

CANADA

ARCHITECTURE PROPOSAL

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

House of a Thousand Snows: An Architecture for Inuit Oral Tradition

In hearing that the Inuit have one thousand words for snow, I am initially struck by an image of Arctic immensity—a landscape extreme enough to withstand a multiplicity of snows. In delving deeper, I discover that the Inuit’s “one thousand words for snow” is not simply a thesaurus-style entry with one thousand synonyms, but a reflection of the inherent structure of the native tongue, Inuktitut. In this language, the particular meaning of things unfolds through strings of compound descriptors and modifiers that enable the Inuit to describe the subtleties of their experience in one unified utterance. One Inuktitut linguist suggests, “an Inuktitut word can replace a whole English sentence.”

The Language of the Inuit, Louise-Jaques Dorais’s historical and anthropological overview of the Inuit, studies the ties between syntax, semantics and society in the Arctic. The linguistic complexity of how to describe snow – an element transposed into infinite unique forms upon crystallization – is acquired from a lifetime of immersion in the expansive geography of the Arctic, from being in the snow. Similarly, the ability to “feel the weather in your bones,” captures how our language reflects the body’s phenomenological relationship to the environment. As an architect, I seek ways in which architecture is shaped by language, stories, myths, and transformative acts of performance and daily ritual. My search is for those moments where oral tradition and building tradition overlap, where cultural artifacts materialize through story telling. For my Fulbright project, I propose to work with the Inuit to investigate how their language is tied to the structure of their physical spaces and from that, their sense of place and self.

In traditional Inuit ways of life, the temporal and the spiritual were fluid and interchangeable. Today the Inuit are immersed in another kind of environment, just as complex and nuanced as the past. Many Inuit have become increasingly mobile, transforming their social, economic and geographic context—hunting alone with the use of a skidoo in place of a team of snow dogs is one such example. However, the Inuit language survives this marked shift away from the ancestral modes of living. Inuktitut holds value as part of Inuit identity, culture and tradition. The sharing of this language strengthens relationships between generations and represents a different perspective in the often one-sided dialogue between Inuit & Qallunaat (people of the south). Many anthropologists, historians, and even medical researchers are exploring storytelling (oral tradition) as a meaningful approach in qualitative and community based participatory research specifically with the Inuit.

As today’s Inuit face the unavoidable impact of Qallunaat cultural influences in their everyday life, the struggle for identity compounds from the rapid change which has left little time to comprehend the transformation that has occurred. In shaping a space to share Inuit oral tradition, I seek to give the Inuit an opportunity to reflect upon and describe the complexities of their recent experiences.

House of a Thousand Snows: An Architecture for Inuit Oral Tradition takes place in three parts: 1) an initial period of research and study guided by faculty from the Departments of Architecture and Native Studies at the University of Manitoba; 2) an extended period of immersion with an indigenous community identified through the Department of Native Studies; 3) a final period of production and workshops to construct a space to share the experience of living with the Inuit with the community and public.

For the first part of my project, I will be working with Dr. Mary Anne Beecher, Associate Head of Research in the Faculty of Architecture, and Dr. Lisa Landrum, Assistant Professor of Architecture whose interest in stories and myths about architectural beginnings aligns with my desire to explore the nature of storytelling and ritual through a study of performative structures built by the Inuit in the Arctic. I will produce a series of measured drawings and models that formally analyze these structures to familiarize myself with their construction and use. This study will be held in conjunction with Dr. Renate Eigenbrod, Head of the Department of Native Studies, as an interdisciplinary exchange that takes part through her involvement in community based literary activities and interest in the work of a new generation of Aboriginal writers. Through the Dept. of Natives Studies, I will find an Inuit community in Manitoba to work with during the second phase of my project. Additionally, I will visit and initiate contact with local galleries, in particular the Winnipeg Art Gallery (which is currently working on the design for a new Inuit Art and Learning Center to house its extensive collection of contemporary

Inuit art) and Plug-In Gallery (which offers an international post-graduate artist residency for their Summer Institute), for potential future exhibition of the work and/or opportunities to hold workshops in their gallery space.

For the second part of my project, I will live in and engage with an Inuit community (tbd through Dept. of Native Studies) living in northern reaches of Manitoba. Learning some Inuktitut, and limiting my use of the widely spread tongue of English, my aim is to capture Inuit sensibility and sensitivity through observation and participation. Sharing the languages of the arts, we will draw, photograph, build, and film together. The changing nature of Inuit life will be documented and constructed into a narrative that shares the experience and the language, Inuktitut, as tied to representations of their inhabited spaces. An image of the Inuit, one that reflects their understanding of their place and self, will emerge. In asking how the Inuit converse, I am seeking a dialogue: an exchange between my culture and theirs.

After this period of immersion in the Inuit community, I will return to University of Manitoba for the final phase of the project: to work collaboratively with the faculty and students to create structures to house these documented stories. I am particularly interested in working with indigenous young adults to explore architecture as a way of constructing place and identity. The project will use built structures and the structure of film as physical mediums in which we overlay language and experience to construct narrative. Through a series of workshops we will re-imagine how oral tradition and myth continue to transform space and demonstrate that through storytelling we can create architecture: a House of A Thousand Snows.

Today, our existential and experiential relationship with the environment is further understood through interconnectedness—interactions transformed through multiple dynamic interfaces. This alters the very nature of how we act and how we speak. Not unlike the Inuit, we are searching for words that accurately describe our experiences, words that give depth and structure to our lives. The reflective relationship of language to the inhabitation of space is important in understanding how shifts in environment not only affect indigenous ways of life, but how we address the complexities of these changes in the everyday practice of our lives.