

Cultural Disrupter on the Edges of the Arctic Archipelago

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The Hudson Bay Company (HBC) is a prominent enterprise that engaged in fur-trading commerce with various Indigenous nations across North America for most of its history. Though founded in 1670, it was only at in the late nineteenth century that HBC ventured into the Canadian Arctic, north of the 70th parallel. Starting in the 1910s, HBC workers erected several fur-trading posts on Arctic land, often with the help of Inuit individuals. In contrast to whalers mostly confined to their ships, fur traders built land-based architecture that enabled them to live in the Arctic year-round. They then became a new, distinct group of so-called northerners. Through their Western-based structures, fur traders incidentally exposed Inuit communities to diverse materials, building techniques, and cultural norms alien to local traditions—functionally, aesthetically and cosmologically. The fur trade thus ushered in significant transformations in the region’s material, spatial and ontological realities, notably in the built environment.

By framing the architecture of HBC fur-trading posts as a cultural disrupter, this paper posits that the physical development of the fur trade in the Canadian Arctic played a pivotal role in instigating a wide-ranging process of process of transculturation in Inuit building practices. In this context, transculturation refers to a process whereby a tangible or intangible element from Western culture blends into the built environment historically associated with Inuit culture, and vice versa. Relying primarily on photographic records, the paper contends that this cultural crossing occurred not only to facilitate functional aspects of northerners’ daily life but also to align with the capitalist imperatives and shifting cultural norms associated with the fur trade industry. Furthermore, the paper suggests that transculturation, manifested in various ways, scales and seasons, contributed significantly to the cultural alienation of Inuit peoples, whose identity is intricately tied to their profound connection and reverence for the Arctic lands.

THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE CANADIAN ARCTIC

Spanning from Alaska to Greenland, the Arctic region of the North American continent comprises expansive bodies of water or ice, depending on the season, along with vast and relatively flat land areas, which includes an impressive archipelago of 36,563 islands.¹ Within the geopolitical boundaries of Canada as a settler-colonial state, the Arctic region covers nearly forty percent of the country’s territory (1,276 million mi²), intersecting the northern parts of two provinces (Québec and Newfoundland-Labrador) as well as all three of the country’s northern territories (Nunavut, the Northwest Territories, and the Yukon). Due to its high latitudes, the Canadian Arctic is situated in zones of continuous and discontinuous permafrost and features extreme environmental conditions. Mostly devoid of trees, with limited sunlight and intense cold prevailing almost year-round, the Arctic has been vividly described by Latvian-Canadian author and Arctic traveller Fred Bruemmer as “the harshest, most hostile and potentially most lethal environment ever inhabited by humans.”² The people indigenous to the Arctic region are known as the Inuit peoples.

During the early Holocene period, approximately 12,000 years ago, a consequential continental glacial retreat set the stage for the migration of large herbivores, such as caribous, muskoxen, bison, and horses, alongside marine mammals like whales, belugas, walruses, and narwhals, towards the northernmost regions of the American continent. Consequently, the hunting societies associated with these animals logically followed their means of survival, migrating from North Asia to Alaska and, in subsequent waves, ventured towards the eastern Arctic.³ According to architectural historian and writer Mark Jarzombek, the Canadian Arctic is believed to have been the last region on Earth unoccupied by humans.⁴ Those who made the Arctic Archipelago their home for the first time approximately 4,000 years ago are effectively the ancestors of the Inuit peoples.

THE TRADITIONAL BUILT ENVIRONMENT OF THE INUIT PEOPLE

Throughout their century-long history as a people, the Inuit have developed unique traditions to adapt to the Arctic’s harsh environment. Central to these traditions are seasonal movements across the landscape. Until the mid-twentieth century, most



Figure 1. *Drawing of an Inuit group performing traditional activities outdoor.* Archives of Manitoba, Charles Napier Bell fonds, PR1987-350, Northern scene with four adult Inuit & one child, [18?], P7903/15.

Inuit groups maintained a very flexible territorial organization. From a Western perspective, these groups, characterized by social compositions that frequently changed, were often labeled as so-called nomads. Due to survival imperatives dictated by sometimes extreme weather conditions, population movements among Inuit groups in the Arctic were notably more frequent from spring to fall (seasonal nomadism) than during winter (semi-sedentary lifestyle).⁵ This implies that the Inuit built environment was intricately tied to people's ability to perform their traditional activities, including fishing, hunting animals and preserving plants in preparation for the cold season (Figure 1).⁶ In other words, seasonality played a crucial role in shaping the Inuit's built environment, influencing material choices, building practices, and settlement patterns.

From a technological viewpoint, the Inuit boast a rich tradition of crafting a wide array of tools and weapons from locally sourced materials, including animal skin, antlers, teeth, horns, bones, stones, and plants. Serving as a testament to their technical ingenuity, the Inuit historically also utilized these materials in the construction of indoor living spaces, the design of which varied according to seasonal conditions. For instance, it was commonplace for a single animal—particularly the caribou, which could be susceptible to scarcity—to serve as the primary source material for numerous objects, building materials, and cultural techniques within Inuit communities.⁷

Delving specifically into their traditional built environment, Inuit groups inhabited igloos (snow huts) during the winter months and typically built tupiqs (tent-like structures) as their homes in warmer seasons. Both structures were based on a circular plan and incorporated animist principles, wherein a soul was attributed to plants, inanimate objects, and natural phenomena.⁸ This cultural attachment to land, which should be treated with the same respect given the human beings according to Inuit belief systems,⁹ therefore infused their living spaces with a deep connection to the environment.

However, the traditional lifeways of the Inuit underwent fundamental changes at the turn of the twentieth century when

Western fur traders decided to settle in the Canadian Arctic for commercial and imperial purposes. For the first time in history, the region was then occupied by a distinctively non-Indigenous group of so-called northerners. The human and material presence of fur traders in the Arctic, supported by an extensive network of fur-trading posts, had a profound impact on the region's material, spatial and ontological realities, notably in the built environment.

THE ARRIVAL OF THE FUR TRADE IN THE ARCTIC

At the turn of the twentieth century, a few fur-trading companies ventured into the Canadian Arctic region to establish commercial ties with local Indigenous groups. Foremost among these Western enterprises was the Hudson Bay Company (HBC). Starting in the 1910s, HBC initiated the establishment of a network of fur-trading posts and transportation routes along the edges of the Arctic Archipelago at the rate of one or two per year. The company also purchased trading rights from other trading companies, such as the French company Révillon Brothers, to consolidate their efforts on transport routes and to better "co-operate in measures for safeguarding the interest of the native population."¹⁰

In contrast to whalers, who engaged in trade with the Inuit a few decades earlier, fur traders strategically erected land-based architecture in key locations in the Arctic, enabling them to have shelters throughout the entire year. This historical development is highly significant as it marked, for the first time, the cohabitation of two culturally distinct groups of northerners in the region: one Indigenous group—the Inuit—and on non-Indigenous—Western fur traders cohabited.

The arrival of Western fur traders in the Canadian North in the early twentieth century ushered in profound transformations and posed new challenges in one of the world's harshest environments. Unlike the Inuit, whose deep reverence for nature and animals shaped their way of life, fur traders primarily viewed the resources of the Arctic through imperial and capitalistic lens. Notably, animal skin—especially that of the arctic fox—emerged as a coveted commodity. Its pristine white fur could be easily

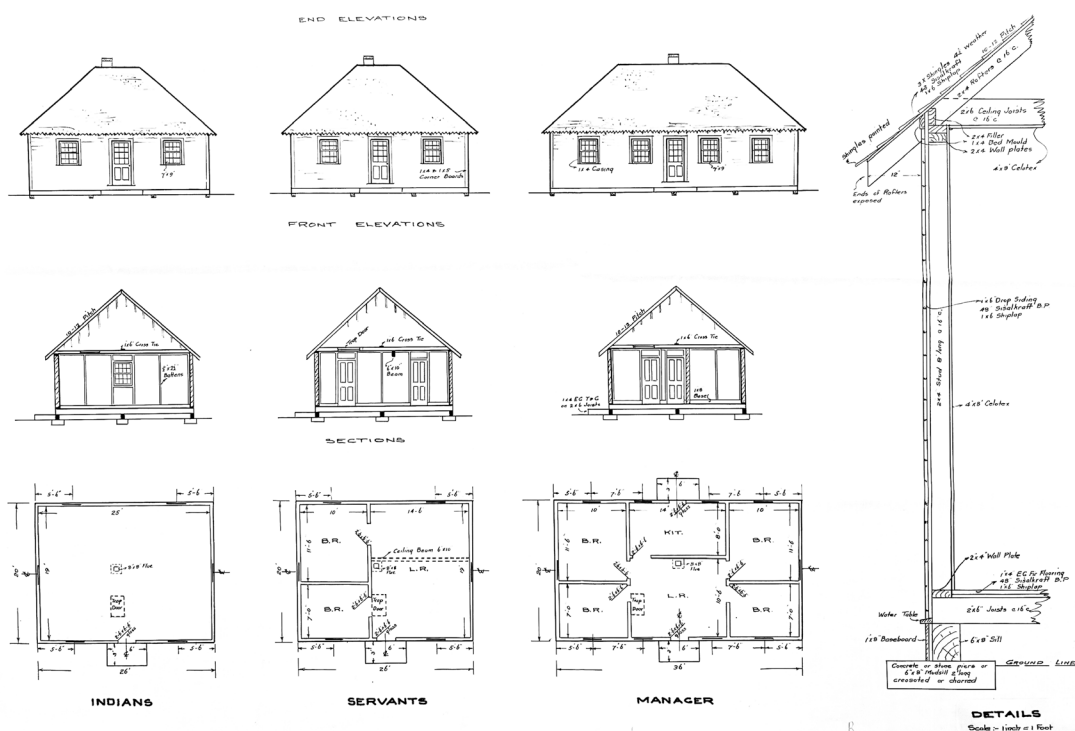


Figure 2. Construction drawings of dwelling structures for a typical HBC fur-trading post in the Arctic. Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Archives of Manitoba, Fur Trade commissioner's miscellaneous correspondence, Four plans drawn by L.F. Pearce covering the various buildings and structures for a typical fur trade post, 1930, RG3/4A/8 sheet 1.

dyed and subsequently transformed into luxury items such hats, winter coats, and other garments. Nevertheless, the success of Western traders' capitalist pursuits relied heavily on the Inuit, as they possessed crucial mobility skills, knowledge of the land, and mental capacities for working under the extreme conditions of the Arctic winter.

The fur trade progressively became a valuable activity for the Inuit, as fur was routinely exchanged for various European commodities.¹¹ Trapping animals and trading skins with Westerners became a vital component of their livelihood for over a decade. The actual quantity of furs brought to trading posts varied widely based on factors like location, season, and the overall health of fur-bearing animals. For instance, in the 1910s, an experienced Inuit fur trapper could anticipate trapping as many as fifty Arctic foxes (earning \$15 for each a pelt), while the annual yield for a single post ranged from hundreds to thousands during the same period.¹² While commercial activities with Westerners remained central to the livelihood of many Inuit individuals throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the fur trade gradually became a predominantly regional, yet lucrative, industry.

While commercial activities with Westerners remained central to the livelihood of many Inuit individuals throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the fur trade gradually became a predominantly regional, yet lucrative, industry. However, the industry's reliance on a single resource had adverse effects on

the Inuit, as their livelihoods became increasingly tethered to fur trading. The compounded impact of the Great Depression and the Second World War ultimately led to the collapse of the fur trade throughout North America—including the Arctic—during the 1940s.

ARCHITECTURE AS A CULTURAL DISRUPTER

Although Westerners and the Inuit primarily inhabited distinct built environments, their physical proximity not only influenced specific building practices at the local level but also, as this paper argues, acted as a cultural disrupter on a regional scale. Through the construction of trading posts and the establishment of Western-based settlements along the edges of the Arctic Archipelago, fur traders unwittingly introduced Inuit communities to a wide array of building materials, construction techniques, and cultural norms that diverged significantly from Inuit traditions—functionally, aesthetically and cosmologically (Figure 2). This exposure inevitably engendered consequential transformations in the material, spatial, and ontological reality of the region's built environment.

By framing the architecture of HBC fur-trading posts as a cultural disrupter, this paper posits that the physical development of the fur trade in the Canadian Arctic played a pivotal role in instigating a wide-ranging process of process of transculturation in Inuit building practices. Originally coined by Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz in the 1940s, transculturation generally denotes



Figure 3. *Group of Inuit people inside a wooden structure in the Arctic.* New Bedford Whaling Museum, George Comer (1858-1937) collection, *Group in Era's Cabin, Inuit Nunangat (Hudson Bay), 1900*, silver gelatin print, 3.75 x 4.75 in. (9.5 x 12.1 cm), NBWM 1980.37.26.a.

a process characterized by the influx of new cultural elements—tangible or intangible—and the subsequent loss or alteration of existing ones.¹³ In the context of this paper, transculturation refers to a process whereby an element from Western culture blends into the built environment historically associated with Inuit culture, and vice versa.

Through the critical analysis of photographic archives, this paper asserts that transculturation as expressed in the traditional built environment of the Inuit occurred not only to facilitate functional aspects of northerners' daily life but also to align with the capitalist imperatives and shifting cultural norms of "luxury" associated with the fur trade industry. Furthermore, the paper suggests that transculturation, manifested in various ways, scales and seasons, contributed significantly to the cultural alienation of Inuit peoples, whose identity is intricately tied to their profound connection and reverence for the Arctic lands.

TRANSCULTURATION IN PHOTOGRAPHIC RECORDS

As the fur trade in the Canadian Arctic started relatively late within the broader history of the fur-trading industry, there is an abundance of photographic records captured by various anthropologists, ethnologists, and other Arctic travelers who ventured into the North Pole at the turn of the century. Many

of these historical photographs depict scenes from inside and outside the inherently ephemeral traditional Inuit architecture during all seasons. Consequently, historical photographs emerge as an invaluable primary source for investigating the type of cultural blending that this paper aims to unveil. The visual nature of photographic materials makes them a rich source of knowledge encompassing both physical and symbolic evidence of transculturation. Therefore, the analysis in the specific context of this paper principally relies of these archival materials.

Photographs play an increasingly important role in historical research, particularly for scholars interested in the histories of human groups whose cultural narratives have historically been transmitted through oral traditions rather than through writing. In such cases, photographs hold the potential to become integral components in both cultural and historical investigations.¹⁴ However, using historical photographs to substantiate theoretical arguments can present some challenges. Despite vision being our primary sense for information gathering, reaching a consensus on the interpretation of specific images proves to be an elusive task. Paradoxically, while photographs are a relatively accessible medium for most individuals (unlike language-dependent writing), they are wrongly associated with an implied objectivity. Yet, the knowledge that historical photographs



Figure 4. *Group of Inuit people inside a snow hut in the Arctic.* New Bedford Whaling Museum, George Comer (1858-1937) collection, *Group inside a Snow House, Inuit Nunangat (Hudson Bay), 1901*, silver gelatin print, 3.75 x 4.75 in. (9.5 x 12.1 cm), NBWM 1980.37.37.a.

encapsulate can lose clarity when they are subjected to a critical analysis, revealing a shift towards subjectivity in the process.

As journalist Robert Papstein astutely observed, our ability to interpret text systematically contrasts with our more haphazard and non-systematic approach to reading images.¹⁵ This dynamic underscores the need for nuanced analyses when deciphering the complexities inherent in using photographs as research data, while acknowledging the intricate interplay between accessibility, objectivity, and subjectivity in their interpretation.

Given the length and format constraints of this paper, the analysis primarily centers on a close and comparative reading of two archival photographs, both captured by George Comer (1858–1937). Comer was an American explorer renowned for his Arctic expeditions conducted between 1897 and 1919. During these ventures, he developed a keen interest in the cultures and lifestyles of the Inuit people, documenting his interactions with local Indigenous communities through a rich record of photographs and journals.

The two specific photographs by Comer included in this paper both depict a group of Inuit people gathered inside a shelter. In one photograph, the shelter consists of a wooden structure

associated with Western building traditions, while in the other, the shelter is the quintessential Arctic dwelling—the igloo. Through the comparative analysis of the two photographs, the objective is to identify elements indicative of cultural disruption, contributing to substantiating the claim that a process of transculturation took place in the built environment of the Inuit in the Arctic at the turn of the twentieth century.

Figure 2 features architectural drawings for a typical Arctic settlement, including elevations, sections, plans and construction details. Produced in 1930, these drawings reveal the planning by HBC to have varying designs of dwelling structures based on their intended occupants. Notably, there are three distinct types of dwelling depicted through these architectural drawings: one for the manager (HBC officer), another for servants (HBC employees), and a third one for the so-called “Indians” (the Inuit). Implicit in these drawings is the fact that Inuit individuals, beyond engaging in transactional activities at fur-trading posts, were also accommodated in certain circumstances.

While Figure 3 lacks specific historical data, a reasonable assumption is that the photograph was taken within a real-life dwelling akin to the one designated for “Indians” in Figure 2. Consequently, the information contained in Figure 2 can reveal

contextual yet speculative insights into Figure 3. The photograph shows over a dozen Inuit adults and children densely gathered inside a Western-style structure that appears to be constructed from wood. Above, metallic racks meant for hanging animal skins or other materials to dry are attached to the structure's beams. Moreover, a cast-iron furnace occupies the middle of the space—and photograph—with a chimney extending vertically and reaching the ceiling. Presuming the photograph was taken during winter, it can be inferred that the Inuit group sought refuge inside this structure to benefit from the warmth generated by the furnace.

By closely witnessing and interacting with the architecture associated with the fur trade, the Inuit found themselves in direct contact with Western materials and architectural practice that superseded the seasonal particularities so central to their traditional lifeways and building methods. They were exposed to a variety of tools and materials such as wood planks, metal, and glass, as well as pre-assembled building systems, including windows, furnaces and drying racks—all of which were imported from elsewhere. The presence of one of these things is perhaps why that almost all children and a few adults on the photograph seem captivated by something situated outside the camera frame. By being in a Western structure, like the one depicted in Figure 3, one can imagine that architectural practices originating from traditions developed in temperate climates would likely prompt curious reflections among the members of this Inuit group.

Inuit individuals selectively adopted some things associated with the Western lifestyle that they deemed beneficial. They incorporated these things into their own homes, thereby changing material realities and cultural norms within their social fabric. Figure 4 serves as a compelling illustration of the prevalence of Western technology inside an igloo housing at least three Inuit people. All three are seated on a bench-like snow platform encircling the base of the igloo's circular walls. Many metallic objects are visible in the photograph, including a drinking cup, a kettle and some cooking pots.

Of particular interest is a clock positioned towards the center right of the photograph, suspended from shelves above the seating area. Beyond being a mere Western artefact like many other featured in this historical image, the presence of the clock suggests that Inuit communities adopted Western timekeeping practices to structure their daily lives. The material manifestation of the clock within the space of the igloo signifies a fundamental shift: Inuit lives were then regulated on a 24-hour basis within recurring seven-day periods.

This observation bears significance. Prior to the arrival of fur traders in the Arctic, the Inuit held no concept of a structured daily time. Their lives were in accordance with their needs and harmonized with the possibilities of nature. The Inuit's commercial partnership with fur traders prompted a profound

reassessment of their traditional lifeways, as they adopted a Western conception of time. Consequently, Inuit communities began aligning their daily activities with Western scheduling imperatives. This transformative shift in the perception of time had a noteworthy impact on Inuit practices, particularly in relation to the construction of their built environment.

In a theoretical sense, the evidence of material, cultural and semiotic disruptions highlighted in the analysis above can be understood as manifestations of a broader process of transculturation instigated by the presence of the fur trade industry in the Arctic in the early twentieth century. I posit that the instances of cultural disruptions depicted in the historical photographs presented in this paper were not solely driven by the pragmatic necessities of Inuit daily life (considering the allure of a warmer dwelling in sub-zero temperatures), but also aimed to align with evolving cultural norms of comfort, opulence and capitalism, which are all intertwined with the fur trade industry.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS ON CULTURAL DISRUPTION

The historical analysis presented in this paper suggests that the cultural disruptions resulting from the physical presence of the fur trade industry in the Canadian Arctic played a pivotal role in instigating a subtle yet disruptive process of transculturation. In contrast to missionaries or government officials, whose actions in the Canadian North were often driven by ideology, the relationship between Western fur traders and Inuit communities was chiefly commerce-based. Seemingly innocuous and beneficial from a strictly functional point of view, the outcome of the material exchanges and cultural blending also fueled the denormalization—and subsequent alienation—of the Inuit peoples.

To be clear, the term alienation here does not imply a process of assimilation. Instead, the cultural and architectural blending highlighted in this paper reflects a gradual and cumulative process encompassing a spectrum of attitudes, ranging from the subtle compulsions of empire to the overt opportunism of connection. Nevertheless, while the fur trade's *raison d'être* was not assimilation, it is crucial to emphasize that it did induce a form of alienation rooted in fundamentally divergent cultural norms and worldviews between Inuit and Western societies.

In conclusion, one of the intended contributions of this paper is to underscore the valuable role of historical photographs as research data. In this paper, photographs allow to visualize the incipient phases of a transculturation process manifested within and through a built environment that no longer exist due to its intrinsic ephemerality, with the fur trade being a driving force behind it all. The main analysis in this paper focuses on two historical photographs, which constitutes a methodological exercise that can prove to be useful. However, historical research does not operate in isolation from other sources of knowledge.

The historical understanding of the Arctic's built environment is embodied in a variety of sources, including archival photographs, written records, and oral traditions. It is crucial, however, to recognize that the insights derived from these sources are inevitably filtered through the perspective of the researcher. As such, historians must remain mindful of their social position and approach source materials with criticality. As brilliantly articulated by the translators of the first ever Inuit novel *Hunter with Harpoon*: "the meaningful mediation that occurs whenever one culture or language encounters another."¹⁶

ENDNOTES

1. Together, these islands have a land area of 543,500 mi², making the Arctic Archipelago the second largest of its kind in the world.
2. Fred Bruemmer, *Arctic Animals : A Celebration of Survival* (Ashland, WI: NorthWord, 1987), 75.
3. Mark Jarzombek, *Architecture of First Societies : A Global Perspective* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2013), 62.
4. Jarzombek, *Architecture of First Societies*, 74.
5. Réjean Girard, ed., *Histoire du Nord-du-Québec* (Quebec, QC: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 2012), 41.
6. Réjean Girard and Normand Perron, *Le Nord-du-Québec* (Quebec, QC : Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 2016), 28.
7. Joe Karetak, Frank J. Tester, and Shirley Tagalik, eds. *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit: What Inuit Have Always Known to Be True* (Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing, 2017), 102.
8. Jarzombek, *Architecture of First Societies*, 31.
9. Karetak, Tester and Tagalik, *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit*, 56.
10. Harold A. Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1962), 370.
11. Girard and Perron, *Le Nord*, 46.
12. Garry Hamilton, *Arctic Fox: Life at the Top of the World* (London, UK: A & C Black, 2008), 185.
13. Kenton Bell, ed., "Cultural Hybridization," Open Education Sociology Dictionary, accessed January 8, 2024, <https://sociologydictionary.org/cultural-hybridization/>.
14. Penny Tinkler, *Using Photographs in Social and Historical Research* (London, UK: SAGE Publications, 2023), xii.
15. Robert Papstein, "Creating and Using Photographs as Historical Evidence," *History in Africa* 17 (1990): 247.
16. Markoosie Patsauq, *Hunter with Harpoon* (Montreal, QC: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020), 71.