

# D E - B U N K - I N G M Y - T H O L - O G Y

ARCTIC

ROUND

TABLE

ANAMARIJA

KOROLJ

&

LEON

LAI

*In September 2013, we traveled to Iqaluit, Nunavut, with Associate Professor Mason White and Matthew Spremulli from Lateral Office. The purpose of the trip was to improve, and make headway on, a housing concept we developed at the Arctic Adaptations NuHousing Competition last summer. The team was guided by the Nunavut Housing Corporation to learn from local Iqaluit residents, Inuit youth, elders, and entrepreneurs.*

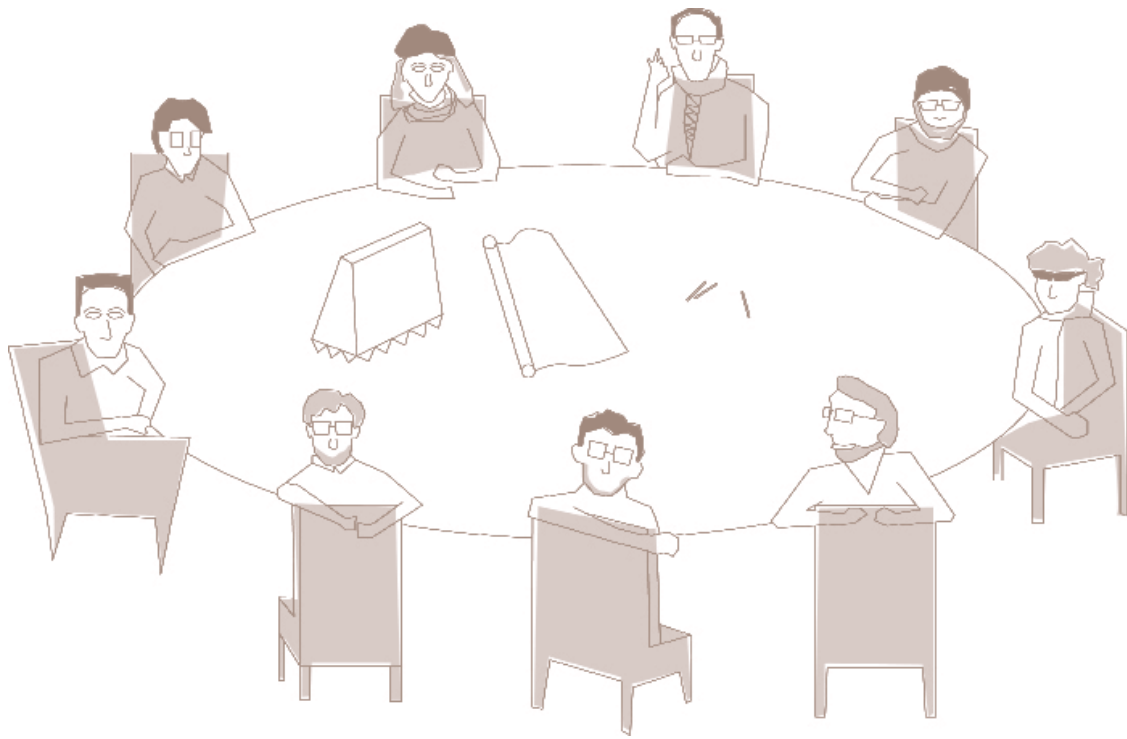
*On this trip we pitched our idea to numerous audiences. As we told the story again and again, we watched our idea shift, taking on different lives and manifestations. We wondered: is a project before it is built anything more than rhetoric?*

## **The Myth**

In the 1970s, the Swedish architect Ralph Erskine faced tremendous difficulties and







From top left: Leon Lai, Daniels MArch Student; Anamarija Korolj, Daniels MArch Student; Mason White, Associate Professor - Daniels Faculty, Partner - Lateral Office; Matthew Spremulli, Associate - Lateral Office; Erica, Iqaluit Housing Authority; Jovie, Nunavut Housing Corporation; Ralph Erskine, Swedish Architect (1914 - 2005); Don Hutton, Sr. Manager, Contracts & Procurement - Nunavut Housing Corporation; Tim Brown, Manager, Policy and Planning - Nunavut Housing Corporation

budget cuts in realizing his vision for the ideal Arctic City. At the time, Resolute Bay was becoming a major supply hub for the high Arctic. Canada had initiated a plan to construct new, modernist architecture and urbanism that would solve the longstanding social problems of the Inuit population in the North, from prostitution and alcoholism to people living off of discarded materials from the airbase. Erskine's winning presentation proposed one of the most influential projects in the contemporary history of Arctic architecture. His idea hinged on a romantic vision of an Arctic community, where an inhabitable wall structure, bent to resemble an enclosed medieval town, would provide the essentials of modern arctic living—including shops, a library, swimming pool, and even a botanical

garden. The microclimate created by the walled structure would fortify against harsh prevailing winds. Erskine's drawings and papers were published, audiences were excited, stakeholders were convinced, and construction began.

But Erskine's project was abandoned in 1978, after only a single wing of the structure had been completed. Initially, budget constraint halted the project. However, the project in its partial state failed to reflect any of other said positive effects on the community. There was a large disparity between his vision and reality: not only would the partially constructed scheme segregate the Inuit community from Southern inhabitants, but also the perimeter wall structure destroyed the fundamental function

of wind as natural snow clearing for the Inuit community on the inside.

This story of overreaching vision is told over and over in architecture. Without persuasion, imagery, and vision, a project cannot reach the construction stage. In the end, Erskine's vision was undoubtedly a double-edged sword: it won him the competition but reality could not live up to it. But can a good idea survive without good rhetoric? Is the idea separate from, and more important than, any construction? Is it irrelevant how many failed forms a project takes if there is still a possibility that it will be realized?

### Reality I: Construction

The realization of a housing project in the North is incredibly difficult. Natural resources are scarce, every element of a building must be shipped, and costs are exorbitant. Journeymen migrate to the North at the beginning of every season to take advantage of the opportunity for employment, as well as, for some, a chance to construct amidst the unforgiving elements.

For Don, these challenges are the only things that matter when building in the North. An enormous map in his office reminds him how far materials must travel. He warns us that novel construction ideas often prove shortsighted in such extreme environments. For example, structural insulated panels (SIPs) have garnered acclaim in recent years for the innovation of factory-fabricated walls that can be shipped, complete with insulation, ready to be erected quickly. However, due to their high upfront costs and heavy southern factory manufacturing, they

can be disastrous in such a fragile economy and further eliminate local tradesmen from the construction process. Additionally, the walls frequently break down in transit, and unlike timber, a damaged panel is irreplaceable. From Don's perspective, the rhetoric of prefab housing crumbles when placed in the Northern context.

### Reality II: Home as Capital

In an interview with Erica, a housing inspector at the Iqaluit Housing Authority, the inherent cultural barrier in the design and management of collective housing was clarified. During her daily site inspections, she has seen an increase of Inuit elders selling their homes after retirement: "the maintenance cost for these homes is too high and they don't want to pass this on to the next generation." As a result, the elders move back into subsidized housing. Erica says that for the younger generations of Inuit, there is no benefit to owning a home. And because there is a culture of leaving the house and getting outside as much as possible, any bit of their savings goes into their daily travel and recreation equipment. "We hunt and fish. I'd much rather upgrade my ski-doo than spend it on my home." For housing to become an asset in the context of Northern society, there is a need for an alternative model to address and improve both the indoor and outdoor experience of those who will reside in the home. When the concept of a dwelling is seen as a burden instead of an asset, how does one even begin to engage the issue of housing?

### Reality III: Sea-cans

The Arctic College Nunatta Campus residence, where we resided for seven

days, encapsulates the strange duality that often is found in Northern buildings: materials shipped from the South built to form a distinctly Northern typology. Situated at a former military outpost, the residence is both progressing as an educational facility and enduring as a reminder of military presence. It is also an adaptive reuse project—another typical feature of Northern construction, where nothing can afford to be wasted. Hundreds of shipping containers (or sea-cans) on stilts make the robust building feel like an enormous sea vessel. In Iqaluit, the typical house exhibits small-scale reuses of sea-cans, including impromptu workshop add-ons, family dry bulk storage, and even domestic expansions such as bedrooms. While the Arctic College was a product of the timely governmental intervention in the face of limited resources and rapid population growth, the more grassroots use of sea-cans is a form of practical construction ingenuity.

### **Making the Myth a Reality**

The first morning of our trip, we were asked to give a presentation of our scheme to the Nunavut Housing Corporation in a round-table format. Since the competition was won silently, we had not prepared a pitch. From the perspective of the various housing agencies, the bottom line for any new housing proposal must first respond to the immense housing deficit. For an audience of builders, the winning motive might be technical innovation and construction. For the Northern public, it might be the design of the housing block's exterior relationship to the city. For future dwellers, the concerns were probably a mix of affordability, functionality, and maintenance.

The voices around the table displayed conflicting priorities that no single, simple rhetoric could satisfy.

It became clear that our most important role is not, as we believed, to tell the right story at the right time. Our role is to listen: to absorb the conflicting opinions in hopes of generating an amalgamated vision greater than the sum of its parts. As difficult as it was to hear our beloved guide Jovi, a true local, proclaim at the group meeting, "I'm sorry guys, but your current proposal is nothing but a dream!", it is more crucial to understand the concerns raised by these stakeholders and their reasons. With more designers working in unfamiliar contexts than ever before in history, there is a responsibility to bring more than external research and fresh ideas to the table. This cannot be achieved by googling images of a place; it can only be done by interacting with people directly, if at all. We are taught to be as careful with our rhetoric as possible, but often it's more important to be persuaded than to persuade.

*The design has been on display at the Canadian Pavilion as part of "Arctic Adaptions: Nunavut" at the 2014 Venice Architecture Biennale.*

**OIL**

**JENNIFER**

**SPILLS**

**CODE**

The hard stroll of those humid streets  
and the cars shouting through horns  
splitting my bird guts

while I try to make myself sticky and defined  
thick enough to be necessary.