

Terrain-Specific: Contemporary Landscape Architecture in Canada

Bhavika SHARMA*, Alissa NORTH

John H. Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape, and Design, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON M5S 2J5, Canada

***CORRESPONDING AUTHOR**

Address: John H. Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape, and Design, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON M5S 2J5, Canada

Email: lafrontiers@foxmail.com

ABSTRACT

The Canadian landscape has typically captured a global imaginary of a pristine wild, but how might its urban designed landscapes be distinctly understood? Foregrounded by the landscape transformations accelerated by climate change, the book *Innate Terrain: Canadian Landscape Architecture*, edited by Professor Alissa North from the University of Toronto, highlights landscape architecture projects situated on the unique Canadian terrain. Providing further provocation on Canadian landscape architecture, *Innate Terrain* seeks to fill the literary gap on contemporary landscape perspectives, distinguishing Canadian landscape architecture from global practice, and particularly, its well-documented American counterpart.

Landscape architecture in the Canadian context has evolved and established its own distinct identity, one imbued with national and local sensitivities. Informed by diverse environmental and cultural contexts, Canadian-designed landscapes reflect and refer to the prevailing ecosystems of Canada's innate terrain. Contrary to the preceding International Style, landscape architecture projects in Canada have adopted the ethos of Critical Regionalism in the second half of the 20th century. Contemporary Canadian practitioners are designing landscapes that are deeply informed by their surrounding geographical context while emphasizing cultural specificity. Central to this cultural specificity, addressed by a new generation of landscape architects, is the increasing recognition of Indigenous Traditional Knowledge within the discipline. Canadian landscape architects have collaborated with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities, including the keepers of this knowledge, to develop land management strategies and design landscape interventions.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Demonstrates the development of contemporary Canadian landscape architecture flourished on Critical Regionalism
- Reveals the impact of the ideas of wilderness, which gleans a national identity on Canadian landscape architecture
- Fills the literary gap on Canadian contemporary landscape architecture with site-specific practices

KEYWORDS

Contemporary Canadian Landscape Architecture; Critical Regionalism; Indigenous Traditional Knowledge; Cultural Heritage; Innate Terrain

RECEIVED DATE

2022-11-04

EDITED BY

WANG Moying, WANG Ying, GAO Yuting

1 Introduction

Contemporary Canadian landscape architecture embodies an acute awareness of site, inheritance, and terrain, designing through critical reflections on regional conditions and their inhabitants. Site refers to the area of the design, the region is the larger context of a site, while terrain refers to the specific physical features of the land. From evoking geological formations and coastal grasslands in the planted slopes of the Vancouver Convention Centre (Fig. 1) to bridging industrial context with public programming at Toronto's Sugar Beach (Fig. 2), these Canadian projects, both re-build and represent the comprehensive ecosystems of Canada's terrain. Increasingly, landscape architects in Canada are addressing design through a regional lens, rather than importing colonial design forms and ideals.

Innate Terrain: Canadian Landscape Architecture^①, edited by Professor Alissa North from the University of Toronto, is a forthcoming book which features the unique qualities of Canadian contemporary landscape architecture projects and positions these works with contemporary theories. The application of diverse techniques imbued with regional knowledge and considerations are highlighted in the book. On the east coast, the *In Transit* installation in Saint John and the designed landscape at Spencer's Island emphasize cultural specificity through robust integrations of physio-geographic characteristics with historical lore, locally harvested materials, and artisanship; at the heritage site of Kekerten Territorial Park, collaboration with local Inuit communities prompts the development of design strategies that include culturally relevant methodologies.

2 Deconstructing Wilderness: The Lineage of Landscape Perspectives

From a global perspective, Canada's national identity is gleaned from ideas of wilderness. Landscape imagery of endless vegetation and vast terrain distinguishes the country from its European counterparts. Wild and picturesque landscapes have become a prominent component of visual iconography defining Canadian nationhood. However, this national identity contingent on wilderness is a cultural construction^[1]. As elaborated by William Cronon, the idea of wilderness relies on cultural notions that venerate untouched, sublime landscapes^[1].

Existing landscapes have been a powerful stimulus for the Canadian imaginary. In the early 20th century, settled Canadian artists and storytellers, including the Group of Seven, visually



© Turner Wagington



© Alissa North

1. Planted slopes of the Vancouver Convention Centre
2. A former industrial site was transformed into Sugar Beach, Toronto.

① The book *Innate Terrain: Canadian Landscape Architecture* is available from the University of Toronto Press.

represented Canadian wilderness through grand panoramas^[2]. The Group of Seven painted the Canadian terrain in its sublime glory through invocations of snow-covered mountains, flourishing boreal forests, and rugged bays isolated from human settlement (Fig. 3). These representations interpreted landscapes in the tradition of European romanticism, prioritizing grand landscapes^[3]. Although these landscape depictions reveals the vastness of the Canadian terrain, they conceals crucial aspects of the regional cultural contexts^[4]. Representations of the 20th century landscapes omitted the existence of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities to perpetuate ideas of Canadian nationhood. Creating wild and



© University of Guelph. Collection at the Art Gallery of Guelph

3. *The Drive* (1917) by Tom Thomson. Although his accidental death precluded him as a member of the Group of Seven, he had an important influence on the other artists and had a profound effect on the formation of the group.

uninhabited landscapes relied on removing and dispossessing Indigenous residents^[5]. Alberta's Banff National Park exists on the traditional territory of several Indigenous communities; previously, the Blackfoot Nation utilized the western periphery of the region to sustain their communities. Following the Banff National Park's establishment, Indigenous communities such as the Blackfoot Nation were barred from hunting, fishing, and acquiring timber in the region to preserve wilderness^[6]. The 20th century landscape representations precluded how terrain sustained the livelihoods of Indigenous communities.

Contemporary Canadian landscape architects must remain informed of the discipline's lineage, including earlier perceptions of landscapes, to move forwards critically. In Canada, extending the question of national identity to include regional complexities is necessary. Currently, within the discipline of Landscape Architecture in Canada, site and terrain are critically contemplated alongside diverse local contexts.

3 Theory and Terrain: Contemporary Approaches to Landscape Architecture

Departing from their predecessors, contemporary landscape practice and theory emphasize landscape conditions in Canada. Rejecting the homogenous formal schemes prescribed by the

International Style, landscape praxis in Canada took a more direct shift to Critical Regionalism. In *Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance*, Kenneth Frampton defines Critical Regionalism as "[mediating] the impact of universal civilization with elements derived indirectly from the peculiarities of a particular place."^[7] This theoretical framework expresses a fundamental opposition to applying universal designs to various regions. Critical Regionalism continues to captivate contemporary Canadian landscape architects, as they tend to closely assess geographical context, topography, climate, and cultural contexts before proposing site interventions.

Additionally, methodological shifts within North American landscape architecture have occurred with the emergence of Ecological Urbanism. This framework amalgamates urban design theory with ecological insights to inform landscape interventions^[8]. Ecological Urbanism suggests ecological awareness during site intervention. A holistic understanding of surrounding ecosystems is necessary, including the intricate network of relationships ecosystems encompass^[8]. Ecological Urbanism takes tentative steps towards closing gaps between western design conventions and Traditional Ecological Knowledge, which is the ecological knowledge that has been gained by generations of Indigenous peoples through their direct contact with the land. Indigenous communities have developed diverse knowledge systems with highly refined awareness of the ecosystems and environments of their respective territories^[9].

Understanding local landscapes and cultures is imperative to both these contemporary landscape theories. North American landscape theories unearth unique regional identities when applied to the Canadian context. Observed in Atlantic and Northern Canada are promising design interventions that nurture regional peculiarities.

4 Addressing Local Sensitivities and Terrain: *In Transit* and *The Uncertain Centre of the Mary Celeste*

Several place-making initiatives have emerged in Atlantic Canada. Through emphasis of hyper-local conditions, such as landscape characteristics, heritage, and local resources, both rural and urban sites in this region have been able to further develop a distinct regional identity. Applying cultural lore to existing terrain, east coast projects have embodied the ethos of contemporary landscape theories of ecological, tactical, and landscape urbanism within their design, to counter placelessness and homogeneity.

In Transit, a landscape intervention, emerges from the foggy maritime scenery in Saint John, New Brunswick's urban core. Coiling



© Acre Collective

4. *In Transit* at New Brunswick's transit headquarters
5. Historical traces at the Bay of Fundy
6. Projection beacon tower and sailcloth screen at *The Uncertain Centre of Mary Celeste*

through several of New Brunswick's towns and villages, the Trans-Canada Highway previously allowed for entanglements between visiting tourists and local communities. New highway infrastructure was implemented in the region at the turn of this century to alleviate the cramped highways of the former Trans-Canada Highway. Achieving faster, more direct connections to neighbouring provinces indirectly affected New Brunswick's regional presence. Presently, visitors bound west for Quebec or Nova Scotia to the east view New Brunswick as a transient region, coursing through the province and a series of highway signs to reach another destination.

Constructed in 2010 by Acre Architects, the public installation, *In Transit*, repurposes past site markers to reinstate the region's

present identity. At New Brunswick's transit headquarters, a concrete retaining wall is incorporated with a bright folk art installation. For this site, 85 unique aluminum panels were composed for public installation, visually appropriating the language of common roadside and highway signs. Of the aluminum panels, a small fraction is configured into benches, countering transient regional interactions and cueing visitors to take a respite at this site instead (Fig. 4). *In Transit* integrates flood protection with regional narratives surrounding existing infrastructure to present a site-specific intervention promoting regional peculiarities.

At Spencer's Island, Nova Scotia, a rural community was formed on an 18th century shipbuilding centre. In 1872, the ship *Mary Celeste* departed from the rural town's shipyard; ten days later it was found near the coast of Portugal, abandoned and shipwrecked^[10]. This mysterious tale of *Mary Celeste* had been shared widely and absorbed into the regional folklore by local residents. Presently at Spencer's Island, a design project situated along the Bay of Fundy's striking shoreline, titled *The Uncertain Centre of the Mary Celeste*, considers place-making by incorporating historical lore and storytelling. Located at the threshold of Spencer's Island, this commemorative project seeks to address the region's past, present, and future (Fig. 5).

Since 2006, the centre has been an ongoing collaboration between School of Architecture of Dalhousie University and community members from Spencer's Island; the design was led by Professor Roger Mullin and completed by Dalhousie students and craftworkers from the region.

Situated on a sloping ten-acre (about 4 hm²) field, this project includes a series of structures that draw from the region's seafaring lore and considers the geological characteristics of the Bay of Fundy.



© Roger Mullin



© Roger Mullin

The initial landscape interventions included a wooden beacon-like tower and a sailcloth installation (Fig. 6). In addition to being markers of the site's history, these interventions carved out space for current community members to use; the tower served as a projection shed while the nearby sailcloth doubles as a screen. Over the course of several years, a crew of Dalhousie students, community partners, and residents completed the structures using found and donated materials^[11]. When passed on, storytelling tends to have variances. Similarly, iterations are added annually to the centre. The physical form of the project changes continually, reflecting the shifting surrounding landscape. One of the project additions is a carving of 108-foot-long (33-meter-long) rock wall into the terrain. Sheltering the public square from the high tides at the Bay of Fundy, the hull-shaped rock wall sits adjacent to the previously built tower.

In Transit and *The Uncertain Centre of the Mary Celeste* consider a specialized approach to community and landscape renewal. By drawing from the above mentioned contemporary landscape theories and applying local considerations to design, responsive and resilient landscape intervention were formed.

5 Prioritizing Regional Connections and Knowledge: Kekerten Territorial Park, Nunavut

When practicing in a cross-cultural setting, the cognizance of regional knowledge and worldviews is necessary; within this process, biases and limitations inherited from western knowledge systems require re-examination. Our cultural perspectives firmly shape how we perceive our surrounding environment; this is demonstrated by Inuk writer and Grise Fiord resident, Larry Audlaluk who explains that “people of the south see ice as frozen water [while] Inuit see water as melted ice”^[12]. All Indigenous communities hold a form of Traditional Knowledge, each distinct to their region, their language, and their experiences. Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit (IQ) refers to the cumulative body of knowledge, beliefs, and practices held by the Inuit regarding living beings and their environment^[13]. Adaptively evolving, IQ is transferred orally through generations. IQ includes cultural and biophysical knowledge, pertaining to the northern ecosystem; viewing these tenets as indivisible from one another^[13].

In Nunavut, developing a framework for designing landscapes in accord with Inuit culture has preoccupied landscape architects, local communities, and regional organizations in recent decades. Integrating IQ into a set of standards within the park planning process has been a distinct objective of the Nunavut Parks and Special Places Division, a branch of Nunavut's territorial government

tied to park management and protection. Achieving the integration requires extensive collaboration with Inuit in each region and applying culturally relevant methodologies within the planning and design process. An iterative process was developed by landscape architect Chris Grosset for Nunavut Parks and Special Places. This process referenced the IQ tenet of Pilimmaksarniq/Pijariuqsarniq, the practice of developing skills through mentorship, practice, effort, and observation^[14]. Various community engagement techniques were incorporated within the planning process, to further understand local terrain and its intangible contexts. Inuit residents were involved in interviews, group mapping activities, and data collection. Community-appointed committees reviewed the collected data and interviews, and applied findings to park planning and management.

At Kekerten, an island located in the Qikiqtaaluk Region of Nunavut, a regional-specific landscape intervention was observed. Once co-habited by a large community of Inuit residents and settler whalers, the island and its whaling station were abandoned at the turn of the 20th century. Few material traces remain embedded in Kekerten's terrain; decomposing impressions made by former dwellings, the burial sites of Inuit, and whalers are the only physical markers of the previous inhabitants. However, Kekerten's cultural history was preserved among the Inuit residents of this region through oral tradition. Presently, designated as a Territorial Park, Kekerten's landscape was enhanced in 2004; the heritage site was re-designed to reflect Inuit oral histories and archival documentation from whalers. Guided by a team of landscape architects led by Ehrler Limousin & Associates, the design for Kekerten intended to preserve the physical landscape of the remote island, while implementing interventions that illuminated the region's layered cultural histories.

At a public meeting in Pangnirtung, an Inuit elder involved with this project stated that “the rabbits sit by the foxes [at Kekerten],” summarizing the complexities imbedded within this site^[15]. A preliminary design proposal suggested reconstructing the site's former whaling station. During the design process, Inuit community members voiced concerns that an imposed building on the island's landscape would minimize Inuit's historical presence. Prioritizing community feedback, design modifications followed the advice. Collaborating with an advisory committee from Pangnirtung and consulting IQ, the designers implemented solutions involving little physical development. Alternatively, the whaling station was reconstructed as a skeletal framework, highlighting the former structure's magnitude and impact at Kekerten. A framework of iron columns and perimeter beams reveals the vast volume occupied by the whaling station without diminishing the surrounding landscape (Fig. 7). Adjacent to the whaling structure is a “qammaq,”



© Government of Nunavut



© Government of Nunavut

a subterranean winter dwelling of Inuit, reconstructed with stone, sod, and whalebone. The white-grey framework of the “qammaq” visually complements both the adjacent whaling station and the surrounding terrain while making Inuit histories visible (Fig. 8). Accompanied additionally by an interpretive story, these nuanced landscape interventions seek to uncover the sites’ former histories through their material connections and open frameworks. The designed landscapes on Kekerten, including ongoing collaboration and consultation with local Inuit during the design process, ensures the accurate interpretation and preservation of cultural heritage.

6 Adapting for Terrain-Specific Futures

The Canadian landscape, particularly which in the northern region, continues to change rapidly—the outcome of a rapidly warming planet. With these climatic shifts, practitioners of landscape architecture are confronted with countless correlating challenges. From coast to coast, several contemporary projects

such as the green roof of Vancouver’s VanDusen Botanical Garden (Fig. 9) and the stormwater system of Sherburne Common in Toronto (Fig. 10) have proceeded to adapt to climate change. In the case of Sherbourne Common, the site context and topographic condition are utilized to implement on-site stormwater treatment. Presently, adaption is no longer a suggestion but a requisite for landscape architecture.

During the design process, landscape architects and allied professionals must contemplate terrain, foster local partnerships, and establish regional strategies. The promising impact of collaborative, site-specific interventions are exemplified in the projects discussed in *Innate Terrain*. As opposed to constructing something entirely new, these design proposals interweave geology, tradition, mythology, ecology, and history. Within the current Canadian context, opportunities for landscape architects, allied professionals, and holders of Indigenous Traditional Knowledge to build relationships have emerged. New possibilities for collaborative landscape interventions and climate adaption are on the horizon.



© Brett Hitchins, Brett Ryan Studios



© Chris Booker

7. Reconstructed whaling station at Kekerten Territorial Park
8. Reconstructed “qammaq” framework at Kekerten Territorial Park
9. Green roof at VanDusen Botanical Garden
10. At Sherbourne Common, water features are integrated into the stormwater treatment facility.

REFERENCES

- [1] Cronon, W. (1995). The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature. *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (pp. 69-90). W. W. Norton & Co.
- [2] Walton, H. P. (2007). The Group of Seven and Northern Development. In: J. O'Brian & P. White (Eds.), *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art* (pp. 141-145). McGill-Queen's University Press.
- [3] White, P. (2007). Out of the Woods. In: J. O'Brian & P. White (Eds.), *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art* (pp. 11-20). McGill-Queen's University Press.
- [4] O'Brian, J. (2007). Wild Art History. In: J. O'Brian & P. White (Eds.), *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art* (pp. 21-37). McGill-Queen's University Press.
- [5] Cooper, D. (2021). Legacies of Violence: Citizenship and Sovereignty on Contested Lands. In: T. Waterman, J. Wolff, & E. Wall (Eds.), *Landscape Citizenships* (p. 241). Routledge.
- [6] Binnema, T., & Niemi, M. (2006). 'Let the line be drawn now': Wilderness, conservation, and the exclusion of aboriginal people from Banff National Park in Canada. *Environmental History*, 11(4), 724-750.
- [7] Frampton, K. (1983). Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance. In: H. Foster (Ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (p. 21). Bay Press.
- [8] Spirn, A. W. (2014). Ecological Urbanism: A Framework for the Design of Resilient Cities. In: F. O. Ndubisi (Ed.), *The Ecological Design and Planning Reader* (pp. 557-571). Island Press.
- [9] Capra, F. (1982). *The Turning Point: Science, Society, and the Rising Culture* (p. 41). Simon and Schuster.
- [10] Blumberg, J. (2007, November). *Abandoned ship: The Mary Celeste*. Smithsonian Magazine.
- [11] Mullin, R. (2010). The Uncertain Centre of the Mary Celeste. *MADE*, (6), 67-76.
- [12] Limousin, M. (2009). *A personal interview with Marla Limousin/ Interviewer: L. Audlaluk* [Personal Interview Transcript]. Nunavut, Canada.
- [13] Tester, F. J., & Irniq, P. (2008). Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit: Social history, politics and the practice of resistance. *Arctic*, (61), 48-61.
- [14] Wenzel, G. W. (2004). From TEK to IQ: Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit and Inuit cultural ecology. *Arctic Anthropology*, 41(2), 238-250.
- [15] Ehrler Limousin and Associates. (2004). Public Meeting Transcript, Pangnirtung, Nunavut, Canada.

因地制宜：加拿大当代景观设计

巴维卡·夏尔马*，艾丽莎·诺斯

加拿大多伦多大学约翰·H·丹尼尔斯建筑、景观与设计学院，多伦多 M5S 2J5

*通讯作者邮箱：lafrontiers@foxmail.com

摘要

郁郁葱葱的植被和广阔的地形使得如画的荒野景观成为了加拿大国家形象的重要组成部分。那么，我们该如何理解那些经过设计的当代城市景观？多伦多大学艾丽莎·诺斯教授主编的《天然地形：加拿大景观设计》一书关注气候变化下的景观演变，结合当代设计理论，重点介绍了在加拿大独特的地形之上塑造的景观设计项目。在东海岸，位于圣约翰的“过境”（*In Transit*）装置和斯宾塞岛的景观设计项目通过将自然地理特征、历史知识、本土材料和手工艺紧密结合，强调了场所文化特征；在凯克尔滕领地公园遗址所在地，设计师与当地因纽特社区的合作促进了包括文化相关研究方法在内的设计策略的制定。该书为加拿大景观设计带来了更多灵感，同时填补了相关文字记录的空白，展现了加拿大当代景观设计有别于全球其他地区的景观实践（尤其是文字记载丰富的美国景观）的独特魅力。

20世纪早期，定居在加拿大的艺术家们通过大尺度的绘画直观地展现那里的荒野景观。然而，这些图画虽然凸显了地域的广阔，却忽略了其背后隐藏的地域文化特性。20世纪下半叶，加拿大景观设计摒弃了之前盛行的“国际主义风格”——将普适性设计应用于不同的地区和场地，转而遵循“批判性地域主义”设计理念。景观设计师与当地居民合作，仔细评估地理环境、文化背景等因素，因地制宜地制定土地管理策略和景观干预措施。在“生态都市主义”的影响下，景观设计作品反映并参考了加拿大天然地形中的典型生态系统，不断演变并最终形成了自身独有的景观气质。

全球气候变暖使得加拿大（尤其是北部地区）的景观处于持续变化之中。当下，景观设计师更应该化挑战为机遇，建立起与相关专业人员、传统知识传承人的合作关系，共同探索适应气候变化的新的景观干预手段。

文章亮点

- 展现了批判性地域主义理念影响下的加拿大当代景观设计的发展过程
- 揭示了“荒野”这一加拿大典型意象对于当地景观设计实践的影响
- 以典型案例展现了因地制宜的干预措施，填补了针对加拿大当代景观设计的文字记录空白

关键词

加拿大当代景观设计；
批判性地域主义；
土著传统知识；
文化遗产；
天然地形

收稿时间

2022-11-04

编辑 汪默英，王颖，高雨婷