Forget what you may have heard about anthropology: it is not solely a science of lost cultures, dusty relics and ancient peoples. This widely misunderstood discipline provides a critical link to contemporary history, and its contributions to preserving and advancing culture cannot be understated – especially in nations as diverse as Canada. That’s why, for the past 60 years, the Museum of Anthropology (MOA) at UBC has been building relationships with Indigenous communities and working closely with them on cultural renewal projects.

“Unlike other museums, we have always tried to democratize our practice, and work directly with communities to represent communities and let communities represent themselves,” says Anthony Shelton, Director of MOA, who for more than five years has overseen a $55.5-million renewal of the Museum entitled A Partnership of Peoples.

“The Partnership brings together, strengthens and consolidates some of the research that we’ve been doing for a very long time.”

Reciprocal Research
The Renewal Project focuses on four areas of research including visual culture, museum studies, language and new technology.

Showcasing the best of new technology, MOA has partnered with three First Nations groups – Stó:lō Nation, U’Mista Cultural Society in Alert Bay, and Musqueam Indian Band – to co-develop the Reciprocal Research Network (RRN), a revolutionary Web-based network connecting the northwest collections of 12 partner organizations, including the Smithsonian Institution in the U.S., and Oxford and Cambridge in England.

Providing online access to the collections enables Indigenous communities to both restore and strengthen their cultural
identity. For many Aboriginal communities, this is the first time they will see materials and objects that were previously scattered in museums across Canada and the world, rendering them unknown and inaccessible to the communities that created them.

“The RRN provides a mechanism to digitally repatriate Indigenous collections and archives,” says Shelton, who notes that instead of physically removing material from the place, electronic versions can be created that provide an active resource in the Network’s database. “This will create, over time, a different arena in which researchers and people in the originating communities interact.”

Preserving Language
Even before the development of the RRN database, Shelton believes that MOA has been a pioneer in transforming research patterns, forging new relationships between researchers and universities, and between museums and the originating communities. For example, the disappearance of Indigenous languages up and down the B.C. coast has long been a concern to communities and researchers at UBC and elsewhere.

The fragility of language challenges the very notion of conserving oral history, but UBC and MOA are doing their part in keeping Indigenous language alive. The renewal project houses new recording studios and sound booths that will be a useful resource for both Indigenous communities and researchers.

“UBC has a number of projects, a number of different courses on different Aboriginal languages,” says Shelton. “Consequently, UBC course leaders would be able to use MOA facilities to teach and do research on these languages.”

A number of Indigenous communities have used the sound booths to discuss their thoughts on MOA’s collections. With permission, MOA has recorded these conversations as a way to aid communities to re-encounter parts of their own culture and also as an archive for future generations.

“In terms of the Museum itself, we can start recording Indigenous language terms for our collections,” Shelton says. “We can look at the ethno-linguistic classification of objects, which can open whole semantic universes of which they are a part. We haven’t been able to do this before.”

Repatriating Knowledge
The decolonization of knowledge is something Shelton hopes the museum will start to achieve as it becomes a resource for Indigenous communities. To this end, a new hybrid space within the Museum houses the multiversity galleries. Some 16,000 objects in the collection that were previously difficult to view, along with their interpretations, will now be optimally presented for the public. The interpretations are a product of the Museum’s collaboration between curators and communities, which Shelton says has generated a new thesaurus of criteria based on community preference rather than museological dictates.

Ultimately, the Museum’s relationship to Indigenous cultures has three dimensions: an academic dimension based on research and teaching; a community dimension structured around social and community-based issues and research projects; and a public dimension as Western Canada’s premier museum of global arts and cultures.

Museum exhibitions serve to engage the public, provide a platform for teaching, and inspire new research questions. Shelton is confident the Partnership of Peoples project will enable MOA to continue its important work as a leader in anthropological research and a showcase for living history and contemporary culture.

The Museum of Anthropology (MOA) at UBC is Canada’s largest teaching museum. It is renowned for its extensive Northwest Coast collection and its commitment to providing collaborative insight into Indigenous cultures around the globe.

A Partnership of Peoples has received funding from the Canada Foundation of Innovation, the Government of British Columbia, Koerner Foundation and additional support from UBC.
1. A view of Turnour Island, ancestral home of the Tlowitsis Nation
2. Elder from Tlowitsis community demonstrates the traditional way to cut fish
3. Artifacts on display at the Museum of Anthropology
4. Sitol:18 woman with a cedar basket