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# Iqaluit Core Area and Capital District Redevelopment Plan—Nunavut, Canada

Office for Urbanism, FoTenn, Laird & Associates, and the City of Iqaluit



There is a certain degree of fashion today associated with harsh, hard-to-get-to landscapes. With scenic, easily accessible locations filling rapidly with retirees, lifestyle transplants, and Richard Florida’s “creative class,” it can seem as if the gentle and reposeful landscapes romanticized in centuries past are now as passé as the strip mall.<sup>1</sup> This may be why in locations such as the Mountain West, inacces-

The stark, often beautiful Arctic landscape provides the setting for the City of Iqaluit, capital of Canada’s Nunavut Province.

sibility has become a selling point to the very rich, and why a full-page article in the “House & Home” section of *The New York Times* even celebrated life amid the still-forming lava fields of Hawaii.<sup>2</sup>

Yet as activists, writers and researchers from Edward Abbey to Marc Reisner have pointed out, choosing to live in a harsh climate requires more than rhetoric and fashion sense.<sup>3</sup> At some point, sumptuous travel literature and modish design photography must be set aside, and the difficult business begins of figuring out how, exactly, twenty-

## Iqaluit Core Area and Capital District Plan—Jury Comments

**Harris:** I thought this was really kind of astounding. It’s the commission you ought to turn down because it’s so challenging. When you first go to the site you would be in such despair I don’t know how you would continue. And it involves the toughest kind of questions about how a community that doesn’t have

any kind of town background is now forced to be in a town. It’s very serious and tough work.

**Vale:** I thought this was a fascinating commission. It’s because Nunavut was named a province that you need to have a provincial capital, which means you have to deal with things like ceremonial visits of the queen,

and you need to think through what it means to have a kind of formal and hierarchical built environment. My sense was that the consultants were engaging with those kinds of social and cultural issues in a pretty sensitive way. And they realized that the alternative was to just have the buildings sprawl randomly out into



first-century human beings can occupy such unforgiving, isolated landscapes.

It is at this edge of experience that the Iqaluit Core Area and Capital District Redevelopment Plan attempts to mesh not fashion with rhetoric, but noble societal hopes with the most challenging of physical realities. Its authors take what have become standard planning goals—sustainability, walkability, mixed-use, cultural awareness, sense of place—and find ways to make them work in the tundra-wrapped Arctic capital of Canada’s newest territory, Nunavut.

## Nunavut

On April 1, 1999, the Territory of Nunavut officially came into being. Located in the vast portion of Canada referred to by many as simply “the North,” it covers two million square kilometers (approximately 772,200 square miles) and spans three time zones. Approaching three times the size of Texas, Nunavut encompasses one-fifth the geographic area of a nation that is itself the second largest on earth. This expanse is home to only one person per 70 square kilometers (27 square miles), and none of its 26

communities are accessible by road or rail.

By most any standard, Nunavut’s climate qualifies as harsh. With some 60 percent of its land above the Arctic Circle, temperatures routinely drop well below those in southern Canada, and the sun disappears nearly completely for a month or more in winter. More surprisingly, Nunavut rivals the American Southwest for lack of precipitation.<sup>4</sup>

It is not just its climate and scale that make Nunavut unique, however. For centuries this part of North America has been home to the Inuit peoples, who provide “the foundation of the Territory’s culture.”<sup>5</sup> As a result, Nunavut’s particular blend of modern and traditional is evident in a “Consensus Government,” which combines the values of Canadian parliamentary democracy with “Aboriginal values of maximum cooperation, effective use of leadership resources, and common accountability.”<sup>6</sup>

**Left:** Walkability is a key design concept intended to preserve indigenous values and protect the fragile landscape.

**Right:** Circulation patterns take into account the importance of snowmobile usage during the winter months.

the tundra, and that would cause people to lose the pedestrian-oriented lifestyle they have. So, if you are going to have a city at all, it made more sense to have one where people continue to walk. I only wish they had engaged some of the issues of what it means to be a capital city.

**Brager:** The more I looked at it, the more impressed

I was with what they did. I’m wondering how reproducible it is though, and whether it has impact beyond their community. It didn’t seem to have much research.

**Harris:** I’d say there are two kinds research—one about the traditions and culture of the people and that extraordinary transition which is occurring for them;

also about the fundamental ecological conditions. The plan appears to be responsive to both of those—trying to figure out how to maintain, within a town, some of the opportunities that have been enjoyed in a more nomadic way of life, and also how to contain the growth so it doesn’t sprawl out into the tundra. There are other things that people have done forever that are



## Iqaluit

Nunavut's capital city, Iqaluit, was originally founded in 1955 as the settlement of Frobisher Bay. Located on the southern end of Baffin Island at the mouth of the Sylvia Grinnell River, it has been an administrative center for the Eastern Arctic since the early 1960s. Today, as the location of the Territorial Assembly, it is home to more than 6,000 residents.

As the Core Area and Capital District Redevelopment Plan makes clear, Iqaluit is a community with both great potential and formidable challenges. A seat of government, the city is expected to embody a certain symbolism. It is also an increasingly popular gateway to recreational use of the Arctic. Yet, because of its history and isolation, it has had difficulty fulfilling either its symbolic or recreational functions.

Despite having no overland connections to other communities Iqaluit now has a 20 percent growth rate. This has brought the beginnings of traffic congestion, sprawl, and that ill-defined, but still disquieting, problem of "placelessness." As Michèle Bertol, Iqaluit's Director of Planning and Lands, sums up the situation, "Iqaluit is at a crossroads."

It was under these conditions that Iqaluit sought the services of a consultant team composed of the Office for Urbanism, the planning firm FoTenn, and landscape architects Laird & Associates to create a new vision for its Core Area—its functional heart—and that portion of it that serves as its Capital District.

Panoramic view of the City of Iqaluit. The setting of Iqaluit is so challenging one juror commented that working there might be an example of "the commission you ought to turn down."

## Blending Traditions

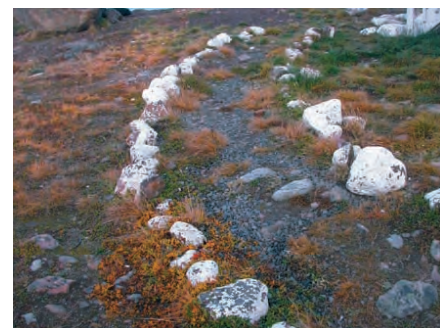
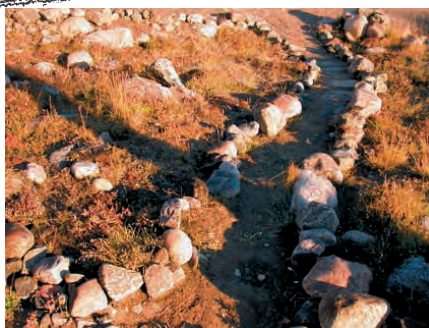
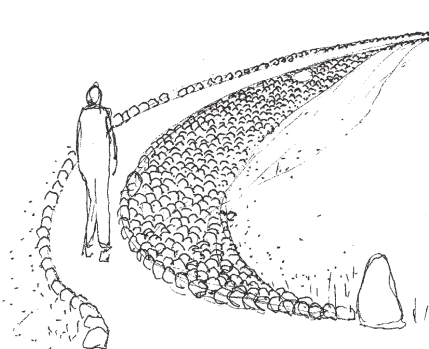
According to Bertol, it is difficult to find a single planning model that meets the challenges of a location that can to outsiders seem like "another world." Bertol, who arrived there from Montreal in 1994, has developed a close knowledge of a landscape that most Americans, and even many Canadians, only know through television and film.

Pamela Sweet, Vice President at FoTenn, believes that a key to the success of her firm's Iqaluit work has been the ability to blend the best practices and ideals of the south of Canada with those of the North. This process began with an very successful stage of citizen involvement. In Iqaluit, Sweet says, the people showed up in greater numbers than could have been hoped for in similar-sized communities in the rest of the country. But the team also sought to establish more traditional cultural channels by consulting with town Elders. A key part of the political process in any Inuit community, such interactions soon shed light not only on community history, but on the needs of those for whom issues of physical access are key.

Simultaneously, elected officials and stakeholders were also drawn into a process emblematic of "consensus government," with the result being six guiding principles:

- A city designed for its people, and designed to inspire.
- Redevelopment focused on the core.
- More housing in the Core Area + Capital District.
- Public places that respect the Arctic environment and the Inuit heritage.
- A walkable Arctic city.
- A Capital District that represents all of Nunavut.

Pedestrian walkways, pathways and trails can be defined with the use of materials that are natural to Iqaluit. Rocks are customarily employed to define the edges of walking trails, allowing the tundra to regenerate in the protected side.



One can see a number of contemporary planning themes within these guiding principles: sustainability, walkability, mixed-use, cultural awareness, and sense of place. This is not that different from what one might find in planning documents in southern Canada or the United States. Iqaluit, however, is a long way from Toronto or Seaside, Florida. For example, how does one respect the landscape in a location where, as the plan notes, even basic services must be provided in ways that are often “expensive, intensive, and damaging in their own right?” How does one achieve the goal of greater density and mixed-use when the community is surrounded by vast expanses of open land?

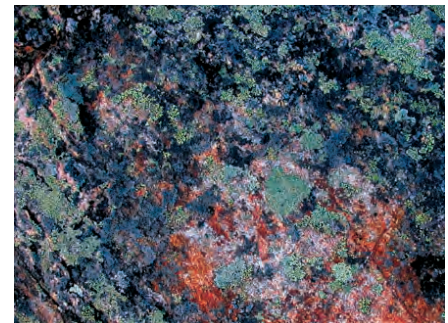
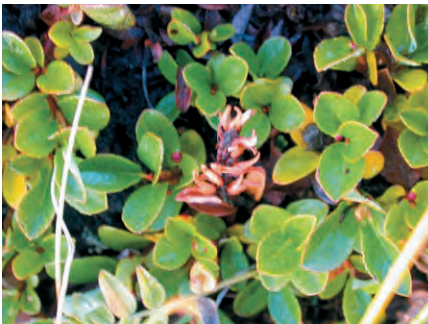
### A New Kind of City

To achieve its purposes, the plan calls for many of the same design features one might expect in a capital city, north or south: public spaces for gatherings of territorial significance, a square for people of the city itself, and new roadways that can one day be transformed into grand boulevards. Other elements emerged from a blending of more typical planning ideals with local environmental demands and cultural needs.

One such aspect is the way walkability is addressed. In the Arctic, darkness and drifting snow frequently obscure where a road ends and a sidewalk begins. As a solution, the plan proposes a series of vertical elements, such as lights, signs, and (along paths) rock borders, to assist pedestrians. It also makes provision not just for automobiles, but for



The tundra is a rich, diversified environment that is extremely sensitive. It must be protected in the Core Area to regenerate. A healthy tundra will help hold dust down, and be a more pleasing environment.



snowmobiles and ATVs—essential forms of transportation in the North.

To residents of New York or California, walkability and a harsh Arctic environment may seem to be strange

bedfellows. But the larger, underlying goal of creating a distinctly Inuit city is in many ways even more paradoxical. The Inuit have traditionally been a nomadic people. According to Bertol, one of the key questions that had to

in there. They talk about the capital. I didn't see what it could be or what it was. But it was remarkable to even begin thinking about how to make a memorable place and a place of culture against that landscape.

**Vale:** The question is whether this is a preliminary planning study that would be followed by having a new

urban design consultant or even a competition for a precinct or something like that. We would probably be even less happy if they had proposed some designs. I take the argument that it's not what you would immediately jump to as replicable, because it's such an extreme site in every sense of that term. On the

other hand, precisely because it's so extreme it seems to demand a sensitivity to the character of its place that makes it compelling.

**Harris:** There's a kind of professional responsibility of performance that I thought was really remarkable. It reminds me of an experience I've had, and I'm sure

According to Bertol, one of the key questions that had to be answered in the plan was how to create an urban fabric that would express the an historically non-urban people. such a people—and how to do this in such an environmentally sensitive landscape.

One solution involves maintaining links to outdoor life, such as a public waterfront, natural areas, and trails. Sweet says many residents also asked that the town environment reflect the nature of the surrounding landscape. They wanted “wide open spaces,” an absence of fences, housing units with their own private entries, and unobstructed views of the shoreline. The communal nature of property ownership was also taken into account, as were existing paths across undeveloped parcels of land.

The final framework for the Core Area of Iqaluit also provides design standards and park allocations that balance the new goal of mixed-use density with older cultural traditions of the Inuit. It also makes proposals for new sites and programs of public art and ways to encourage preservation of the fragile surrounding environment.

### From Iqaluit to the World

Today the plan is already being implemented. As Bertol notes, “We weren’t just looking for a feather to put in our cap.” Many of its proposed new crosswalks and walking paths are being built this year, and a new square is already being laid out. Moreover, a large version of the illustrated plan map now hangs in the Iqaluit City Council chamber for reference whenever a development issue arises in a public meeting. Bertol says the plan is also already serving as a “springboard” for things to come.

Even more importantly, however, Bertol believes the plan is “truly a benchmark in Arctic planning.” Sweet, and her firm FoTenn, are already applying what they have learned in Iqaluit to other communities in the North.

The expansive Arctic may one day be described in the pages of *The New York Times* with the same words of familiar, knowable romance used to describe the Arizona desert

and the lava fields of Hawaii. But perhaps it is good that this has not happened yet. For now, it is the love of the Inuit themselves for their Northern landscape, and the desire to build a functioning, noble capital there, that allows real solutions, real planning, to take place. From this process comes a document that holds lessons, not just for Arctic communities, but for any built environment in transition, and any location where the goals of great place-making must meet needs of great landscapes and great peoples.

—Jason Alexander Hayter

### Notes

1. Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class and How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).
2. In *True West: Authentic Development Patterns for Small Towns and Rural Areas* (Chicago, IL: Planners Press, 2003), Christopher J. Duerksen and James van Hemert noted that “some land in the mountains is being marketed for sale as getaways for the ultra-rich who can arrive by helicopter or snowmobiles.” In “With Vulcan as My Landscaper,” *The New York Times*, June 30, 2005, p.D1, Patricia Leigh Brown observed that today “intrepid pioneers are romancing lava, the more rugged and foreboding the better.”
3. See, for example, Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1968); and Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water* (USA: Penguin Books, 1993). Reisner famously claimed that to “really experience the desert you have to march right into its white bowl of sky and shape-contorting heat with your mind on your canteen as if it were your last gallon of gas and you were being chased by a carload of escaped murderers.”
4. Further information can be found at the City of Iqaluit website, [www.city.iqaluit.nu.ca](http://www.city.iqaluit.nu.ca); the website for the Territory of Nunavut, [www.gov.nu.ca](http://www.gov.nu.ca); and the Nunavut Tourism website, [www.NunavutTourism.com](http://www.NunavutTourism.com).
5. Government of Nunavut, “Our Land,” from [www.gov.nu.ca](http://www.gov.nu.ca).
6. Government of Nunavut, “Consensus Government,” from [www.gov.nu.ca](http://www.gov.nu.ca).

All images courtesy of the City of Iqaluit.

you have too, working in a neighborhood and asking people what they really prize, and they're suddenly telling you about a taco stand which turns out to be the community meeting place where important things happen. There's no way to know that except through them. And I think these guys did that in that town.

These don't seem like landmarks. That doesn't matter, does it? It does to them.

**Hardy:** It really is getting to the essentials, what determines the identity of a place. Could its inclusion force people to think about what we've been discussing, and if so, wouldn't that be valid? In other

words, it would be somewhat startling. It's an award that would create what we are after. Whereas if you ignore it, it's ignored.

**Harris:** Yes, how could they have chosen a place like that? There are no trees, no coffee tables out on the sidewalk.