even be rented out as a theatre or a film set for historical courtroom dramas. I'd like to see a bit of off-site storage, to free up more space for a component about the history of Victoria. Fine-tuning the building and collections to the needs of this community will result in increased repeat visits by locals.

Not that the community isn't already involved. The Maritime Museum was created and developed by a band of passionate vol-

unteers who take care of much of the operation, both behind the scenes and at the front desk. I was surprised to learn that this treasure house has only four paid staff. With sensitive development the Maritime Museum could create lots more jobs, not only in the building but in the revitalized Bastion Square and beyond.

During our interview I insisted that Shoemaker walk me around the exhibits and storage spaces. I've been there before but I just love the atmosphere of the place. Ships in bottles, ships in lightbulbs, lanterns from the Empress of China, and whale baleen from Yokohama catch my eye. An original photo of the S.S. Beaver up on the rocks at Stanley Park is framed with cable from its rigging.

The Infrastructure Project calls for the restoration of the architectural integrity of the interior of this classic heritage structure, the reworking of the display of the permanent collection, and the creation of a children's space. The new executive director says its do-able. I am eagerly looking forward to this addition to one of our best cultural attractions.