



Urban and Regional Development Discourses of Sustainability at the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Games: Leftover Colonialism?

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The Olympics Games are often touted as a harbinger of urban renewal as well as an opportunity to market the city and its culture(s) to the world in order to transform it into a world class tourist destination. In the case of Vancouver 2010, the Olympics are a broad regional development rather than a solely urban affair. The fact that Whistler has been left out of the official title does not lessen its importance as host of all ski events (though not snowboard events, which will be held at Cypress). Therefore all discourse about renewal and increased reputation should be thought of in a regional rather than purely urban context. In British Columbia, any development or use of land is inherently controversial, because this province is almost entirely made up of un-ceded Native territory, land which first peoples have legally legitimate title claims to. The fact that the Olympics will be held on such land makes them subject to scrutiny as a colonial enterprise. However, I argue that the entire idea of land development as well as the philosophy of international competition that is behind the Olympic Games is based on an inherently colonialist discourse.

Within our culture there are discourses that are taken as common sense because they are so imbedded in British Columbian culture. Geographer Braun calls these 'buried epistemologies.'¹ I argue that the values of urban development and competition for global reputation are based on colonial and capitalist discourses, which we take to be the only legitimate worldviews in this post communist age. I outline four beliefs that are inherent to a development minded colonialist discourse that dominates the Olympic ideology today. Those who subscribe to this discourse:

¹ Bruce Willems-Braum "Buried Epistemologies: the Politics of Nature in (Post) Colonial British Columbia." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol 87 (1), March, 1997. 3-31.

i. Separate human beings from nature so that nature can be viewed as an *other* which can be tamed or developed.

ii. Do not value Native non-capitalist land uses and value systems.

iii. Adhere to a mechanistic rationality in which technical solutions to any potential development or environmental problem are promoted, rather than attempts to shift consciousness.

iv. Perceive the world as a global arena of competition, not just in terms of athleticism, but for global supremacy in terms of tourist dollars and reputation.

These four ideas may appear completely “rational”, however, they have a historical genealogy and are part of the discourse that allowed and promoted the colonization of Indigenous peoples and the land by Europeans since the 15th century.

The Olympic Games exist within the larger colonial superstructure and they are a fascinating microcosm in which to analyze how buried colonial discourses continues to be played out, on cities, regions, people, and in sports. I will explore the idea of the Olympics as urban and regional development and renewal- as well as the Olympics as a place to culturally promote the city and region- in terms of the ideas that are embedded into the dominant Western culture. In particular I will look at ecological sustainability, and the sustainable solutions for Vancouver 2010, as a manifestation of some of these colonial worldviews.

i. The colonial/capitalist discourse separates human beings from nature so that nature can be viewed as an *other* which can be tamed or developed.

One perceived benefit of hosting the Olympic Games is the opportunity to carry out urban and regional development projects that otherwise might not be prioritized. I argue that the entire idea of development embodies in Western societies is based on rational ‘Cartesian dualism.’ This rationalist philosophical Western tradition promotes

the “psycho-separation of humans from their natural roots. The legacy of the enlightenment in western culture is a reductionist mindset that sees the human enterprise as somehow separate from and above the natural world.”² Bill Rees shows how this separation allows humans to deny their associations with the natural world while living in cities. With his famous Ecological Footprint Analysis he can demonstrate exactly how much land and resources are used by each city dweller, and he shows that the ecosystems of cities are not defined by local geographical boundaries but instead are large global networks in which food, oil and other resources produced across the world support a city with only a small physical footprint. Studies of the Ecological Footprint of Canadian cities show that “the ecosystems *in* high-income cities constitute as little as 1%, of the total ecosystem area required to support their human populations.”³ City dwellers often think of themselves as separated from nature, and often mistakably proclaim that humans have succeeded in replacing nature with technology⁴. This is a fallacy because we have not actually decreased our land use, we have just succeeded in specializing our geographical spatiality enough so that we don’t face our own reliance on a land and resource base daily. Our denial of this reliance means that the outsourcing of environmental impact can be easily ignored, and so we can think of the ecology of cities as a reference to the living networks physically bound by the city streets and subsequently attempt to solve urban environmental problems within that narrow space.

The Olympics are a celebration of the human body (and spirit) that are supposed to remind us of the physical abilities that are too often alienated from in us a post modern life that is dominated by technology. Therefore, the Olympics should be a fitting

² Bill Rees, “Understanding Urban Ecosystems: an Ecological Economics Perspective” in Alan Berkowitz *et al.* editors, *Understanding Urban Ecosystems*, New York: Springer-Verlag, 2003. pg. 4.

³ Rees, “Understanding Urban Ecosystems” pg. 10.

⁴ Ibid

time to re-acknowledge our identity as animals, as materially constituted “natural” beings that are heterotrophic: that rely on our surrounding ecosystems to feed and breathe. The ideal Olympic city would help us to remember and celebrate our connection to the earth by reconnecting the host city with the ecosystem that supports it. Therefore a good sustainability policy should be focused on localization of the urban ecosystem; they should attempt to bring the externalities of environmental damage that comes from having a geographically wide Ecological Footprint back to the city level. They should attempt to localize production.⁵

The Ecological Sustainability plan of the Vancouver Organizing Committee for the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games (VANOC) uses a different model of sustainability, one that continues the separation of city dweller from nature by focusing the sustainability strategies within the physical city. However, these plans, though focused locally, often have positive effects on the Ecological Footprint as well. One of VANOC’s Ecological Sustainability plans is to promote clean fuelled vehicles at the Game. The Olympic transport plan will involve a new hybrid combustion/electric bus fleet; discourage the driving of single occupancy vehicles to events by limiting parking and increasing the bus fleet by 400 vehicles; improve the sea to sky highway to help with traffic flow. These goals are likely to be met. The stated goal of these initiatives is to “help reduce traffic congestion, minimize local air pollution and limit greenhouse gas emissions.”⁶ Hybrid and diesel buses are admirable solutions for urban air pollution and for the reduction of greenhouse gas emission, but they also have another potentially positive environmental effect on the size of the city’s Ecological Footprint: by reducing

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ VANOC website, Clean Transportation Page, <http://www.vancouver2010.com/en/Sustainability/EnvironmentalPerformance/CleanTransportation>

the reliance on fossil fuel, and perhaps shifting the production of the buses, engines and fuel cells to local manufacturers, the ecosystem of the city will begin to shrink. An example of localization of production in conjunction with the Vancouver Olympics is a sustainable transport “demonstration” of hydrogen fuels, and the construction of a recycling station in North Vancouver, which will provide a fuelling station that could support an eventual 20,000 vehicle fleet. For the Olympics, it will support demonstration cars and a bus fleet⁷ (which is not mentioned on the Translink website⁸ despite being a “Transport Opportunity” listed on VANOC’s website). This Integrated Waste Hydrogen Utilization Project (IWHUP) will use factory by-products as hydrogen fuel, which can be accessed by equipped vehicles.

The solution of a local problem can have global consequences. However, the VANOC sustainability plan lacks long term sustainable solutions that attempt to reconnect people with nature in a way that allows them to appreciate the connections they necessarily still rely on. For example, the global food system is one of the most unsustainable aspects of city living, and the long distance travel of food accounts for a great proportion of urban Ecological Footprints. The fossil fuel used to truck tomatoes from Mexico year round is as much a larger pollution problem of Vancouver as fossil fuels releases within the city. However, because in cities we have the luxury to ignore the external environment, the food system is not as easy to conceive as being an important sustainability problem. The Olympic plan does not address issues that truly link Vancouver to the global environment. When Rees speaks about localization he is advocating the internalization of the globalized urban ecosystem. This is not at all what

⁷ Natural Resources Canada, News Release “MINISTER EMERSON ANNOUNCES \$12.2 MILLION CONTRIBUTION TO ADVANCE HYDROGEN ECONOMY” October 13, 2005.
http://www.nrcan.gc.ca/es/etb/ctfca/NewsReleases_e.html.

⁸ http://www.translink.bc.ca/Plans_Projects/Bus_Expansion/default.asp

Vancouver 2010s sustainability doctrine promotes directly, although indirectly it supports this goal.

ii. The colonial land paradigm behind development and the Olympic Games does not value Native non capitalist land uses and value systems.

In the article *Buried Epistemologies*, Braun reveals how the meta-narrative of sustainable management displaces the related buried management discourse about the demarcation, segregation and administration of Native lands.⁹ Instead of revealing how and why settlers have control of land in BC, and legitimizing it historically, the settlers discourse need not dwell on this; instead the language focuses on the “knowledge” and “expertise” of developers as if there were consensus on the best way in which to manage and use land.

The participation of Native people in the planning of Vancouver 2010 may at first glance seem to buck this trend of paternalistic control over land uses. However, upon closer scrutiny, a situation of assimilated values is revealed. The people within the four Nations that cooperated with VANOC can be compared with those that did not, and the fact of a dominant cultural system of valuing land in a particular way is revealed.

Since the bid for the Olympics was conceptualized, there has been First Nations participation in their planning. The active participation has been from elected band leaders from the Lil’wat, Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh Nations, which have become known as the Four Host First Nations. In fact, VANOC Board Chairman Jack Poole has acknowledged that “If it hadn’t been for the full support of the Four Host First

⁹ Braun, “Buried Epistemologies.” Pg. 9.

Nations in our bid, we likely wouldn't be talking about Vancouver 2010 today.”¹⁰ In November 2005, the relationship between VANOC and “the Four Host First Nations” was solidified and specific goals were agreed upon in a historic Protocol.¹¹ The Protocol calls for increased showcasing of art, language, traditions, history and culture; Skills development and training related to the Games; Lasting social, cultural and economic opportunities and benefits; Improved health, education and the strengthening of the communities through sport, economics and cultural development; A youth sport legacy; Arts Festivals and Events; and participation in the Medal Ceremonies and Opening and Closing Ceremonies. A Squamish Chief sits on VANOC's board, Lil'wat contractors have been hired to build new venues and develop the Callaghan Valley (site of the Nordic ski area), and the Nations all had a presence in Torino¹². There is no doubt that there is significant cooperation and participation going on between elected representatives of the Four Host Nations and VANOC.

However, there is another side of the Native relationship to the Olympics that is not quite as cooperative. There is a vocal group of Native people that see the Olympics and the resort development that they will promote as an attack on un-ceded Native land, land that is still used for traditional activities such as hunting, fishing and gathering food and medicine. The Olympics promote Vancouver as a liveable city, and the surrounding areas as a winter tourist playground. The fact that none of the land on which the Olympics will take place has ever been legally ceded to any government,

¹⁰ Turtle Island Newsletter. “Protocol: First Nations and the Olympics” November 30, 2005.
<http://www.turtleisland.org/discussion/viewtopic.php?t=4149&start=0&sid=190f93f446aae296f7ee3929a7ccdc26>

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² VANOC website, “Aboriginal Participation Page.”
<http://www.vancouver2010.com/en/Sustainability/AboriginalParticipation>

meaning even private owners cannot actually claim to have legal title, is not mentioned on the VANOC website or in any articles on the Protocol.

Land politics in BC are still very much in a colonial stage because settler authorities from the 1860s onwards signed very few treaties with First Nations people, preferring to assign reserves and make policies aimed at promoting or forcing assimilation.¹³ The justification for this was partly due to the way in which land was valued by colonial authorities, which was perfectly expressed by BC Land Commissioner Joseph Trutch: “the land...remains in unproductive condition-is of no value to the Indian and utterly unprofitable to the public interests.”¹⁴ The simple idea was that land that was “undeveloped” or “untouched” in a manner easily recognized by settlers was available for settler ownership and suitable development. Hunting, gathering, fishing, ceremony or even intrinsic value were not acknowledged by settlers as valuable land uses and therefore it was justifiable to use the land without Native consent or compensation given. From the 1860s, when Trutch severely cut back reserve land and avoided settling the land question, the BC government has followed assimilation policies in regards to Natives. One tactic that sometimes ensured Native compliance with settler land policy was imposing a form of political organization on bands, in which reserves were set up as municipalities with elected leaders. This political structure caused (and still does cause) considerable rifts between elected chiefs and the traditional chiefs. In many bands the serious rifts between the elders (and increasingly many Native youth) and those who represent the band to the settler’s government are growing. At the root of these rifts is often the very ideology behind how land should be used, and who should

¹³ Paul Tennant *Aboriginal Peoples and Politics: The Indian Land Question in British Columbia, 1849-1989*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 1990. 43.

¹⁴ Joseph Trutch, quoted in Tennant, *Aboriginal Peoples and Politics: The Indian Land Question in British Columbia, 1849-1989*. pg 43.

have the largest stake in making those decisions. In the case of the Lil'wat, one of the Four Host Nations, the rift appears at first to be about this development paradigm. However, it is also about control, about who makes the decisions for the band and this is an issue related to debates about assimilation and how much assimilation should happen

In 2002 a coalition of Aboriginal Elders, land users and Native youth of the Lil'wat and Secwepemc nations launched an official complaint to the Olympic bid committee to alert the bid to their environmental and cultural concerns. They accounted how "the provincial government keeps allowing large scale development on our land without taking the traditional and current uses of our people into account and thereby negatively impacting the land and our people."¹⁵ The coalition did not specifically address the new Nordic Venue being constructed in the Callaghan Valley; instead they linked other ski resorts being developed on their un-ceded territory, such as Sun Peaks and Mount Currie, with the Olympic Games by claiming that the advertising and place promotion of VANOC will only increase the rush to develop the ski resort industry. They object to the development push because they are scarcely consulted, even though legal decisions such as Delgamuukw has recognized that Native people in BC have title to land and with that comes an obligation to consult (a weak obligation apparently, but at least a recognition that title claims are legitimate)¹⁶. The coalition sees any ski resort development as an extinguishment of title without proper consent, therefore they

¹⁵ Elders, Land users and youth of Sutikalh and Skwelkwek'welt "Concerns of Aboriginal Elders, Land users and Native Youth regarding the impacts of the 2010 Vancouver-Whistler Olympic Bid on Aboriginal People, Culture, Land and the Environment." Posted on www.turtleisland.org/news/news-secwepemc.htm, June 6, 2002.

¹⁶ Kent McNeil "The Post-Delgamuukw nature and content of Aboriginal title." *Osgoode Hall Law School*. May 2000. <http://www.delgamuukw.org/research/content.pdf>

cannot put their support behind a growth machine that will promote this type of development and does not propose to solve the issues of title rights institutionally.

The case of the coalition and their objections not to the Olympic Games but to the entire paradigm of economic growth and urban and regional development for touristic purposes illustrates that outward economic expansion is not so incredibly rational that there can be no other prescriptions for a city and region's progress. In fact, within the mandate of VANOC 2010 are the seeds for a different type of development that may not damage the land as much, and may even consider some of the coalition's concerns. We will now turn back to the Ecological Sustainability of Vancouver 2010 Olympics and to the third aspect of what I have titled the colonial/capitalist Olympic doctrine to determine whether or not this aspect of sustainability can be successful.

iii. The colonial/capitalist discourse adheres to a technical rationality in which technical solutions to any potential development or environmental problem are promoted, rather than attempts to shift societal consciousness.

In the article *Buried Epistemologies*, Braun reveals how technical rationality becomes a surrogate for moral and political rationalities.¹⁷ This technical reliance is part of a global system. In an essay about urban environmental governance in a post Rio Declaration world, Low et.al simplify the notion of sustainable development by describing two competing tropes or discursive traditions in our globalized world.¹⁸ One is raw capitalism, in which the free market regulates all interactions; environmental change will trigger market signals that will lead to technical solutions that will allow for continued growth and unlimited consumption. This notion relies to a great extent on the

¹⁷ Braun, "Buried Epistemologies" pg. 8.

¹⁸ Nicolas Low, Brendan Gleeson, Ingemat Elander, Rolf Lidskog "After Rio: urban environmental governance?" in Nicolas Low et al, editors. *Consuming Cities: The Urban Environment in the Global Economy after the Rio Declaration*. London: Routledge, 2000. pg. 283.

separation of city dwellers from their connection to the natural world already mentioned. The other discursive trope is environmental governance, in which “the market must be returned to democratic, political regulation” in order to be compatible with ecologically sustainable development. Ideologically, there must be a value system in place which “prioritizes care for humans and for the earth” by “internalizing within production the environmental and social costs of natural resource use.”¹⁹ I argue that culturally, Vancouver, and the 2010 Games, is somewhere in between the raw capitalist approach and the environmental governance approach to sustainability.

Raw capitalism can be seen in the heavy reliance on technological solutions to perceived²⁰ environmental problems. A well accepted notion is that technology can save the day when the natural systems start to fail. However, Bill Rees directly contradicts the idea that cleaner and newer energy sources actually targets the issues of unsustainable resource use:

“If we are interested in conserving in non-human life on Earth, it might just be that the greatest disaster that could befall the ecosphere is for humans to discover another cheap, super-abundant source of energy to replace fossil fuels. If there’s no change in the consumer values and behavioural characteristic of high-income countries – in other words, no change in the ways in which we use energy to exploit nature – then the present pattern of biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation will continue on an even grander scale.”²¹

Energy is used to make things, destroy ecosystems, increase human populations and settle more land, therefore a zero emission energy source that runs forever will only lead to more efficient ways to use land and increase our exploitation of the planet.

¹⁹ Low et al, “Urban Environmental Governance.” Pg. 283.

²⁰ I write perceived because it is also true that some environmental problems are prioritized more than others; the ones that can and will induce market signals, such as peak oil concerns, are usually of top priority to politicians and business interests alike.

²¹ Bill Rees, “Is Humanity Fatally Successful?” *Journal of Business Administration Vol. 30-31, 2002. Pg 14.*

One of the strategies for ecological sustainability of Vancouver 2010 is increased development and use of “clean energy.” In terms of meeting the unspecific goal to “Power, heat and cool Games facilities with renewable sources, including wind, small hydro, geo-thermal and solar”²² BC Hydro is running far behind in their development, and it is unlikely that any of these projects will be in use by 2010. The Vancouver 2010 Bid book stated that BC Hydro had an “aggressive plan to pursue sustainable energy”²³ however, 90% of their energy now comes from large, environmentally damaging hydroelectric dams. The most recent publication on their website is a viability report for six types of renewable energy, and it has concrete plans to pursue only one of these, Small hydro projects. Biomass, geothermal, tidal current, wind and photovoltaic together could account for up to 1/3 of all the energy used in BC today²⁴, however, BC Hydro is not aggressively building new energy sources.

In conclusion, not only are new cleaner energy sources not going to be built for the Olympics, and may not be built anytime soon, but these projects will not, in the long run increase the overall sustainability of our cities, because cheap energy only encourages increased resource use and consumption. In his paper “Is Humanity Fatally Successful?” Bill Rees writes that all animals are dependent on energy for their survival, but the human species has grown exponentially over the years due to our unique ability to harvest energy by the displacement of other species from their ecological niches,

²² <http://www.vancouver2010.com/en/Sustainability/EnvironmentalPerformance/GreenBuildings>

²³ Vancouver 2010 Candidate City Bidbook. “Theme 4: Environment.” 2002.

²⁴ BC Hydro “BC HYDRO GREEN & ALTERNATIVE ENERGY DIVISION GREEN ENERGY STUDY FOR BRITISH COLUMBIA, PHASE 2: MAINLAND.” 2002.

http://www.bchydro.com/rx_files/environment/environment3927.pdf

elimination of these non human competitors and sheer over-exploitation of all resources, renewable (fish for example) and non renewable (oil).²⁵

Urban ecological sustainability therefore must be about a paradigm shift away from technical solutions that allow for continuous growth and consumption if cities and regions are actually to lesson their ecological footprints.

One more aspect of Olympism embodies buried and often denied aspects of Western society:

iv. The capitalist/colonial doctrine embodied in Olympism views the world as a global arena of competition, not just in terms of athleticism, but for global supremacy in terms of tourist dollars and reputation.

One of the most important claims and perhaps the least debatable of all theories on the benefits of the Olympic is the claim that they boost the international reputation of cities, in some cases placing them on the global tourist map for the first time. A desire for global city status, brand recognition and the chance to attract the world by advertising as an “object of consumption”²⁶ drives cities to compete for a chance to host the Games. The Olympics are a marketing opportunity like no other, an opportunity that can pay off in terms of attracting tourist dollars and new citizens. Sassen writes that there has been an important shift in the way that urban economic developers think. Rather than focus renewal and development efforts on attracting businesses and investment, the goal is to attract the beneficial people (the “creative class”²⁷) who want a high quality of life rather than simply a high end service industry job. The Olympics are the type of event that puts a city on the map by emphasizing its credentials as livable,

²⁵ Rees, “Is Humanity Fatally Successful?” pg 13.

²⁶ Sassen, Saskia and Frank Roost “The City: Strategic Sites for the Global Entertainment Industry.” In Dennis R. Judd and Susan S. Fainstein, editors. *The Tourist City*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999. 143-154.

²⁷ Richard Florida “Cities and the Creative Class.” *City and Community* 2 (1), 2003. 3-19.

cultural and well run, rather than as a primarily business or investment focused marketing strategy. VANOC's marketing strategy is greatly focused on Vancouver as a city with "great cultural diversity, rich Aboriginal heritage, and lively, progressive arts scene."²⁸ The diversity tag is always attached to Canadian marketing strategies, because in terms of immigration, Canadian cities have truly global roots. The arts scene, as well as being an attraction for potential immigrants, is a great indicator of the level of creative class people already likely to live in the city. However, as explored above, the use of Aboriginal heritage to sell the Games raises some concerns about representation, considering the internal conflicts within Indian bands that are said to support the Olympics.

The fact that the Olympics are rarely held in non-Western cities, and that the athletes of these countries are overrepresented on the podium highlights the inequalities in terms of wealth that persist globally. They also reveal that the geography of the Olympic Games has continued to be closely linked to the spaces of world power. The Olympic Games are marketed as a global arena for friendly amateur competition between athletes and nations, but they have always been a venue for geo-political conflicts to be played out, and for nationalism to flourish. The displays of nationalistic fury in 1936 Berlin, the 1968 black power statement and the repression of the student movement by the Mexican government, the 1972 Munich massacre, the boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics by the US. These are just some examples of highly politicized issues being staged alongside the Olympic Games.

²⁸ VANOC website, "Culture and the Games page"
<http://www.vancouver2010.com/en/CultureEducation/CultureAndTheGames>.

The Games are seen as a reward for cities that can sell themselves as modern, developed and environmentally enlightened. The news surrounding Beijing's successful 2008 bid all focuses on the possible politically transformative effect that the Games could have on China. Many see the Games as an opportunity for China to demonstrate its economic superpower status, while some Westerners question whether the Games can be a catalyst for a move towards Western style democracy.²⁹

Not only are politics part of the competition, but the manner in which bidding cities compete to host the Games is part of a global marketing war that is essentially a zero sum game in which some places become "hot spots" at the expense of less desirable or badly marketed cities. In their article on urban economic governance, Low et al proclaim that in order for the trope of ecological governance to work, cities must work together in networks of ecological collaboration rather than in economic competition with one another.³⁰ This idea may seem unlikely in the economic growth climate of our capitalist and buried colonial society, however, it makes ecological sense for cities to stop competing for foreign tourists and begin to invest in local sustainability while at the same time cooperating with one another on global environmental agreements.

Conclusions

After reviewing the Ecological Sustainability Projects that VANOC has committed to in light of Bill Rees, Bruce Willems-Braum and Low et. al's ecological sustainability theories, I realize that many of the initiatives are somewhat ecologically sound. However, they are certainly products of our society, which values continuous economic

²⁹ Bronwell, Susan "Olympic impact across the Chinese Wall: Human Rights versus Humanism" http://www.playthegame.org/News/Up%20To%20Date/Olympic_impact_across_the_Chinese_Wall_Human_rights_versus_humanism.aspx

³⁰ Low et al "Urban Environmental Governance." Pg 303.

growth and global competition for resources (be they tourists, land or oil). The sustainable features do not address the problem of consumption, our disconnection from nature or Vancouver's global Ecological Footprint. Overall, the sustainable Olympics are part of a half way attempt to reform the Western culture of resources dependence and environmental damage with technical solutions. These solutions, without a change in ideology or worldview, will not serve to decrease our global resources dependence. The denial of the validity of Aboriginal traditional land uses, and the inclusion of only assimilated Aboriginals in the planning of Vancouver 2010, demonstrates that BC society has not moved beyond colonial discourses of land use that prioritize development activities over all others.

Sustainable solutions without cultural change are doomed to failure, which is why the VANOC's attempts are noble, but misplaced.