

# Hunting For Ourselves: Behaviour and the Pursuit of Ecological Good

In contemporary landscape and design discourse, hunter culture is often rejected as an idealized past. The anthropocene looks toward landscape infrastructures and machines as a way to mitigate the ecological impacts of human behaviours. Considering the disconnect between southern cities and the resources that fuel them, Cree hunter culture offers lessons on forging relationships between environments and humans in the pursuit of ecologically good design. A combination of geographically specific research in subarctic Eastern James Bay Cree territory, the hydro-electric capital of Canada, is combined with larger questions of ethics and attitudes. This paper first mines issues of Cree land and stewardship values, and second proposes a set of ethical considerations for the empathic architect.

George peers at me through his timeworn skin as if he is a ventifact, the Arctic wind having, over years, carved his face with a motif of creases and crow's-feet. We talk about the RCMP's massacre of sled dogs and Afroman's *Because I Got High*. We talk about how to navigate through fog using only the waves that strike against your canoe. Inside his winter cabin, his stories frost my skin—they are as true as ice.

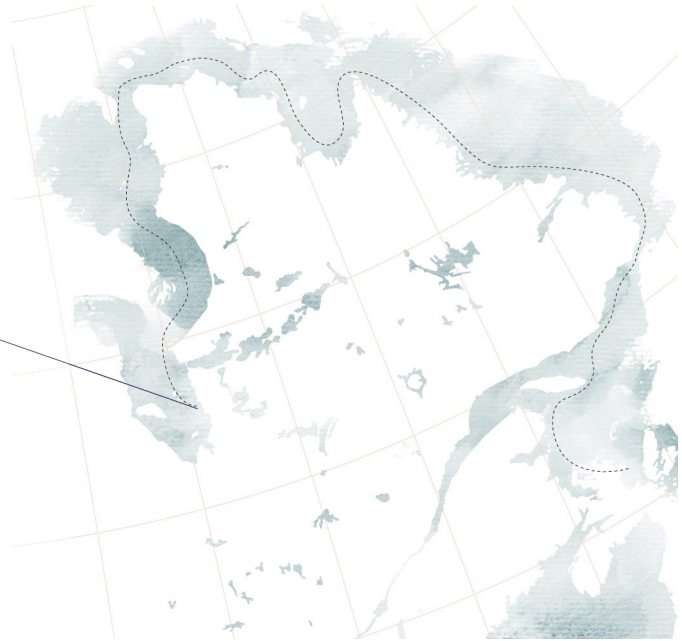
The seekers, the pilgrims, the explorers. These are the Euro–North American heroes, the archetypes whose combined spiritual malaise is celebrated in our culture for collectively moving the human spirit forward. The glorified protagonists in these epics are driven by the belief that there are lessons 'out there' that cannot be found 'in here'. The prize of this hunt is knowledge which, once captured, can be transformed, applied and disseminated at the will of the hunter. George explains to me how he survived six weeks marooned on an ice floe at the age of ten. I become aware of how the supple hide around my feet was once the coarse, heavy back of a moose and thank the hands that made them so.

Often the insatiable pursuit of greater spaces has very humble beginnings. Gilgamesh and Enkidu searched for cedars, St. Augustine set out for pears. Darwin dug mulch. These light expeditions were pivotal, however small they seem within the great scale of the epic that contains them. Simple beginnings

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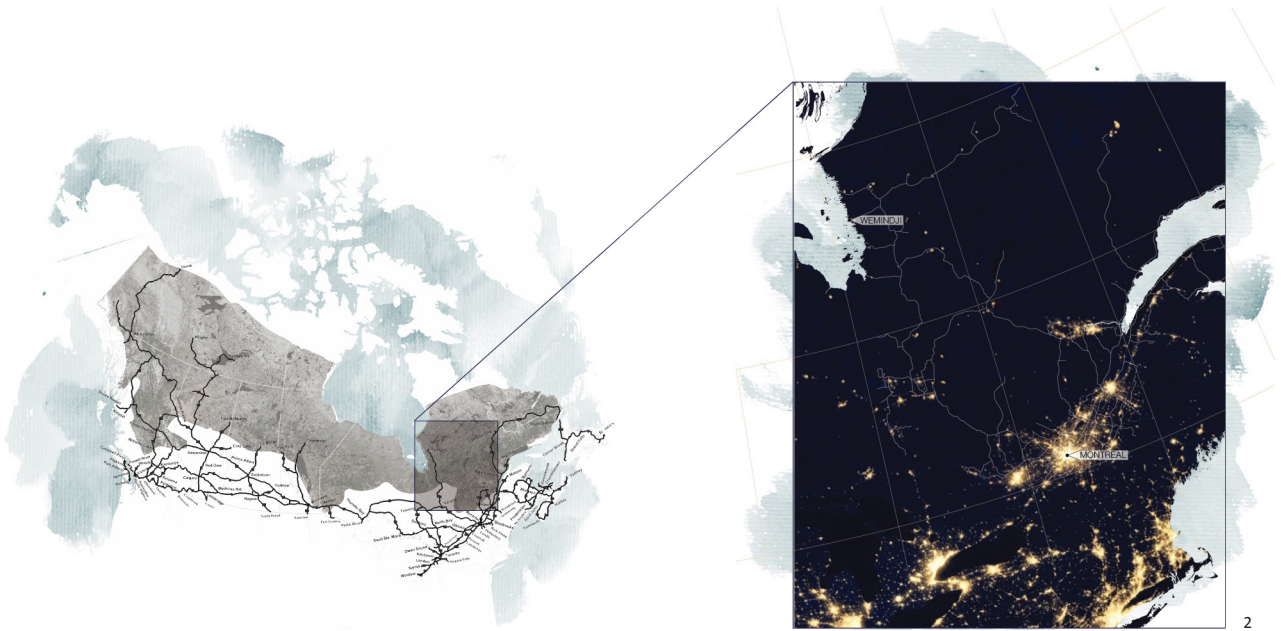
snowballed into cultural reformations. George Kudlu shares with me these smaller stories. They add up to have the scale of an epic. But George’s epic, unlike the explorers celebrated for defining Western culture and domains, never involves him leaving home in order to pursue knowledge. George, like any good Inuit or Cree hunter, is a seasoned explorer of inner space and a steward of his land. In order to understand this from a Western perspective, the definitions of what is outer and inner, what is mine and yours, and what makes a nomad, migrant, explorer, or settler, must be set aside. These are some of the fundamental qualities that help describe how bearers of a culture place themselves in the world. The pursuit of knowledge is, therefore, intrinsically linked to worldview. For the Cree and the Inuit, knowledge is in the land and it can be found by means of the hunt.

I spent five months over a winter season in Wemindji, a Cree community of 1200 people, having travelled there with an interest in animal fibres for my graduate research. I lived there as an employee of the Cree Nation working as an architectural advisor and as part of the Band’s Cultural Department. Those first mornings, I woke as a researcher, and it became increasingly uncomfortable. I quickly had to accept that if I hoped to learn anything at all, I first needed to ‘unlearn’ the assumptions of my Western ego.

Returning to Ontario in the spring, still feeling foreign to the bush, I noticed some part of my worldview had been transformed. I heard the honking of a lone goose, a scout, flying north, immediately registering the scent of the animal’s blood and tasting its caramelized flesh on my tongue. I attribute this new connection to animal and landscape, however young and small it may be, to this process of unlearning and rebuilding. Through the time I spent with the animal, talking about the animal with others, engaging with the animal using my hands, a new relationship with goose had emerged. Something that is usually a final product had become a process, a labour.

There is little break in the rhythm of city life during which to establish such a connection, but the ability to do so is critical to building empathy with the planet

Figure 1: George Kudlu, an Inuit hunter has travelled from the coast of Nova Scotia to James Bay by canoe. His winter camp is located in The Cree Nation of Wemindji.



that powers us. We need to have more opportunities to see ourselves reflected in the landscape. So, if our ability to connect intimately to the natural world is this important, how can architects create opportunities to unlearn?

#### NORTH

Canada's subarctic region of James Bay, extending from the southeastern rim of the greater Hudson's Bay, is seated at the interface of diametrically opposed climates, cultures, geologies, and ecologies. With the European settlement of Canada came the division of its land and its First Peoples—both of which were later reassembled in order to their territories' natural resource potential. Despite aggressive attempts by corporations and governing bodies to reshape the land and its stewards, the Cree have risen to an unprecedented level of political and economic prowess among all First Nations, though not without sacrifice. With the forced movement of their settlements, the carving and flooding of their territory, the construction of all-season roads and the attendant ecological imbalance, the relationship of the Cree to the landscape has necessarily changed. While much of their land has been irreversibly transformed, the Cree have built a robust political and financial independence founded on relationships, negotiation, craft, and protest. Power is seated next to the Cree, within the land.

Eeyou Istchee (Eastern James Bay Cree territory) has undergone overwhelming amounts of change in the last forty-one years. As it stands, an area greater than New York State has been flooded by Hydro Quebec reservoirs and river diversions. Twelve dams have been constructed, all of which were met with protest. The complexes collectively generate enough electricity to power an industrial economy-based country like Belgium, or a city like New York.<sup>1</sup> Energy is sent to Southern Canadian cities and sold to American cities by the province of Quebec.

In the eyes of Hydro Quebec, only a fraction of the energy potential latent in Eeyou Istchee is being generated. In 1986, the province put forth a hydroelectric dam proposal for the diversion of the Great Whale River.<sup>2</sup> Though the project

Figure 2: The Subarctic region is where all season roads end, terminating at dams or mines. A satellite image of the earth at night reveals energy use in southern cities such as Montreal, New York and Vermont. The illuminated cities are in stark contrast to the Cree communities that power them.



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Figure 3: The lower Eastmain River was once a powerful complex of waterfalls and rapids. The river was destroyed with diversions by the James Bay project. Photograph, *James Bay Road*, sourced from <http://www.jamesbayroad.com/hydro/eastmain.jpg>

Figure 4: This map shows the locations of Hydro Quebec dams and the area of the diverted basin within Eeyou Istchee. Power lines carry energy towards Southern cities. An area equal to that of New York State has been flooded and the entire system can generate enough energy to power New York City.



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is currently shelved, there is a general and somber understanding throughout Eeyou Istchee that it is only a matter of time before the proposal will be put forth a second time. While this project could be an unfortunate reality, the initial suspension of the Great Whale project was in fact a great victory for the Cree and the Inuit, who protested in the ways they know best—by carefully crafting materials and undergoing demanding journeys through the landscape.

After the Canadian government ignored Cree and Inuit pleas to abide by previous agreements and halt hydro development, joint protest began—though not through picketing, letter-writing, or formal meetings. This protest began with a very different set of tools: draughtsmanship, mapmaking, and woodworking. Inuit and Cree craftsmen constructed the Odeyak, an eight-metre-long hybrid of the Cree canoe, called an ode, and the Inuit kayak, a symbolic union of both Cree and Inuit narratives. A route was mapped from Whapmagootsui to New York City and a five-week trip that would terminate at the cities' public celebration of Earth Day began. As the odeyak travelled farther away from the North, the South began to take notice:



I remember feeling very homesick. A lot of us were thinking about how the people back home were getting ready for the goose hunt. In a week we would be getting home. As we watched odeyak preparing to head off for New York City, there were some Canada geese paddling around in the water. Seeing the geese only made it worse. So a few of us practiced our calls. Of course, the TV cameras instantly swivelled to whoever was calling the geese. I think they were amazed that the geese actually reacted to what we were doing.<sup>3</sup>

For the first time, the North had entered Southern consciousness. The demonstration gained the support of several environmental organizations, including Greenpeace, and a meeting with New York City's mayor followed shortly thereafter. This led to a majority vote amongst New York politicians in 1992 to cancel the purchase of energy from Quebec markets. In 1994, the project was successfully stopped. Very quickly, the Cree were launched into the political arena. Today, they have gained the highly valuable ability to self-govern, having tactfully established partnerships with Hydro Quebec and resource companies such that they can benefit from the unearthing of their land, too.

In architecture, as in many other fields, there has been a booming interest in Arctic territories over the last five to ten years. This international conversation has been stimulated by the melting of the polar ice caps and the idea of a more 'accessible' North. The cultural keyword 'North' immediately inherited new meanings: time-efficient sealift schedules, unexplored forms of renewable energy and storage, wellsprings of natural minerals and resources, new global identities and defense structures, and so on. 'North' had always denoted a perceived barrenness, both ecologically and culturally. Seemingly, the gateway opened and 'North' consequently became much more than twin and foil of the Antarctic. The unattainable had become the habitable, and a global race to occupy the land commenced—a kind of embodiment of The New World phenomenon. In the best cases, this attraction to the 'North' has been accompanied by the willingness of the 'South' to understand and honour the identities of those already occupying the landscape. The difficulty exists in the fact that there are two dramatically different worldviews intersecting here, and so however careful an action may be, the line between honouring and imposing is a precarious and difficult one to draw.

## **SOUTH**

This essay is a call for empathy—a call for the architect to acknowledge boundaries and broaden awareness through looking past ones own perspectives. In his book, *The Empathic Civilization*, Jeremy Rifkin explains, "when we empathize with another being, there is an unconscious understanding that their very existence, like our own, is a fragile affair, which is made possible by the continuous flow of energy through their being".<sup>4</sup> In order to best learn from and work with community members in Wemindji while also contributing to an academic arena, I had to try, as best I could, to see a Cree worldview.

We are living in what geologists term the anthropocene, an epoch of overwhelming human influence on our planet's ecological processes of self-remediation, replenishment and cleansing. It is an era of ecological crisis, an era filled with greenhouse gases, rising temperatures, ozone punctures, decreasing biodiversity, sinking deltas, rising sea levels, ocean acidification, and freshwater depletion. In recognition of the tipping point that has passed, there is a global rush to assume the role of steward and find ways to tend to our suffering

planet. This impulse, coupled with the bitterly painful understanding that our population is rising at an uncontrollable and unsustainable rate, has fostered the utopic vision of the eco-city. The eco-city, coloured green, is a self-cleansing machine that has a neutral impact on the planet. Besides the urban centre, solutions are needed in the zones of imminent crisis, the ulcers populating the earth's surface. An article published in the *Journal of Landscape Architecture* in 2001 argues for 'landscape machines,' the robust nature of which relies on an amalgam of 'landscape and science.' In them, the former is reinvented as its own processing centre.<sup>5</sup> Abandoned mines, polluted deltas, sinking landscapes: These sites of damage are promised to be born anew by multifaceted processes of remediation. Visualizations of these projects depict a promise of green abundance: a lush, bursting public garden that holds the social potential for a new definition of a new public. The worldview supported by the green city and landscape machines is that our species' survival in the wake of ecological crises is unilaterally dependent on the technological evolution we are able to undergo. What is missing from these projects is the sense that, to support the welfare of our ecosystems, we must also evolve socially, culturally, and politically.

We believe the pursuit of ecological good is for our children, but are we expecting them to wake in a world designed to take care of itself? Are we denying the fundamental need to revisit human behaviours and attitudes in the hope that our mega-scale machines will assume full responsibility for ecological stewardship? How can we design architecture that encourages an awareness of human presence and impact?

Our response in North America to the current ecological crisis suits the dominant Western worldview. The position of Western man in the world is quite clear: apart. A wounded landscape is to be salvaged by machines external to our bodies, and by the eco-city, although it in no way accounts for the increasing burden of the human population. Ross Adams describes this as the self-annihilation of architecture and recognizes these utopic visions as an attempt to, in some way, erase human presence.<sup>6</sup> The anthropocene is saturated with this simultaneous hope and despair, as all signs point to the inevitable destruction of ourselves by ourselves—perhaps because we are working outside of ourselves. Junya Ishigami's essay, *Another Scale of Architecture*, discusses the possibility of architecture at the scale of a biome. His articulation of distinct 'worlds' within our world hails from an Eastern disposition. However, it serves as an accurate depiction of the dominant Western worldview of man and ecologies:

The world of subatomic particles and atoms, the world of small insects and animals, our human world, the world that can only be perceived on a global scale, and outer space. They constitute an even larger succession of worlds, each one slightly different from the next...Scale gives a dimension to things, creates classes and hierarchies, and makes each world something concrete.<sup>7</sup>

Knowledge is an evocation of patterns in the human experience. We classify these patterns: each animal, each layer of information, is its own world. The universe contains this multiplicity of worlds, rubbing and vibrating against each other at paces that are somewhat independent and somewhat interdependent. Still, they are distinct enough to be classified as separate systems. Man has an agency that no other being possesses. Is it any wonder that, with a worldview like this, we are met with the anthropocene, the egocentric celebration and destruction of a species whose unprecedented need to consume is an undisputed 'human right?'

While living in Wemindji, I became increasingly aware of the ideas of ‘North’ and ‘South’, or more particularly, the relationship between our urban centres and the places that fuel them. Though George Kudlu has a connection to the landscape that simply isn’t available in an urban lifestyle, I feel there is more for the South to learn from his practice of observing and tracing the landscape. Current conversations on ecological and future welfare may disagree, saying that the success of hunter culture is measured solely in low human populations and outmoded technologies that do not have a contemporary application. Erle Ellis writes firmly in *Stop Trying to Save the Planet*:

Nature is gone. It was gone before you were born, before your parents were born, before the pilgrims arrived, before the pyramids were built. You are living on a used planet. [...] Nature just hasn’t been the same since well-armed hunters came on the scene.<sup>8</sup>

In truth, the landscape has been cultivated and shaped ever since the tool-bearing man arrived. Words like ‘natural’ and ‘nature’ suggest an original and perfect order that does not exist any longer—trying to regain that original appears futile. Robert Markley argues in his essay *Time* that sustainability is a type of time, one that challenges the longstanding concepts of chronological time (kronos) and the opportune moment, the ‘right time,’ or, as in contemporary Greek, ‘the weather’ (kairos):

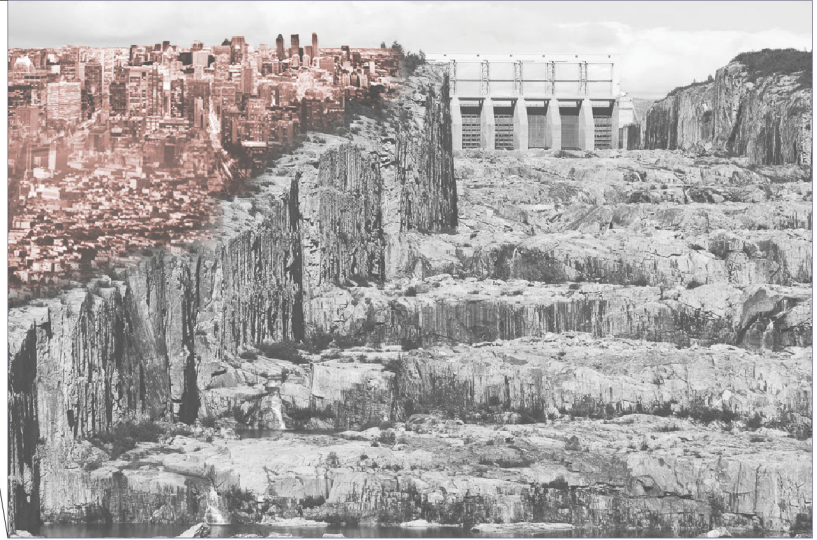
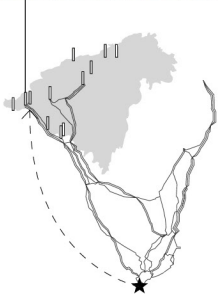
Sustainability ultimately refers to an idealized homeostasis between humankind and environment that never existed except in the sense that robust ecological systems could remain unaffected by low-density populations of humans chasing a few bison hither and yon.<sup>9</sup>

Here Markley, too, positions sustainability as an unrealistic, highly rhetorical movement toward a nostalgic ideal. Mankind is at the centre of a time defined by ecological crisis, both yearning for and rejecting the past as it hurries toward an indeterminate future.

Perhaps it’s not about ‘reverting’ to small-scale, nomadic means of existence, but rather about accommodating in our architectural visions of future machines and landscapes means of instilling changed behaviours and greater awareness in their human sharers. The foundation of hunter culture is a simultaneous awareness of, and surrender to, ecology. In contrast, cities do not typically allow us the opportunity to ‘surrender’ to the places from which its resources are extracted. In fact, we are completely disconnected from these places. The Cree, for instance, are far more aware of the sources and egresses of hydro-electric power, and its impacts on lives both human and animal, than most Quebeckers and city-dwellers. It seems the south is missing the opportunity to read the narrative of these ‘essential’ resources:

Oil, steam and natural gas lines should be marked at significant locations, such as their source and the point at which they enter the city, with the structures that make their functions and important positions in society legible. A huge natural gas line could be marked with an eternal flame that announces the number of miles the gas has traveled. Invisible communication technologies could be expressed at transfer points.<sup>10</sup>

Gary Strang, in *Infrastructure as landscape*, is arguing that the city-dweller, removed from the font of the natural resources they use on a daily basis, be given a more legible reading of these resources in the built environment. Hydro-electric dams are massive interventions in the northern landscape. Interventions



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in the city, not quite at the scale of these dams, could nonetheless help to permit the North's presence in the South. Architecture can offer this opportunity. Projects like *Tidy Street* (2011) in Brighton, UK offer a bottom-up approach to building awareness of energy consumption in the public environment. Large-scale visualizations of the street's electricity use were displayed on the pavement, large enough for residents to see from their windows. With their day-to-day consumption made so visible, residents reduced their electricity usage by 15% over a three-week period.<sup>11</sup> These tangible changes came simply from broadening awareness. Expanding awareness allows a person to see what is already inside of them. Reflection on and changes in behaviour springs from this new access. For the people of Tidy Street, awareness came to them in the built environment. Hans M. Carlson concludes his book, *Home is the Hunter*, by saying the North needs to become present in the South.<sup>12</sup> The truth is that the North is present in the South, because we use its oil, water, and minerals, but this presence has been made invisible in our cities by design—our built environment has, in some ways, been fashioned to insulate us from the material realities of our inherited one.

But more than the potential of architecture to provide opportunities to connect and change human behaviours, I am interested in the behaviour of the architect. How can the architect design for the North, or for any community in which inhabitants have a worldview external to the architect's, without imposing her or his own assumptions? How can the architect honour rather than insist? What is the appropriate behaviour in this context? How should I, as an architect, act?

#### BEGINNINGS

Architecture requires an ethics rather than moral prescriptions. No more rules and systems of values, but rather attitudes and ways of being, the poetic and philosophical basis for action: the action of opening itself to life and endowing it with immanence.

— Philippe Madec, *Pour Que La Vie Ait Lieu (Fragments)*<sup>13</sup>

The navigation through the tensions between North and South seeks a more responsible practice of architecture in this subarctic context. Through subjective experience of being oriented and taking informed action in the North, I have



established a set of precepts for the architect. I hesitate to call the guidelines I am advocating steps, rules, or instructions, though I believe it is necessary to follow them in order to do good work. Instead, 'Beginnings' is more appropriate—I infer no potential outcomes.

The first is to live there. Together, the community and I needed to discern what my place would be—if there was a place for me at all.

The second is to make yourself open to learning. Learning from people, that is, not learning about people. This is an important distinction to make in research since, as previously mentioned, the line between honouring and imposing is a fine one. Clear the mind, and arrive "sightless, with stupid love in [your] heart."<sup>13</sup>

The third is to get involved. Be no particular person—not a researcher, or an architect, or a writer. Remind yourself that you are many other things: a daughter, a father, a friend, etc. There is abundance in every corner of the community, in every conversation. Work in the post office, thaw a moose hide, deliver radio notices, crochet with Gookums (grandmothers), and chase rabbits around the community. Do this before designing and making.

The fourth is to involve everyone. All activities in Wemindji, design build activities to building design projects, were done for, by, and with the community. Researchers interview, but people converse. Choose genuine conversation and let everyone, from Elders to youth, participate.

The fifth is to allow yourself to be affected. If your presence is authentic and built on compassion, let that show. Be open to being changed. Research can imply a kind of separation, a distinction between the researcher and the subject, a boundary. Dissolve the lens and live. Make real friends and real architectures.

When the architect approaches cultures and worldviews she has not been conditioned to understand, she must surrender to experience in order to do good work. This isn't accommodated by our traditionally systematic approach to research. The architect needs to live in the community, needs to use her hands daily, needs to have conversations, needs to use her hands again, needs to have more conversations, and use her hands again. Draw, scrape, gut, and hold. The work must be an all-inclusive conversation. John Ralston Saul proposes that multiculturalism, worn proudly as a badge on Canadian identity, has native origins.<sup>14</sup> The practice of multiculturalism comes to us from the idea of the all-inclusive circle, the cultural framework in which First Nations established and honoured healthy bonds with newly arrived French settlers. The architect must embrace the circle and be changed by what moves through it.

Then let creation spring from this change.

## ENDNOTES

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# TERRITORIAL FORM

