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ARC  
ARCHITECTURE  
& DESIGN  
QUÉBEC

# HABITER LE NORD



190  
MARS 2020

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# PROTECTING NUNAVIK'S CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

## **hildaSnowball**

represents the Nunavik Region as Vice-Chairperson of the Kativik Regional Government (KRG). As Mayor of Kangiqsualujjuaq (2012-2018), her native village, she spearheaded many projects that are beneficial to her community, including the award-winning Qarmaapik House.

## **marie-pierreMcDonald**

is a professional landscape architect. She is Project Director at Groupe BC2 in Montreal where she manages various strategic, planning and development projects for indigenous communities and government agencies in Northern Canada.

Previously, she worked for four years as a land use planner for the KRG, where she managed regional and local planning and development.

*"A landscape should establish bonds between people, the bond of language, of manners, of the same kind of work and leisure, and above all a landscape should contain the kind of spatial organization which fosters such experience and relationships; spaces for coming together, to celebrate, spaces for solitude, spaces that never change and are always as memory depicted them. These are some of the characteristics that give a landscape its uniqueness, that give it style. These are what make us recall it with emotion." J.B. Jackson<sup>1</sup>*

Given the extent of their territory, the Inuit have developed a perception of time and space which is very different from that of the residents of Southern cities and municipalities. This perception has important impacts on the way they live and plan the development of their land. Largely derived from symbolic narratives and their oral tradition, Inuit understanding of the landscape is more spiritual than practical, rather lived and felt than analyzed and theorized, which of course does not mean they did not also accumulate a very fine knowledge of its components. After the introduction of the municipal system following the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement (JBNQA) in 1975, the Inuit of Nunavik had to divide and mark their territory by defining the orientations and uses of the land, in order to exercise a better control. Such an exercise was part of a logic of spatial division having little to do with the daily real-

ity of a people who for thousands of years have mainly been nomadic hunters travelling a vast, uncharted and uninhabited territory. For the Inuit, boundaries are difficult to conceive of. Even when they are understood, they are not associated with any administrative or legal reality that we in the South have been using for a long time. Furthermore, since the late 1970s, the Inuit have experienced a profound cultural transformation that has affected both the landscape and the way it is viewed and understood.

## **DEVELOPMENT AND COMMUNITY EXPANSION**

Nunavik's population is expanding at a very fast pace, and the needs for housing, community infrastructure and municipal services naturally follow suit. Moreover, the melting of permafrost and other environmental constraints, along with the increase in mining activity and natural resources exploration in the region, are putting pressure on villages to spread.

At the moment, most municipalities are trying to meet the high demand for community infrastructure. At the same time, they experience significant difficulties in controlling their development and reducing sprawl. Even if Nunavik covers 500,000 square kilometres of land, the actual municipal boundaries offer limited potential for growth and development. Densification should be part of the solution, but social acceptability of such a planning strategy is not a given, considering the fact that the



Traditional Inuit dog sledding in Kangiqsualujjuaq. ©M.-P. McDonald.



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- 2. *Aerial view of Puvirnituq,*  
© M.-P. McDonald
- 3. *Tupik (traditional inuit tent) in*  
*Ivujivik* © M.-P. McDonald
- 4. *Traditional cabin in*  
*Kangiqaualujuaq,*  
© Hilda Snowball
- 5. *Northern village of Ivujivik,*  
© M.-P. McDonald

Inuit have been used to living in vast, uninhabited open spaces for thousands of years. Moreover, the traditional cultural values are not very apparent in the way urban development has been planned and realized since the introduction of the municipal regime. Development plans are sometimes imposed to the communities and specific rules have to be followed such as the distance in between buildings and the type of materials to build the houses. In recent years, Nunavik's architecture has seen the early signs of a cultural signature, particularly in some institutional buildings, but village development plans are still referring to generic, southern suburban forms rather than offering spaces adapted to the Inuit culture. Also, the development of the communities is realized in steps, because of various factors such as budget restrictions, last minute funding and very short yearly construction periods. The absence of a long-term strategic plan, and thus of clearly defined goals and guaranteed long-term capital plans, is particularly problematic as it results in somewhat incoherent urban developments that don't reflect the Inuit social needs and are sometimes ill-suited for their cultural and traditional activities. As a result, the Inuit feel that they are in a state of constant flux, always at the whim of rapidly changing political landscapes in which they are rarely, if ever, a clearly stated priority.



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### BEYOND THE MUNICIPAL BOUNDARIES

Southerners usually understand Nunavik's territory through two clearly distinct realities: the small Northern villages and the vast wilderness around them. But this abstract understanding leaves behind a strip of land around every village which for many Inuit is what they actually call home: the slightly delicately humanized landscape that forms their traditional hunting and camping areas, where almost every family owns a cabin. These special places are the embodiment of the long and intimate relationship between the Inuit's culture and the natural environment. This is where the Inuit go to reconnect to the land, where to get away from chaos or to recuperate, where to find well-being and peace. Home-made traditional cabins are defining elements of the

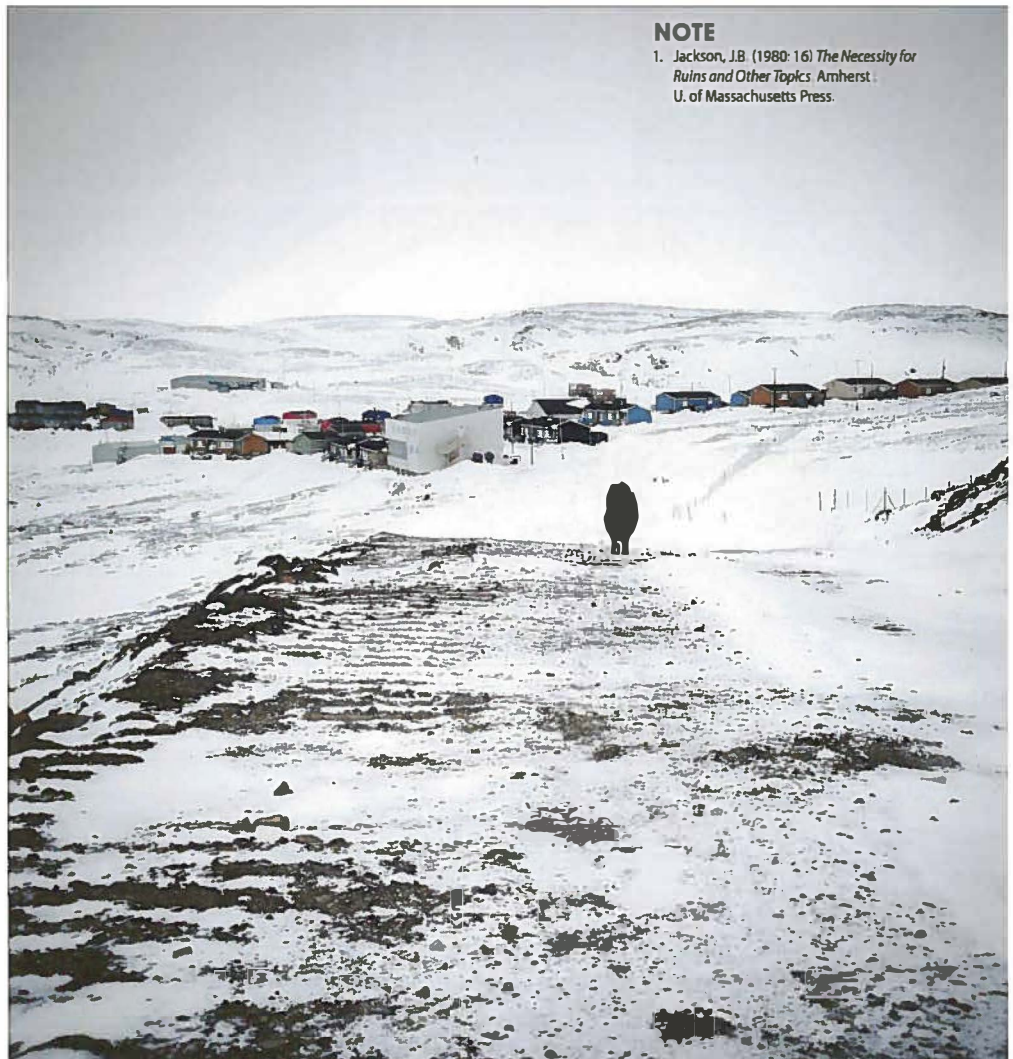


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Nunavik cultural landscape. Their simple structure and appearance connect them to the land and belie an enduring resiliency, with minimal impact on the environment. These structures also play a crucial role in providing unique opportunities for Inuit of different generations to form close bonds, as well as revitalize and transmit Inuit culture and language. Preserving these cultural landscapes is important, not only from a historic point of view, but also to prevent the loss of a natural and cultural heritage.

### HOW TO PROTECT THE NUNAVIK CULTURAL LANDSCAPE?

Community and regional planning tools and policies are, for now, part of the solution to manage urban development and preserve Nunavik's cultural landscapes. They help identify the best potential areas for development and ensure that these will be suitable and appropriate for the well-being of the community. However, communities have found these planning tools to be very confusing and complex to use and implement, in spite of local consultations. Unfortunately, these efforts have not yet proven sufficient to prevent urban sprawl and control development outside of the municipal boundaries. Even if the land use planning aspect is improving, many problems still arise while the communities are expanding rapidly. Are such land use planning strategies and design approaches adequate for Inuit communities? How to adapt a well-established yet rigid municipal system that is not truly respecting the Inuit values, culture and lifestyles? Urgent reflections are needed at higher decision levels than those of planning and design. In the meantime, a participatory approach to plan and design Inuit living environments is for now the best way to ensure that the development meets functional requirements without sacrificing Inuit values, culture, traditions, lifestyles and aspirations. Such an approach is essential in order to preserve the Nunavik cultural landscape and prevent the loss of these very important natural and cultural special places.



#### NOTE

1. Jackson, J.B. (1980: 16) *The Necessity for Ruins and Other Topics*. Amherst: U. of Massachusetts Press.