On Design

House Hunting, or I’ve Never “Lived” in My House

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Less than fifty years ago, the Innu of Unamen Shipu, a Northern Quebec native community, were still a nomadic tribe, hunting, fishing, and gathering food across the vast reaches of northeastern Canada. Since 1954, the year in which the government of Canada officially created an autochthon reserve at Unamen Shipu, the Innu have largely moved into permanent houses. This article begins by examining the relationship between the Innu and their reserve dwellings. It then presents an exploratory design exercise, the goal of which was to develop sustainable housing prototypes adapted to the Innu’s present way of life. The exercise raised several interesting questions as to the persistence of tradition and the importance of place and territory in the design of dwellings.

The Innu once pursued a nomadic life-style across the vast unsettled lands of northeastern Canada. More recently, the Canadian government has tried to encourage them to settle in permanent communities. Toward this goal, one important initiative was the creation of autochthon reserves. The reserves were designed to serve as a temporary alternative to the nomadic native way of life, a kind of transition phase before the total integration of the Innu into Canadian society.

Created in 1954, the reserve of Unamen Shipu is located at a site (also commonly known as La Romaine) that the Innu had been occupying seasonally for thousands of years. Settling on the reserve meant the Innu could look forward to an easier life: permanent houses were built for the members of the community; local recipients of the Canadian government’s welfare program began to receive monthly allowance checks; children were sent to school from September to July...
in the city of Sept-Îles, several hours away by boat; and a new church was erected, and the first Catholic priest came to live in the community. Unamen Shipu’s population has grown from less than 200 in the 1950s to more than 800 today.

Although the majority of Unamen Shipu’s population continues to take part in traditional activities such as hunting and fishing several months a year, they maintain permanent residences on the reserve. However, their houses were planned according to standard North American divisions — with a living room, kitchen, dining room, and two or three bedrooms. The living room contains a large bay window; the kitchen is of the laboratory type; and there is neither an entry vestibule nor an adequate place to install a wood stove on the ground floor (Fig. 1).

There has been little explicit criticism of these houses by the Innu, and the majority of community members, if not all, would not give up the comfort of modern homes. Televisions, washing machines and dryers, skidoos, and trucks are likewise consumer goods the Innu cherish — in the same way most North Americans do. However, upon visiting the reserve, one cannot help observe an implicit, but strong reaction against the North American-style housing. As far as the government is concerned, whatever problems the Innu have with these houses stem from a lack of maintenance. But might one not also interpret the strong reaction of the Innu against these houses as an expression of traditional and cultural vivacity?

The Innu have been alienated from their traditional way of life by a centuries-old relationship with the white man. Even today, they still encounter resistance when it comes to recognition of their traditional fishing and hunting customs. Much more importantly, recognition of ownership and jurisdiction over lands they have occupied and used for centuries is still a major issue.

During the first half of 1999 the author collaborated with members of the Innu community in their search for a more adequate and sustainable dwelling — a house that would correspond to and respect their way of life and their aspirations. A major part of this effort was a design exercise by sixteen students in the Cross-Cultural Design Studio at the École d’Architecture of the Université Laval, Quebec City. This article reports on that exercise in the winter of 1999. It has been structured to reflect the working organization of the design studio.

BEFORE THE RESERVES: THE NOMADIC LIFE

For thousands of years the Innu hunted and fished on the lands north of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, near Anticosti Island. This huge territory, made up of thousands of square kilometers, is relatively flat, arid and austere. It is a land dotted by thousands of lakes and rivers and covered with conifer forests, where, toward the north, even the biggest trees rarely grow taller than a man (Fig. 2). The Innu believed this land did not belong to anybody — apart from the gods — and had no divisions. It was a land without limits, where moose and caribou (the Innu’s main game) roamed in large numbers. Nothing and nobody put limits on the Innu’s search for food. After all, wasn’t it a territory nobody else wanted?

In their search for game, the Innu traditionally moved from site to site in small family groups. Depending on the availability of wild game, they would settle for a period of anywhere from a few days to a few weeks, but rarely longer. Two, three or four tents would form a campsite for about 20 to 40 people. The tents would be set up in a row along a riverbank or on the edge of a lake (Fig. 3).

When they became available, canvas prospector tents brought by European explorers replaced the Innu’s traditional bark summer tents and caribou hide huts. Easier to use and lighter to carry, canvas, resistant enough, made life a little easier for the Innu. Their first canvas tents had the same cone or dome shape as their fur or bark shelters. However, the tents soon took on a rectangular form with a two-slope roof. Open at one end,
they were equipped with a small handmade wood stove during the winter. The stove was located near the entrance, far enough from the door to allow people to pass in and out easily (fig. 4). The stove, and the chimney pipe that went out through a hole in the fabric above it, were made from sheet metal. This heating device was rather small and light, making it easy to carry. A little bit of sand put inside the stove corners prevented the wooden legs from becoming too hot and burning the floor.

A further remarkable aspect of the Innu tent was its floor. Called sapinage, it was made of fir boughs, and could be more than a foot thick in winter (although during other seasons it was usually half as deep). During winter, the snow-covered ground was first carefully packed down. Then large fir branches were laid down with the inside of the branch curve facing the snow. This first layer was next covered with smaller fir branches, and finally the entire assemblage was covered with carpets. Originally, the Innu covered their floors with caribou furs, but the introduction of the utatnum (a box-like long and narrow sleigh attached to the back of a skidoo) made it relatively easy for the Innu to transport luggage (fig. 5). A floor constructed in this manner provided excellent insulation from the cold, and turned the most uneven ground into a flat, soft, and very comfortable surface. However, no description of this floor would be complete without mention of its extraordinary, permeating fragrance. Who has not smelled the wonderful aroma of freshly cut fir branches?

Traditional practice was to pack snow again the outsides of the tent for insulation from the cold. On the inside, bedclothes, blankets, small mattresses, and clothing would be carefully tied up on the tent walls during daytime (fig. 6). Not only did this help keep heat in, but it provided a very comfortable surface to lean back on!

The actual fabric of the tent — the canvas — further contributed to the special interior atmosphere. Since the canvas was white (or natural light beige) and translucent, it allowed light to filter in. On nights when the moon was full, the inside of the tent would be slightly illuminated. Another interesting characteristic of the tents was that exterior noises could be heard inside. These features brought the living space into close contact with surrounding nature.
The traditional tent is still used today by the Innu for hunting and fishing expeditions. Families sometimes also set up camp near the reserve to trap animals such as beaver, lynx, seals, foxes, wolves and martens — either for their meat or their fur. Alternatively, Innu may visit the camps for a few days, or even just for a few hours, to relax and be closer to nature.

**THE RESERVES: THE FIRST HOUSES**

Reserves were initially created for Quebec’s autochthon population to concentrate them in a smaller area. Since colonial times, the Catholic Church had been interested in concentrating the autochthon population to facilitate its evangelization efforts. Concentration also served the interests of the allochthon population (the white people), who had become aware of the many resources in Canada’s vast northeast. Wood was one of the first resources to interest the white community. (To be precise, fur was the first resource the whites were interested in, but they were dependent on the natives to obtain it.) In the case of Unamen Shipu/La Romaine, men from the south were also interested in the local hydroelectric potential and in the area’s mineral resources.

For several decades the Innu had been pushed further and further north, far away from the cities. Because of its isolated location, the creation of a reserve at La Romaine came quite late, compared to certain other sites. Even today there are no roads leading to La Romaine. The great number of lakes and rivers in the region and its low population density make roads extremely costly to build. Located several hundred kilometers from the nearest road-serviced village, in summer one has to take a boat or plane to reach the settlement. But in winter things are different. After the lakes and rivers freeze over, it becomes much easier, if not a pleasure, to circulate. Nearly everyone uses a snowmobile or skidoo to get around, and over-snow routes are well maintained and marked.

As already mentioned, La Romaine had served as a site for seasonal Innu gatherings for many centuries. When large families came and fished together near the Unamen River, it was often the occasion for great festivities. Attracted by such large gatherings, trading companies saw the chance to exchange a variety of goods with the native people, and the site gradually became a trading post — called Nitassinan by the traders.6

Today, the settlement of La Romaine is made up of two distinct villages that coexist side by side.7 To the west lies the allochthon or “white” village; to the east, that of the Innu (fig. 7).
The allochthon village is a rather spontaneous settlement where all the houses are different from one another. They stand on lots that may or may not be bordered by fences, and the village as a whole is criss-crossed by a few narrow streets that hug the contours of the landscape. It is clear in the allochthon section of La Romaine that the houses have been built and progressively transformed by their owners, with every action under control of the inhabitants. When we made our initial survey of the village in early November, however, the wind was quite strong, and it was also clear that vegetation has an extremely difficult time. Nothing luxurious was growing around the houses. Only simple natural vegetation has a chance to survive in such a climate.

Street layout and housing design are very different in the autochthon part of La Romaine (the allochthon village is not part of the reserve). The streets here are aligned and form a gridiron pattern. They are also much wider and bordered by ditches. Many houses are identical. In fact, after a quick walk around the Innu settlement, it became apparent that the couple of hundred houses on the reserve had all been built in four or five styles. In addition, all the houses are set back more or less the same distance from the street, and are equidistant from one another. It is obvious that the whole site was bulldozed prior to construction, since it is all sandy or covered by a scarce and fragile vegetation.

Around the houses, one frequently sees small sheds or hangars, which have largely replaced the traditional conical tents. Skidoos and canoes are stored in yards or in the sheds and hangars, which are also often used to repair them. A small piece of land, just at the back of the house, is frequently reserved for preparation of traditional bread, or Innu pakueshikan. Women cook this bread directly in the hot sand. A few clotheslines can be seen here and there. At the back of many houses, wood is stacked for the stove.

In addition to their use as storage places, elderly people sometimes use the sheds or hangars as “retreats” — or less often, as secondary houses. The sheds and hangars have the same dimensions as the canvas tents, and the Innu usually install a small handmade wood stove in them and spread a few old carpets on the floor. The elderly like to meet there to smoke a pipe, chat with friends, or repair fishing nets, snowshoes, etc.

In the Innu part of La Romaine it is very rare to see fences around lots. The typical North American lawn is also practically nonexistent. In fact, only a few families have even attempted to landscape the areas surrounding their houses. Marks of territorial appropriation seem to be more temporary than permanent. As a result, without the obvious and clear street pattern and the rigid alignment of houses, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to recognize the limits of any plot areas. In reality, plots do not belong to individuals, but to the tribe. The band legally owns the land. Demonstrations of property limits are therefore relatively absent. In fact, it would be interesting to take an aerial photograph of the reserve in the winter, just after a snowfall, to see how people circulate from house to house and in and out of the reserve, walking or using skidoos. Such a photograph would probably confirm what we saw during our November survey: that pedestrian paths and small all-terrain-vehicle trails totally ignore official plot divisions — at least the ones that exist on paper.

Access to the houses, themselves, is generally by means of wooden stairs and small balconies or porches, designed and constructed quite simply. Sometimes, on the porch roof or balcony, people will install a few poles to be used to dry clothes.
small game or pieces of meat (FIG. 11). There are no carports or garages. If people own a car or truck, they park it in front of their house or just beside it.

Because they must be built on deep foundations (a depth of at least five or six feet must be reached to get beneath freezing level), every house has a basement (a very common way of building in Canada). The first level above ground is also quite high (REFER TO FIG. 11). Yet in most cases the basement is practically empty, except for a wood-burning stove. The elderly may use this space to prepare caribou hides and dry caribou meat. Alternatively, this space — or at the very least very difficult — to properly and safely burn a wood stove. The elderly may use this space to prepare food for their own private entrance.12

Music without disturbing their parents (too much), and may be claimed by teenagers, who like to play their loud music without disturbing their parents (too much), and where they can have their own private entrance.13

Inside the houses, people usually gather in the living room. In a typical living room one may see a sofa, a television set, a carpet, and nothing (or almost nothing) on the walls. In the bedrooms, wardrobe doors have often been removed, and there are no clothes hanging on hangers; clothes are instead stacked in the corners of the room. Very often the only piece of furniture in a bedroom is a mattress on the floor. These rooms seem to be underutilized.14

Usually, a kitchen is the space in a house where food is prepared and cooked, and where, in some cultures, people eat. It is therefore the space in a house where the dwelling habits of a given culture are most strongly expressed. However, the kitchens in the autochthon houses of La Romaine, are of the laboratory type. They are neither adaptable nor flexible; the counters are too high for most of the women; and the space is too small to allow more than a few people to be there at the same time. It would be impossible — or at the very least very difficult — to properly and safely install a wood stove.

All building supplies come from outside the reserve, and they must be ordered months in advance. Most of the time they are delivered by boat. As with all other imported goods, construction materials are expensive. This definitely has an impact on the quality of the general maintenance of houses in La Romaine.

One does not need to have much experience to realize that the design of these houses has simply been imported from the south. One can recognize no attempt to adapt these houses to the Innu way of life. In fact, the layout of the reserve, as well as the design of the houses, was planned by outsiders from the Canadian Mortgage Housing Corporation or the Ministry of Indian Affairs.15 Until now no participatory process has preceded the design or construction of dwellings on the reserve. What kind of control, if any, do the Innu have over the construction of their settlement and dwellings?

THE DESIGN EXPLORATION: OUTLINE AND UNDERLYING PREMISES

In response to this situation, the Université Laval design studio sought to discover the basis for a sustainable dwelling better adapted to the Innu’s contemporary way of life. The studio and the research that underlay it were based on three major premises. First was that house form is greatly influenced by a community’s culture and daily life. Second was that Innu socio-cultural aspirations should play a very important role in shaping dwelling form. Third was that it is extremely important for the Innu to regain some measure of control over design, construction and transformation so that their houses may once again reflect their particular needs.

These three premises and the design studio’s general structure and activities derived from my own experience in teaching design in cross-cultural situations. They also derived from a diverse set of theoretical works. Among them were those by John N. Habraken on the importance of syntax, territorial boundaries, and control concepts and rules versus space deployment; by Christopher Alexander on rules and design patterns; by Amos Rapoport on the influence of culture and domestic activities in modifying house form; and by Augustin Berque on the ethical notion of territorialization/deterritorialization in association with the Innu’s relation to their natural and built environment.16

The design studio began by having the students research the topic thoroughly. All aspects of the subject were investigated: the life of the Innu in primitive times; their lives during the colonial period; the history of the reserve; the nature of the first permanent houses and of the current ones; and the existence of precedents (either similar projects, if any, or other people’s experiences of the transition between a nomadic and a sedentary way of life).

After the research, the first phase of the design process consisted of a search for principles or patterns that could be used to define rules to guide the design of the first prototypes. The objective was to help the designers (here, the stu-
dents in a learning process) by giving them guidelines. These would ensure that Innu cultural traits were respected during the design exercise, thus helping to create a certain uniformity between the prototypes proposed.

After they were formulated, the rules (we called them “rules of deployment”) were presented to a few members of the community for discussion and evaluation. They were then experimented with during a quick exercise session — about a week — during which the first sketches were produced. During a meeting and a few informal discussions, the sketches were presented and discussed, and comments were given to reorient the design work.

Throughout, particular effort was made to encourage the students to follow the rules (the general tendency among the students was to revert to their habitual and much more idiosyncratic methods of design). This was not particularly popular in the beginning.

Toward the end of the studio, intermediary and final design proposals were produced and evaluated with the participating community members. Sixteen prototypes were prepared (sets of drawings and models) to be presented to the entire community for discussion.

THE RULES OF DEPLOYMENT

For about a week, the students worked in groups of four to explore four different categories of rules. The first category consisted of rules regulating the large-scale relationship between the dwelling and the site, and it involved consideration of such concerns as orientation to sun and wind, overall configuration, and relationship with neighbors. The second category was made up of rules regulating indoor activities, such as sleeping, cooking, eating, working and playing. The third category dealt with rules regulating the narrow relationship between the house, its immediate surroundings, and outdoor domestic activities. Concerns here included access, entry, threshold, view (through windows and other openings), light, etc. The final category consisted of rules regulating construction. These last had to do with such important issues as building materials and techniques, labor skills, maintenance, transportation, feasibility and sustainability.

As mentioned before, the students defined the rules after thoroughly researching the subject and according to observations made while visiting Innu campsites and houses on the reserve. The following enumeration of rules is by no means exhaustive. Rather, it lists the most important — those that were most often used in the design process. Since the studio concentrated mainly on the design of the dwelling, I will introduce these rules first. I will then mention the rules guiding construction.

One of the most important rules the studio proposed dealt with the development of a large, central and versatile room. This room should be located on the main floor, be well connected to other rooms in the house, and be large enough to accommodate a large family gathering (FIG. 12).

A second important rule concerned the presence and location of a wood stove. I have already described how wood stoves were situated in Innu tents. While visiting the reserve we also observed the place they occupied in shelters people built behind their houses. Based on these observations, it was decided that the house should be able to accommodate a wood-burning stove and everything that goes with it (proper base, tools, wood bin, etc.). The stove must be in a central location, convenient for family gatherings. Furthermore, it must be close enough to the cooking area so that meals could easily be prepared on it.

Another important rule the studio formulated had to do with house access. It specified that at least one access (if not two) should be via a large enclosed vestibule, big enough to allow two or three people dressed in heavy winter clothes and boots to come and go from the house together. This hall should have two doors to create an “airlock” type of space. Such an arrangement would prevent heat loss from the house and limit the intrusion of wind and snow. The hall should also be large enough and adaptable enough to contain a large freezer and a deep maintenance sink.

Another rule concerned the “transition space” linking such halls or vestibules with the surroundings and nature. It was felt to be particularly important that house entrances be as close as possible to ground level (i.e., that the main floor of the house be in close relation with the exterior, neither too high nor too low). A low entrance would create problems with snow during the winter, and a high entrance was undesirable for the elderly. Furthermore, every room in the house should have a good view of the outside in order to allow the residents to be in close contact with their surroundings and easily feel daily and seasonal transformations, as well as changes in the weather.
Yet other rules dealt with the floor and the character of sitting rooms. It was determined that flooring materials in the Innu houses needed to accommodate a wide variety of activities. For example, the Innu usually prepare their furs in the house, and the floor must be durable and easy to wash. While in their tents, the Innu sit on the comfortable sapinage floors, and in much the same way they also often work, play, watch television, or simply chat with friends while sitting on the floor in their houses. The layout of rooms and the design of floors must therefore allow comfortable floor-sitting areas where the Innu could still be in contact with people involved in other activities in the house, and with the outside. Contacts with the WC, however, should be minimized. The Innu (as they willingly admit) are rather prudish. The toilet and bathroom should therefore be segregated from the main room of the house, and in retreat from other activities.

Rules were also written on work space(s), cooking and sleeping areas, and storage devices. Spaces that are convenient to use for all traditional Innu activities, with the appropriate dimensions and surfaces, should be integrated into the house or be very easily accessed from it. Rooms should be set aside for the repair of skidoos, canoes, fishing nets, etc.; for the preparation of skins (tanning, drying, smoking and cutting); and for sewing mittens, moccasins, and other objects. Cooking areas should be flexible and adaptable in order to allow different traditional cooking methods. And, as mentioned, the wood stove must be installed so as to be accessible for different cooking activities. By contrast, sleeping areas should be in retreat from the main activity area of the house, but they did not necessarily need to comprise separate rooms. Standard North American bedrooms seem underutilized, at least during the daytime.

Many cultures store clothes differently than Western cultures. The Innu have no exception to this and do not seem fond of the standard North American wardrobe. Perhaps they simply needed a different storage device. For this reason the students were encouraged to explore other storage systems that would be better adapted to the needs and traditional habits of the Innu — for example, the way they store their clothes and other objects in their campsites.

Other rules emerged with regard to house shape and size. The most important of these was that the overall house shape should be simple and economical, with a two- or four-slope roof. The house must also be energy efficient, and its shape should not create any undesirable accumulation of snow around it (for example, making access difficult). The proposed prototypes should further be of approximately the same size and price (or less expensive) than the ones presently built on the reserve. By no means should they be bigger or more expensive.

Finally, the studio established a few rules concerning building methods, construction techniques, and construction materials. Among these were that all building methods and construction techniques should be easily applicable in and by the community. Maximum participation of local manpower should be encouraged. Building supplies should be easy to transport by boat (neither too heavy nor to big). And building elements and components needed to be easy to maintain and repair, and must be easy to access when replacement became necessary. Finally, construction materials should be ecological and sustainable.

The above rules, as defined by the students, were presented to members of the community and to a group of teachers for discussion and evaluation. A final selection of the appropriate rules was then made and used in the elaboration of the first sketches.

THE FIRST SKETCHES

The students were required to use the rules elaborated. In teams of two, they were given a week to prepare their first sketches. On the one hand, the rules served as “runway lights” or “beacons” to guide the designers’ work. On the other hand, the relatively short time allotted to this phase brought a dose of spontaneity and intuitiveness to the process, which we believed was a good complement to the rational aspect of the rule method (and perhaps its shortcoming).

Following the short design period, the first sketches were presented and discussed at the school of architecture, with a few residents of La Romaine and teachers present. The residents who participated had the mandate to bring the sketches back to the reserve and present them to a small group of people interested in the project. The sketches were also discussed informally with friends and relatives. Neither the teachers nor any architects or construction professionals were supposed to take part in these discussions. The intent was that the evaluation would be as free of outside influences as possible. Professional advice and consultation would be reserved for a later phase.

Sixteen schemes (one per student) were prepared during the sketch phase. In the paragraphs below, I will describe the main characteristics of these schemes, what made them stand out, and what aspects raised the most discussion among our Innu “clients.” Some schemes reflected one or several facets of the traditional setting (the campsite) — among these were the conical roof, the circular plan, and the use of local construction materials such as log walls. Some others were more influenced by the settlement as it exists today and the way the Innu live in it. These schemes were more contemporary in their approach, and often integrated modern reinterpretations of tradition with complex forms (for example, several had flat or sloped roofs, large glass openings, or a fashionable look). Still others took a more “modest” approach, and were more preoccupied with creating interesting spaces for domestic activities. Generally, these last schemes featured simpler house shapes.

The houses proposed had one or two stories; some had basements, others not. Some had mezzanines incorporated in their design. Some schemes had a pit around the wood stove in the central room, while others proposed a long built-in bench along the wall. Some had vestibules; others not. Some proposed a flat ceiling, while others left the roof structure visible, generally with a sloped ceiling. Some had built-in tables and seats in the kitchen. A variety of bedroom
layouts were presented — some enclosed, some set apart from the rest of the house. Certain houses had a patio or a terrace, and some had a shed or a small hangar in the yard.

To the great disappointment of my students, all complicated shapes, either for the house itself or for the roof, were discarded. Fashionable designs and new and sometimes inventive or intriguing design ideas (often put forward by good students) were not discarded, but simply ignored — at least the ones that seemed to derive from an architectural “culture of taste.” Flat-roof dwelling schemes were rejected, as if a dwelling could not be lived in if it had a flat roof. One-story houses were preferred to the two-story ones, while houses with mezzanines were seen as a curiosity and raised a certain amount of interest. The design of outdoor elements such as patios or terraces did not seem to attract any interest or attention.

The schemes that were most popular among the Innu were the simplest: a simple rectangular shape, a two or four-slope roof, a relatively “plain” appearance. My students were not depressed, but almost. I remember some of them saying: “What the Innu really want are the bungalows they are presently living in!” In fact, the resemblance between their bungalows and the schemes they chose was striking, but not surprising!

Looking more closely at the selections made, it became obvious that they were greatly influenced by what the Innu were familiar with in term of dwellings — what they have been exposed to in real life (in contrast to just seeing on television), that is to say, canvas tents and bungalows. At this stage, I had to make a choice. I could either leave the students free to design houses they would themselves like to live in (and me as well in some cases!), and more or less ignore the wishes of our clients; or, and this is what I decided to do, we could stick to our initial objectives, and I could ask the students to develop simpler-shaped dwellings. The focus had to be on finding the right solutions to the Innu’s spatial needs for traditional and domestic activities and to better develop and clarify the design of details.

All this said, I must point out that many features presented by the students in these first sketches were seen as being very positive, such as the design of central living areas, the space allocated to wood stoves, and the consideration given to house access and the need for vestibules. Nevertheless, most of these ideas had to be refined and developed in more detail.

**FINAL PHASE**

Using the first sketches and comments we received from the community, we continued to work in the direction mentioned above, developing each scheme.” I was very encouraged by the improvements brought about by the students. They had obviously seriously thought things through. Unfortunately, community members did not participate in this intermediate review. We simply had a few telephone conversations during which they were made aware of the general orientations that the design of the prototypes had taken.

At the final review, at first glance the different schemes may have appeared little more than standard (and elegant!) bungalow designs. However, for me, for my students, for our guest reviewers, and, most importantly, for our clients, the reaction was very different: they were “special bungalows.”

In fact, looking at each proposed prototype individually, one noticed that special emphasis had been given to the planning of the houses. Great care had been given to such features as entrance halls, the central room with its wood stove, the working place, sleeping areas, storage devices, and exterior sheds and their link with interior spaces. The accompanying illustrations briefly present an overview of the final prototypes (Figs. 13–17).

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**FIGURE 13. (TOP)** The plan of a proposed prototype, with two large vestibules, a large central room, a wood stove between the kitchen and central room, a sleeping area in the retreat, and a hangar next to the house. (Project by Frédéric Bataillard, Cross-Cultural Design Studio, winter 1999.)

**FIGURE 14. (BOTTOM)** Two elevation drawings showing the two-slope roof, the simple shape of the house, and the hangar next to it. See the plan in Figure 13. (Project by Frédéric Bataillard, Cross-Cultural Design Studio, winter 1999.)
sented and discussed with the local population. This should be followed by construction of a one-to-one scale model. A first prototype will be built and tested...someday!

Obviously, this rather simple and short first-phase exercise could not lead us (or anyone) to any profound conclusions. The problem is extremely complex, and a great deal more investigation and experimentation must be undertaken, in close relation with the Innu, before any lasting solutions can be found. A lot remains to be done. However, both the “designers” and the “clients” have now learned to work together, defining vocabularies and clarifying objectives. For the time being, the Innu are much more concerned (and rightly so) with self-government and control over their territories.

Autochthons are fighting all over the world for recognition, struggling to define themselves in an increasingly globalized milieu. In their fight, however, they have turned to aboriginal people in other countries and to the United Nations for support, and the definition of their traditions and culture now must pass through an international “filter.” The way in which they perceive and therefore define themselves must necessarily now be much vaster than the limits of their own territory.

It would be highly unrealistic to think that the Innu could go back to their traditional way of life. However, although their complete assimilation into the mainstream of Canadian society is highly possible, it is not inevitable. It is not inevitable if the Innu themselves, as many other cultural groups in the world, fight for the recognition of their way of life, fight for their own self-government. Basically, it comes down to nothing less than the right to be different. New means of communications (television, Internet, etc.) globalize this fight, while at the same time underlining the importance of differences.

The built environment is perhaps becoming more uniform worldwide. This uniformity cannot be enriching if it results in everyone giving up cultural specificities, and even idiosyncrasies, in an attempt to follow the strongest and most influential ones. This uniformity can, however, also be rich, vast, complex and diverse if we let it be. It all depends on us.

In coming years the Innu of La Romaine will continue to be able to define themselves geographically and territorially. Control over the deployment of the built environment is the major guarantee that the dwelling form will correspond to a local culture — whatever it is.

Of course, as is the case with every other group, the Innu will have to find their place, explicitly and implicitly, in relation to an increasingly vaster world. This part of the redefinition of their identity is placeless. Their “house hunting” will continue.

**NEXT STEPS**

A design process such as that described above is very slow. The sixteen models were recently shipped to Sept-Îles and presented to three Innu band councils, including the Innu chiefs of Unamen Shipu. The work must still be pre-
In this article the terms native people and autochthon are used to describe the type of ethnic group to which the Innu of Unamen Shipu belong. The Innu and all the other autochthon groups of Canada are so called because they are considered to be the first inhabitants of Canada, having been established long before the arrival of the first European settlers.


To see a few examples, please refer to H. Bédard, Les montagnais et la réserve de Betsiamites 1850–1900 (Québec: Institut québécois de recherche sur la culture, 1979; Collection Edmond-de-Nevers, 1988), p.61.

The difference lies in the fact that the furs were not brought back to a permanent storage site when no longer in use. Rather, they were transformed into moccasins, mittens, or others leather goods, as needed.

Traditionally, North American Christmas trees are fir trees.


The name La Romaine, comes from the Innu words orumen and olumenne, which mean painting, red earth, red ochre, and represent the color of the earth on the river edge. From Charron and Boudreault, La Romaine: Unaman-shipit.


An exhibition of the Canadian Center for Architecture (CCA) in Montreal a few years ago presented an exhibit on the “American Lawn,” and how over the last decades it has become an object of cultural representation used to demonstrate social status and delimit territory.

To grow grass around one’s house may sometimes be laughed at by other members of the community, and is seen by some white people as something that Indians cannot do.

The government calls the tribe a band, and the equivalent of the Municipal Council is called the Band Council.

As do a lot of their young white counterparts.

These observations and remarks may appear to be intuitive rather than based on real fact. I cannot deny the intuitive aspect of the survey work. Although I wish I could have undertaken an extensive survey before starting the design exercise, I believe that three things allowed me to go further and participate in this explorative design exercise with my students. First of all, these observations were made during my visit to La Romaine during the fall of 1998. I had the chance to visit the reserve and about thirty houses and be guided by a few local people from the reserve. These people included Sylvestre Mullen, the person in charge of housing construction, renovation and maintenance in the reserve and our local partner in the exercise, and Louise Bellemare and Théo Mark, also from La Romaine, who actively took part in the design exercise and helped us during the entire semester.

Second, over the years I have accumulated a fair amount of experience as an architect, professor of architecture, and researcher in the field, not only in my own country but in many other countries where I have lived or which I have visited extensively, and where I regularly have the chance to work and to participate in design exercises or field research with local colleagues. Third, the literature on the subject of the Montagnais or Innu, though not yet very extensive on architecture and dwelling culture, has been a valuable source of valid information. All of this greatly helped minimize the gratuitity or fortuitous nature of some of our observations.

Or by private firms they commissioned. See also Fortin, Coup d’œil, p.50.

In addition to the following note, the following are the references used for the design exploration and research: A. Berque, Etre humain sur le terre (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1996); Ecounène, Introduction à l’étude des milieux humains (Paris: Editions Belin, 2000) (for the writing of this article); and A. Rapoport, House Form and Culture (Paris: Dunod, 1972) (for the French translation).

Our main point of reference is the work of John Habraken (mainly N.J. Habraken et al., The Grunfeld Variations: A Report on Thematic Development of an Urban Tissue (Cambridge, MA: Ed. Dept. of Architecture MIT, 1981). We also looked at the excellent research project undertaken by the Minimum Cost Housing Group of the School of Architecture of McGill University. V. Bhatt et al., How The Other Half Builds (Vols.1,2, and 3) (Montreal: Ed. MCHG, McGill University, 1990). The works of Christopher Alexander, Thomas Thiiis-Evensen, and Giancarlo De Carlo were also examined.

The students did not have to follow all the rules. They were free to choose, among the rules defined, a set of rules that they judged pertinent. They could, of course, adapt or modify them, and even create new ones. But they had to be critical with respect to the rules they were working with, explaining their choices and why and how they were using them.

For the architects and teachers involved either in the exercise or in the reviews, the preparation of the first sketches was an occasion to raise appropriate questions with a large number of community members.

Here, we are referring to a “culture of taste” that is propagated in the world of architecture by international architectural magazines (some say the glitzy ones), and that have a huge influence on architects and architecture students.

Here, we must specify that the term “bungalow” refers to its common and popular meaning in the eastern regions of Canada.

In most cases, I encouraged the students to keep their initial ideas, adapting and developing them, instead of asking them to start from scratch.

In the last decades, the redefinition and recognition of ethnic minorities have necessarily passed by some international institutions under the eye of world’s television networks.