

CANADIAN

\$6.95 OCT/12  
V.57 N.10

ARCHITECT

HEALTHY LIVING





# FIRST STEPS



NIC LEHOUX

A GROUP OF ALBERTA-BASED ARCHITECTS IS WORKING ON RESOLVING FIRST NATIONS DEVELOPMENT ISSUES.

**TEXT** KENT MCKAY & SHAFRAAZ KABA

Mould-infested houses. Buckets where there should be toilets. Entire families crammed into uninsulated tents with forty-below-zero temperatures outside. Children covered in skin rashes due to contaminated water. The deplorable living conditions in the Northern Ontario First Nations community of Attawapiskat made headlines during the winter of 2011, eliciting a collective reaction of horror from the international public. Canadians were shocked and astounded that such squalid conditions existed in Canada. However, the community of Attawapiskat is not an isolated case. The lack of sustainable infrastructure in First Nations communities runs deep, and has continued to exist largely unnoticed by the general public for decades.

In the summer of 2011, prior to Attawapiskat hitting the news, the Sustainable Buildings Consortium (a non-profit organization created by Edmonton-based Manasc Isaac Architects) had begun planning the inaugural First Nations Conference on Sustainable Buildings and Communities. The aim of the Conference was clear: bring together a diverse group of stakeholders and initiate a conversation about the vision, planning, design and operations of sustainable buildings and community facilities for Canada's First Nations. This dialogue would need to involve First Nations Elders and Council Leaders, scientists, architects, engineers, leaders in environmental sustainability, educators and students, among others. The bigger question remained: how do we get their attention?

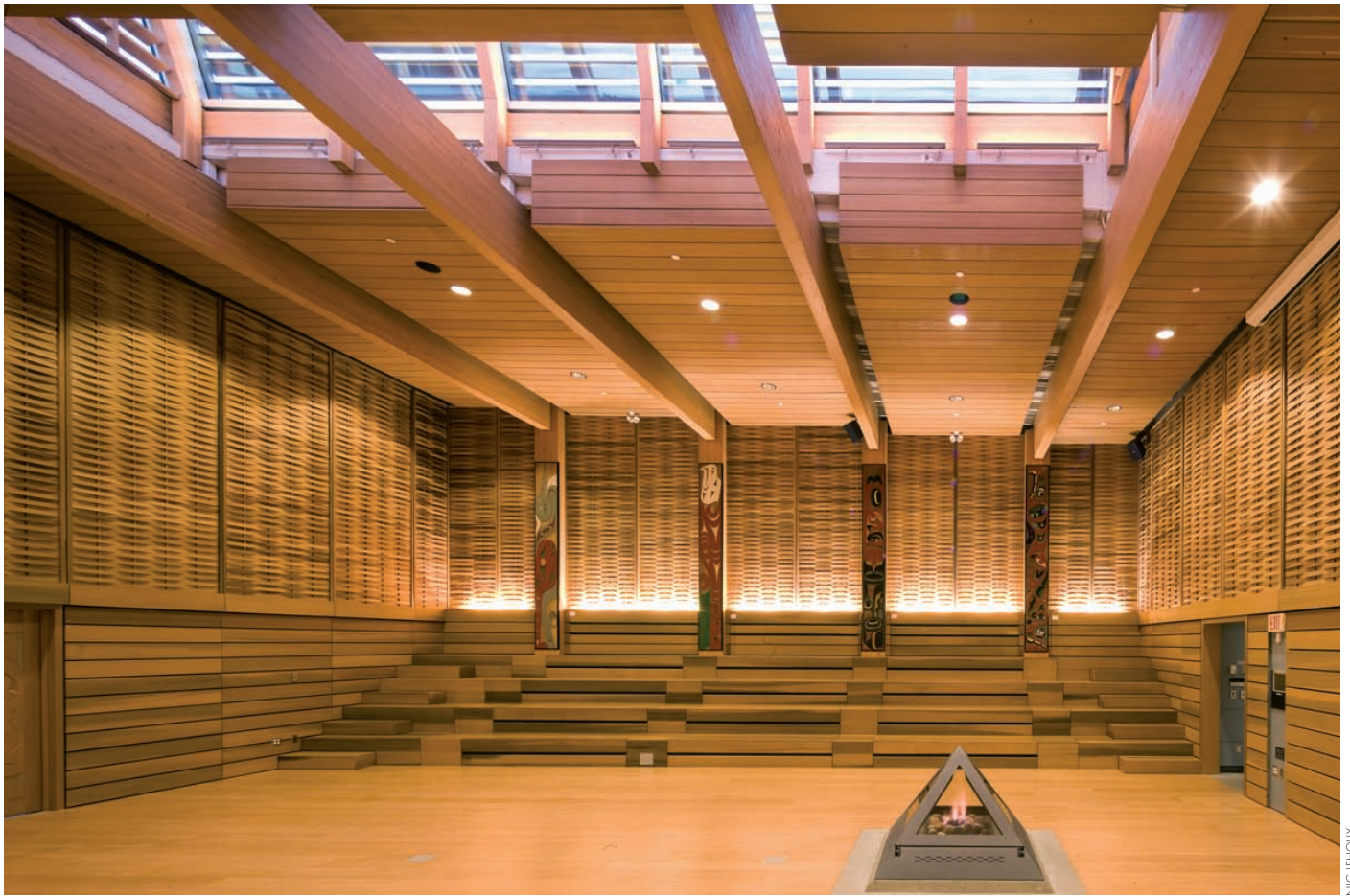
According to Dewey Smith, who represented the Assembly of First Nations at the conference held at the beginning of last March, 70 percent of First Nations households reported houses in

**ABOVE** THE FIRST PEOPLES' HOUSE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA IS BY ALFRED WAUGH, AN ARCHITECT OF CHIPEWYAN DESCENT WHO EXPRESSES ANCIENT FIRST NATIONS CULTURAL VALUES THROUGH THE USE OF CUTTING-EDGE BUILDING TECHNOLOGIES.

need of repair, compared to 25 percent of those living off-reserve. In Canada, nearly 2,000 First Nations households do not have running water or a means of septic waste disposal. Meanwhile, the average home on a reserve is roughly half the size of an average off-reserve home.

Building on a reserve takes place under a unique set of circumstances. Property located on a reserve belongs to the particular First Nation in question and cannot be owned by individuals. This renders most First Nations people unable to access a mortgage, as banks and financial institutions are generally unwilling to lend money if unable to seize land or





NIC LÉHOUC

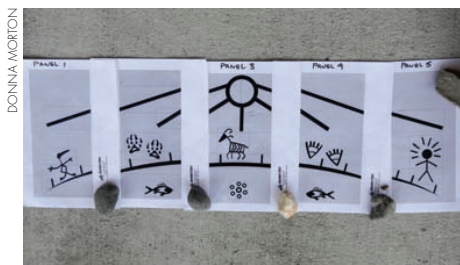
assets in the case of defaults. When housing projects do occur, they are almost always subject to a stringent list of requirements that invariably eliminate any possibility of collaboration with the actual First Nations inhabitants, thereby compromising the cultural appropriateness of the housing project. Each of these circumstances contributes to a lack of ownership on the reserve, and the ultimate neglect and accelerated deterioration of the facility over a short period of time.

Architect Richard Isaac has known about the conditions in First Nations communities for 30 years. He first moved to Canada from the UK in 1982 to work as a volunteer in the First Nation



DALLA COSTA DESIGN GROUP INC.

**TOP** THE CEREMONIAL HALL IN ALFRED VAUGHAN'S FIRST PEOPLES' HOUSE PROVIDES A CALMING, SOOTHING ENVIRONMENT FOR ITS USERS. **MIDDLE** A RENDERING OF THE RED CROSS COMMUNITY COLLEGE BY THE DALLA COSTA DESIGN GROUP INC. IS A CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE RESPONSE TO THE NEEDS OF THIS FIRST NATIONS COMMUNITY. **RIGHT** TWO IMAGES OF PHOTOVOLTAIC PANELS ADORNED WITH STUNNING ABORIGINAL ETCHINGS—AN ARCHITECTURAL GESTURE THAT BRIDGES BETWEEN CULTURAL TRADITIONS AND TECHNOLOGY.



DONNA MORTON



MARK GAULT





MICHAEL BEDNAR

community of Wabasca in Northern Alberta. There, he not only built housing, but invaluable relationships with First Nations people. Isaac later relocated to Edmonton to establish the firm Manasc Isaac alongside architect Vivian Manasc. Taking time to explore the cultural context and the stories of First Nations people, the firm began to understand the myriad gaps that led to such inadequate infrastructure in these communities in the first instance. Beyond the federal government and the department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, (then known as Indian and Northern Affairs Canada), there were many other stakeholders needing to participate in this dialogue. Manasc Isaac needed to develop a wider conversation.

Attawapiskat declared a state of emergency on October 28, 2011 and the media spotlight swivelled abruptly toward this ill-fated Ontario reserve, illuminating the broader problems of inadequate infrastructure in First Nations communities across the country. Canadian and international media suddenly made us aware of the urgent need to initiate a conversation about the basic needs for these people. Grand Chief Stan Louttit of the Mushkegowuk Council, to which Attawapiskat belongs, agreed to travel to

Alberta and provide a firsthand account of the story.

The outcome of the conference was significant. A recurring theme was the need for self-initiated economic development in First Nations. Chief Clarence Louie led the Osoyoos Indian Band Development Corporation to unparalleled success by cultivating business opportunities on the reserve. His initiatives gave his First Nation community greater autonomy, which is a fundamental gap elsewhere, noting that, “reserves were set up to be dependent on the federal government.” Engaging First Nations people in employment is also key to improving their overall health, he insisted. “The best compliment I can give [someone] is ‘you’re a damn good worker.’ A job is at the core of most healthy people’s lives,” he stated. Once the community is engaged and employed, social health will follow: “you can’t talk about education unless you talk about economic development.”

Chief Ron Morin of Enoch Cree Nation, just a few minutes’ drive outside of Edmonton, knows about economic development and its importance to First Nations communities. In fact, the very venue in which the conference was held illustrates this point. The River Cree Resort and

**ABOVE** THE SQUAMISH LIL’WAT CULTURAL CENTRE IS ANOTHER HANDSOME PROJECT BY WEST VANCOUVER-BASED ARCHITECT ALFRED WAUGH.

Casino was an initiative spearheaded by Morin in order to build a stronger economy on the reserve. The \$178-million resort was the first of its kind in Canada and brought significant employment and a steady cash flow to the reserve. Still, there are complications. Shortly after the conference, in April of 2012, a funding dispute resulted in the casino’s defaulting on a \$111-million loan. The casino’s operator cited the provincial government’s refusal to work with Enoch to solidify a new funding arrangement through the First Nations Development Fund. The future of the resort is unknown, and despite attempts to access alternative funding to keep the facility operational, all of the red tape surrounding the process has frustrated the Enoch Cree Nation.

Chief Morin arrived late to the conference, emerging straight out of a crucial meeting in which the Alberta government pulled the plug on his proposal for the Canada’s first Aboriginal-run petroleum refinery. Others immediately felt his frustration and tension in the

conference room when he arrived. For months afterward, media accusations of racism and backroom politics would swirl around the proposal's rejection. Yet amidst that day's frustration, there was a high level of energy and purpose in Morin's voice: "if they want a fight, they've got a fight," he said.

Clearly, First Nations are achieving successful results in business and planning ventures on their own. One innovator is Donna Morton, co-founder of First Power, an organization that works to economically empower First Nations communities through clean energy initiatives. Her presentation at the conference illustrated how green technology can merge with culture, honouring First Nations traditions. In one project, she demonstrated how photovoltaic panels adorned with stunning Aboriginal etchings exemplify a bridging between cultural traditions and technology, social issues and the visual arts. Through her work, she is able to bring several industries together and build something greater than the sum of its parts.

Representing a small roster of Canadian architects of First Nations heritage, Wanda Dalla Costa and Alfred Waugh presented their own work while discussing the general social implications of architecture in First Nations communities.

Dalla Costa explained that culturally inappropriate architecture leads to building neglect and a lack of ownership amongst First Nations communities. She recounted a story about a project involving a new home built for an elderly man with all of the possible modern amenities such as indoor plumbing, but with no regard to the man's actual needs. Shortly after he moved in, the man received a visit from the builders who wanted to follow up on his transition. As they approached the house, the builders were shocked to discover that the toilet had been removed from the bathroom, and was sitting out on the lawn. The man plainly explained that he could not imagine having such a filthy tool next to where he eats. Exploring modern and unconventional ways of expressing First Nations culture, Dalla Costa's work lends a non-traditional voice for First Nations culture. "As long as it's not red brick; that reminds me of a residential school," one of Dalla Costa's clients reminded her.

Alfred Waugh is an architect of Chipewyan descent and is known to express ancient First Nations cultural values through the use of cutting-edge building technologies. Recognized for projects such as the First Peoples' House at the University of Victoria and the Squamish Lil'wat Cultural Centre, his architecture has

been lauded for its ability to deliver Aboriginal culture through modern design.

It could be said that 2012's inaugural First Nations Conference on Sustainable Buildings and Communities raised several questions for its participants rather than providing simple answers. Given the deep and systemic issues responsible for deplorable conditions found in such communities as Attawapiskat, it will take many years to unpack and identify all of the problems, let alone solve them. Nevertheless, it is only through conversation where the questions that one asks are often more important than knowing all of the answers.

In 2013 the conversation will continue through a follow-up conference entitled "Sharing Our Stories." Here, fresh perspectives and dynamic speakers will deepen our insight and understanding into issues of sustainability across First Nations communities. This and future conversations will undoubtedly shed light on the journey that lies ahead for all of the stakeholders involved. **CA**

*The 2013 First Nations Conference on Sustainable Buildings and Communities will be held at the River Cree Resort & Casino in Edmonton from February 27-28, 2013. Details can be found at [www.SustainableFNC.ca](http://www.SustainableFNC.ca).*



**INNOVATIVE**  
solutions for healthy and vibrant  
healing & learning centres

Follow us   

1.800.263.2393 [williamsengineering.com](http://williamsengineering.com)

Johnny Bright School; Edmonton, AB | Potential LEED® Silver  
Alberta's first infrastructure project using the P3 model

**WE WILLIAMS ENGINEERING CANADA**

Engage. Innovate. Inspire.