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**“How to Build an Igloo”**  
**Deconstructing Architectural Myths in Canadian Visual Culture**

Samuel Dubois

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## "How to Build an Igloo"

### Deconstructing Architectural Myths in Canadian Visual Culture

#### SAMUEL DUBOIS

**Samuel Dubois** is an architect (OAQ), trained geographer, and historian of the built environment.

He holds a BA in Geography from McGill University, a BSc in Architecture from the Université de Montréal, and a Master of Architecture from Carleton University. Since 2020, he has been pursuing doctoral studies in the History, Theory, and Criticism of Architecture program at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. His research broadly interrogates the relationship between architecture, resource extraction, and cultural identity, with a particular focus on historically marginalized communities in Canada. Samuel is notably the co-editor of *Thresholds 52: Disappearance* (MIT Press, 2024), MIT's peer-reviewed journal of architecture and art, which was honoured with the Douglas Haskell Award for Student Journals by AIA New York | Center for Architecture.

During the winter of 2011–2012, the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) unveiled an interactive installation in downtown Toronto, inviting the public to build a large igloo-shaped structure using precut Styrofoam blocks. The event was a popular success and attracted over 2,500 participants of diverse ages and cultural backgrounds.<sup>1</sup> Presented alongside this installation was *How to Build an Igloo*,<sup>2</sup> a 1949 classic documentary film produced by the NFB (fig. 1). It portrays two Inuit men constructing a traditional igloo on the western shore of Hudson Bay in the Arctic, near a Western-style fur-trading outpost owned by the Hudson's Bay Company. This juxtaposition of urban mimicry and filmic representation reveals a profound cultural and material asymmetry: while thousands of participants playfully assembled a plastic igloo in the country's bustling metropolis, the film depicted two Inuit individuals building a life-sustaining snow shelter in a region once described by Latvian-Canadian nature photographer Fred Bruemmer (1929–2013) as "the harshest, most hostile and potentially most lethal environment ever inhabited by humans."<sup>3</sup>

This striking contrast sparked the broader inquiry of this essay. In non-Indigenous contexts across the world, the iconic igloo shape—whether materialized in snow or not—has historically been portrayed either as a whimsical icon or as a symbol of technical ingenuity, almost always detached from its cultural significance for Inuit communities and the architectural transformations it has undergone over time. The NFB's public igloo-building events—in Toronto and elsewhere<sup>4</sup>—expose the unresolved tensions embedded in these representations. As such, these contemporary installations offer a provocative entry point into the contested legacy of *How to Build an Igloo* within Canadian visual culture.

Directed and narrated by Montréal-born cinematographer Douglas Wilkinson (1919–2008),<sup>5</sup> *How to Build an Igloo* is one of the earliest filmic representations of the Canadian Arctic region. On its website, the NFB presents the documentary as follows:

This classic short film shows how to make an igloo using only snow and a knife. Two Inuit men in Canada's Far North choose the site, cut and place snow blocks and create an entrance—a shelter completed in one-and-a-half hours. The commentary explains that the interior warmth and the wind outside cement the snow blocks firmly together. As the short winter day darkens, the two builders move their caribou sleeping robes and extra skins indoors, confident of spending a snug night in the midst of the Arctic cold!<sup>6</sup>

Yet, this discursively evocative description paints a deceptively simplistic picture of the film. In reality, the commentary does far more than outline the physical processes that "cement the snow blocks firmly together." Throughout his narration, Wilkinson meticulously explains each step of igloo construction, from selecting an appropriate site to ensuring the structure is airtight once completed. Before construction begins, however, Wilkinson remarks that the two Inuit men featured in the film, identified as Tupac and Aceutaut, "look forward to a mug-up of tea and pilot biscuits at the trader's house" as they "admire the wooden buildings of the white men." These comments, indeed, exemplify the colonial



FIG. 1.  
TWO INDIVIDUALS ASSEMBLING  
A PLASTIC IGLU IN TORONTO,  
WITH *HOW TO BUILD AN  
IGLOO* PLAYING IN THE  
BACKGROUND (2013).  
SOURCE: THE NATIONAL FILM  
BOARD OF CANADA.

framing characteristic of mid-century ethnographic filmmaking, in which Indigenous subjects were often positioned in relation to settler culture, and reinforce enduring narratives of Western cultural and technological superiority.<sup>7</sup>

Although Wilkinson does acknowledge the physical skills and ingenuity of the two Inuit builders, their voices remain notably absent during the film's ten-minute runtime. Beyond the technical limitations of 1940s filmmaking, this silence reflects, I argue, a broader tendency to frame Arctic architecture through Western visual lenses and cultural logics, thereby effacing Indigenous knowledge and agency.

This absence resonates with a pointed critique voiced by Rita Nashook (1932/3–2014), an Inuk<sup>8</sup> elder from Iqaluit, Nunavut,<sup>9</sup> who challenges the ongoing cultural divide between the so-called West (in this case, southern Canada) and Inuit communities in the North. In an interview with filmmaker Zacharias Kunuk and environmental scientist Ian Mauro, she stated:

Southerners don't want to understand Inuit ways. They're ignorant about our culture, don't consider our opinion and treat us like we know nothing. Inuit culture is oral and we keep knowledge in our minds. Even without text, our culture is full of wisdom.<sup>10</sup>

This statement is more than a critique of southern Canada's ignorance about the North; it exposes the deeper structures of epistemic inequality that continue to shape how Inuit knowledge is received (or disregarded) within dominant discourses in Canada. Then, how can the cultural wisdom that Nashook references permeate Canadian architectural history, a field where knowledge production has been traditionally shaped by text-based sources and professionally produced visual documents? Since the 1990s, with the rise of settler-colonial studies in Canada and abroad, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars have emphasized the need to address this kind of historiographical bias in academic research, advocating for the inclusion of Indigenous voices and perspectives to challenge enduring colonial paradigms in society.<sup>11</sup>

Accordingly, this essay critically examines *How to Build an Igloo* through a revisionist framework, foregrounding underrepresented narratives and understandings found in Inuit oral histories, literature, and art.<sup>12</sup> Using excerpts from the film's narration as discursive prompts,

the analysis deconstructs four architectural myths surrounding the iglu and its iconography in Canadian visual culture. Methodologically, this interdisciplinary study also contributes to the decolonization of architectural history by critically reframing historical representations of this iconic Inuit structure, which should be understood simultaneously as a material, cultural, and ontological construct. More broadly, this research draws scholarly focus to Inuit Nunangat—the traditional homelands of the Inuit peoples in Canada—a region that remains persistently overlooked and underrepresented in architectural research, despite comprising approximately 35 percent of the country’s total landmass and 50 percent of its coastline.<sup>13</sup>

### First Myth: “easy to build once you know how”

At the beginning of *How to Build an Igloo*, as Tupac and Aceutaut carry snow blocks on their shoulders, Wilkinson confidently asserts that igluit<sup>14</sup> are “easy to build once you know how” (fig. 2). But is constructing an iglu, even if one knows the step-by-step process in detail, truly easy? In reality, this assertion oversimplifies what is a complex, labour-intensive practice that requires not only technical proficiency but also deep environmental knowledge about northern regions. Inuit traditional knowledge—commonly referred to as *Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit* (IQ)—has been foundational to Inuit life and survival for millennia. The words of Mark Kalluak (1942–2011), an Inuk elder and educator from Tavani, Nunavut,<sup>15</sup> further remind us that, historically, possessing such knowledge “could mean the difference between life and death.”<sup>16</sup> Under optimal meteorological conditions like the sunny day depicted in *How to Build an Igloo*, iglu construction may indeed appear simple or even “easy.” However, Inuit storytelling traditions often highlight the demanding and sometimes perilous nature of this architectural endeavour—especially when undertaken in the unforgiving Arctic climate, where shelter building is often a matter of survival.

To delve into this harsher reality, I turn to Markoosie Patsauq (1941/42–2020), an Inuk pilot-turned-writer from Inukjuak, Nunavik,<sup>17</sup> who composed a story in the 1960s that would later become the first Inuit novel ever published. *Hunter with Harpoon* (1970), originally written

FIG. 2.  
STILL FRAME FROM THE  
DOCUMENTARY FILM *HOW  
TO BUILD AN IGLOO* (1949).  
SOURCE: THE NATIONAL FILM  
BOARD OF CANADA.



in Inuktitut and later translated into English by McGill-Queen's University Press (MQUP), is inspired by an oral legend widely shared among Inuit communities across the Arctic.<sup>18</sup> As MQUP's editors put it, it depicts "life in the old days, not as it appeared to southerners, but as it has survived in the memory of the Inuit themselves."<sup>19</sup>

The story follows Kamik, an Inuk teenager and aspiring hunter, who embarks on a harrowing journey across the Arctic winter landscape with his father and other members of his community. After surviving a bear attack that killed his entire clan, Kamik is left alone and must rely on his still-flourishing skills and embodied knowledge to survive—including how to build an iglu. Patsauq captures Kamik's fragile state as he struggles to construct an iglu on his own for the first time:

Exhausted, Kamik stumbles and does not even try to get up. He is so tired, his lungs hurt. The storm continues to rage. Sprawled out, not moving, he is gradually being covered by snow. If he stays like this, it will bury him. Finally, he gets up. Night has fallen and he tries to build an igloo so he can sleep. He searches for a spot, finds one, and starts to build, with great effort. The blocks of snow seem heavy. He is worn out. Once the igloo is done, he crawls in. The walls are very dark but he is happy to be out of the wind. Inside, he tries to eat some of the frozen seal meat. Then he stretches out to sleep.<sup>20</sup>

This passage vividly portrays the physical and mental toll of constructing an iglu in extreme climatic conditions. Thus, it offers a powerful counterpoint to Wilkinson's reductive claim that igluit are "easy to build once you know how."

Patsauq's story progresses to the following day, continuing to trace Kamik's solitary journey across the Arctic landscape. Despite his overwhelming exhaustion, he presses on and prepares to build yet another iglu before nightfall to ensure his survival:

Kamik keeps walking. There is still some light and he wants to go as far as possible while there is still visibility. He is exhausted but happy: it is another day and he is still alive. When it gets too dark, he decides to build an igloo to sleep in. First he lies down on the snow to rest, but then he starts building. The blocks of snow he tries to work with seem heavy. It takes a long time. When it is done, he goes inside and tries to eat something, because he is starving. There is a little food left, but he holds back from finishing it off. He knows that he will die of hunger if he uses it all up and can find nothing else to eat. Then he looks at his harpoon and tells himself that it can be used for living but also for dying.<sup>21</sup>

Building upon the first excerpt, this second passage intensifies the narrative's focus on Kamik's struggle to shelter himself. It powerfully reveals the deep interconnection between architectural labour, embodied knowledge, and human resilience, essential to build an iglu in the life-threatening weather conditions of Inuit Nunangat.

More broadly, *Hunter with Harpoon* offers a culturally significant and historically valuable insider's view of iglu construction, as experienced and remembered by Inuit communities themselves. Unlike *How to Build an Igloo*, which primarily focuses on technical aspects, *Hunter with Harpoon* delves into themes of labour and human endurance, which are rarely foregrounded in architectural and popular discourses about iglu construction. While the story was categorized as a work of fiction since its inception, Patsauq himself resisted that label, arguing instead that "there is some good historical facts about it."<sup>22</sup> Agreeing with this vision, I believe that Inuit literature and storytelling must be regarded as legitimate and valuable sources of knowledge for architectural history research. Integrating these

perspectives is not just an academic choice; it is an ethical imperative for recovering the full, often overlooked, human dimensions of the iglu—an iconic Inuit structure that is certainly far from being “easy to build once you know how.”

## Second Myth: “snow will be both bricks and mortar”

Early on in *How to Build an Igloo*, Wilkinson likens the snow used by Tupac and Aceutaut to “both bricks and mortar.” While clearly intended as a metaphor, comparing snow to building materials foreign to Inuit architectural traditions raises broader questions about how the iglu’s materiality is perceived and represented in Canadian visual culture. Are igluit, in fact, made solely of snow and ice? By featuring the overnight snow shelter built by Tupac and Aceutaut as a universal archetype, the film arguably presents an overly simplistic version of this otherwise materially rich building typology.

In practice, igluit built for temporary use were architecturally distinct from those designed as long-term, seasonal dwellings. Temporary igluit could be abandoned after a few days, but igluit housing entire families were habitually occupied for weeks or even months. This difference in function had direct implications in terms of materiality and construction methods. For example, Ningiurapik Siutiapik, an Inuk elder from Iqaluit, Nunavut, provides valuable firsthand insight into the composition and insulating properties of the walls of an iglu she lived in during her youth:

In those days we lived in sod houses in the fall. Then when the weather became cold enough, we would move into igluit. When we moved, we would take the heather insulation and use it as a mattress to cushion our sleeping platforms. We would use the old tent as a liner to insulate the iglu to a point where none of the snow would be visible inside; it was like pitching a tent inside the iglu.<sup>23</sup>

This testimony underscores a fundamental challenge inherent to iglu construction: the mutable nature and melting properties of snow as a building material. The risk of melting compromises structural stability, a factor absent from Wilkinson’s evocation of permanence through the comparison with “bricks and mortar.” This analogy fails to capture the adaptive strategies and ingenuity Indigenous builders have developed to address these environmental constraints.

The structural risks associated with melting are also evocatively rendered in the work of Inuk artist Tuumasi Kudluk (1902–1989) from Kangirsuk, Nunavik.<sup>24</sup> In one of his drawings, simply titled *Igloo* (1980), Kudluk depicts three individuals inside an iglu, shown in sectional view, with a visibly melting ceiling (fig. 3). At the centre of the drawing, a figure seems to be repairing the dripping structure with a long tool. Two additional figures, symmetrically positioned on each side of the drawing, point toward the ceiling. Together, the figures centre the act of repair—and the ongoing necessity of architectural maintenance—as the image’s focal point. Equally striking is the way Kudluk renders the iglu’s envelope, using a single unbroken line. This representational method, in addition to resisting the Western convention of illustrating wall thickness in sectional views, emphasizes the building’s spatial interiority and the lived experiences of its occupants. While the repair work is clearly foregrounded, the building materials themselves remain largely invisible, suggesting a conceptual shift from what an iglu is made of to how it is occupied and cared for.

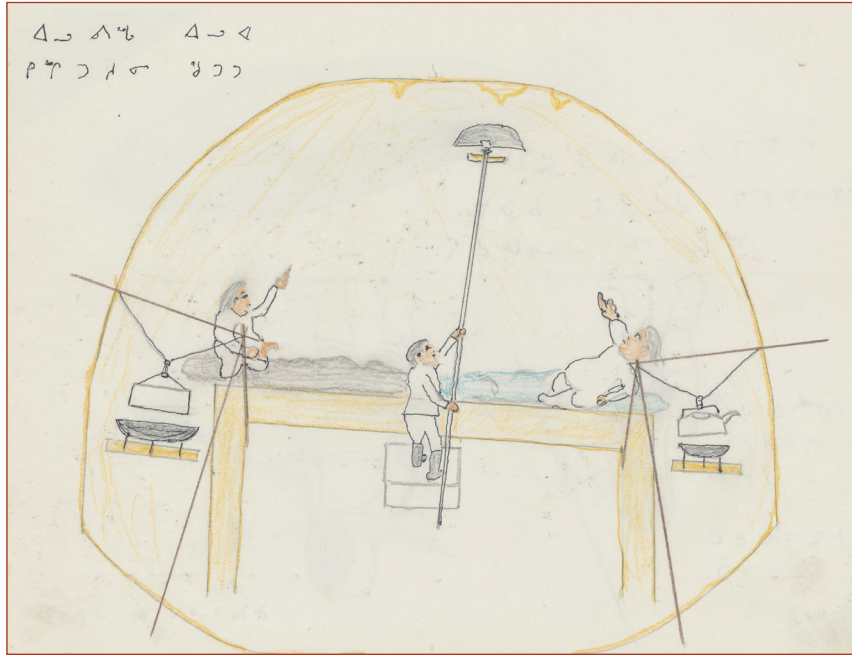


FIG. 3.  
TUUMASI KUDLUK, *IGLOO* (1980).  
SOURCE: AVATAQ CULTURAL INSTITUTE  
AND WILLIE THOMASSIE SR.

In a blog post for the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA), Kudluk’s granddaughter, Ulivia Uviluk,<sup>25</sup> also from Kangirsuk, reflects on her ancestor’s artistic legacy:

[His] works are not only precious for someone like me who is curious about my family history and my culture, but they also serve as important documents created from an Inuk perspective about a *time of transition* in ways of life in Inuit Nunangat. While it was mostly non-Inuit workers in Nunavik who documented the period, my great grandfather’s drawings and carvings are important and meaningful to understanding an Inuit point of view and the realities of his time.<sup>26</sup>

The “time of transition” that Uviluk references is visually evident in *Igloo*, notably through the inclusion on each side of the drawing of what appears to be metallic household items. In actuality, objects such as kettles, cooking pots, clocks, and guns were among the first Western-manufactured goods introduced to Inuit communities as early as the nineteenth century.<sup>27</sup> Over time, they were incorporated into Inuit material culture, reflecting shifting and transcultural realities within the country’s northernmost region. In fact, these transformations unsettle a third myth about igluit, pointing toward a more complex understanding of Inuit architectural practice.

### **Third Myth: “like all good architects, they use the materials found around them”**

While praising Tupac and Aceutaut’s skills as iglu builders, Wilkinson proposes yet another analogy: “like all good architects, they use the materials found around them.” Beyond the “bricks and mortar” metaphor from the previous myth, there is a persistent myth in both popular and scientific discourse regarding the material purity of iglu architecture. In fact, evidence shows that by the late 1940s (i.e., when *How to Build an Igloo* was produced), many Inuit groups had already incorporated Western materials and prefabricated building systems into the architecture of their homes—both inside and

out. This raises an important question: what was the full range of materials used by Inuit builders in iglu construction in the early twentieth century?

In pre-colonial Arctic, building materials were scarce and often difficult to access. However, when Western whalers and traders started the practice of wintering in the region from the mid-nineteenth century onward, an unprecedented influx of foreign materials was introduced into the homelands of the Inuit people.<sup>28</sup> Testifying to the architectural ramifications of this transition, Elizabeth Aglukka (1950-), an Inuk elder from Naujaat (Repulse Bay), Nunavut,<sup>29</sup> reflects on her parents' Western possessions, which appear to be divided along traditional gender lines:

My father had a freighter canoe with a sail, no motor, which he got from the trading post in Repulse Bay. My mother had a kettle, a bucket, cups, and a clock from the trading post. Those were the main things she had.<sup>30</sup>

While such Western-manufactured items were acquired through trade, others—including wooden planks, tarps, and barrels—were often left behind by Western crews before departing from the Arctic region. Wilkinson's provocative prompt, therefore, may lead viewers to mistakenly believe that Inuit builders used building materials sourced exclusively from the immediate environment. Nevertheless, this was far from being the case by the time *How to Build an Igloo* was filmed.

Several Inuit oral history accounts published over the past few decades provide valuable insights into the architectural transformations of igluit at the turn of the twentieth century. In *Uqalurait: An Oral History of Nunavut* (2008), for instance, Elizabeth Tunnuq (1928–2008), an Inuk elder and artist from Qamani'tuuq (Baker Lake), Nunavut,<sup>31</sup> recalls the following:

Nowadays people make a single iglu, so when the entrance block is open, it's cold. Long ago when we had no wooden doors, there would be another smaller iglu attached to the main iglu. There we made a fireplace, on the side, making it higher by placing snow blocks on the side so that when the lichen started burning, the smoke wouldn't be going all over inside the iglu. There were three igluit connected to each other like this: one iglu bigger than the rest, and next to it a smaller one that would be a cooking space, and then another iglu built as a porch so that the wind wouldn't be blowing too much inside. Finally there would be a long hallway-like entrance. That's how igluit were made when people were going to be camping all through winter. Also there was a small iglu connected to the family iglu on the side where they stored meat or fish so that the family iglu wouldn't be too small to walk around in. Men would go out and collect their caches, and the meat would be brought in and put in a storage room—you could put anything in there. If we didn't want to get messy and dirty, we'd make another small iglu beside the outer porch and that was the toilet.<sup>32</sup>

Tunnuq's testimony illuminates how architectural adaptations—such as the incorporation of wooden doors and toilets—were notably made to improve safety, ensure cleanliness, and enhance overall comfort. As such, these innovations reflect what could be called the “modernization” or “westernization” of igluit, a process inevitably tied to the arrival of new materials, building techniques, and cultural norms in the region throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Over time, this process gave rise to innovative and unique forms of architectural modernity across the Arctic, shaped largely by the agency of Inuit builders.

Early-twentieth-century photographs reveal these unique architectural forms, incorporating culturally and materially hybrid elements. Those captured by Peter Pitseolak (1902–1973), born in Kinngait (Cape Dorset), Nunavut,<sup>33</sup> are particularly relevant, given that he is widely known as the first Inuit photographer in history.<sup>34</sup> As photographic archivist Stanley Triggs explains, Pitseolak’s photographs are extremely valuable to analyze from a historical research perspective “because they document the life of a community at a certain point in time and were taken by a member of the community itself.”<sup>35</sup>

A particularly vivid example of the diverse materials and techniques used in iglu construction during this period appears in one of Pitseolak’s photographs, which captures the winter home of a family from his community at Keatuk camp on Baffin Island in the Arctic Archipelago (fig. 4). The structure features vertical snow walls combined with prefabricated wooden elements, plastic-sheet windows, and a tent-shaped roof covered with tarps, with a precast chimney surrounded by metal flashing. These materials—unlike snow and ice, which are naturally occurring materials created by the Arctic environment itself—were functionally, aesthetically and even cosmologically alien to pre-colonial Inuit worldviews.



FIG. 4.

PETER PITSEOLAK, *INUIT MAN AND WOMAN WITH A CHILD IN FRONT OF A DWELLING* (1947-1960).

SOURCE: CANADIAN MUSEUM OF HISTORY, PETER PITSEOLAK FONDS, 2000-1145.

From a theoretical perspective, the incorporation of Western materials and building techniques into Inuit architectural practices can be understood as a form of material “hacking.” This culturally complex concept was notably defined in an architectural volume titled *Blueprint for a Hack: Leveraging Informal Building Practices* (2020), co-published by the CCA:

The word “hack” invokes a variety of subtly different meanings. Traditionally, these included: to cut, notch, break up, clear, reduce or cope. More contemporary connotations refer to clever but unauthorized system modifications aiming for an outcome other than the original objective. This nuance is reflected more broadly in the Hindi or Punjabi word “jugaad” meaning a flexible approach to problem-solving using limited resources. For Inuit, the notion emphasizes a do-it-yourself tip, trick or method for improvising simple, frugal solutions. This notion of hacking is embedded in the rich informal building culture used by Inuit throughout northern Canada.<sup>36</sup>

This theorization illuminates how Inuit builders have historically appropriated and repurposed the “materials found around them” (using Wilkinson’s words) to meet their needs. Inuit hacking, therefore, reflects a sophisticated culture of adaptation, one that continues to shape the Arctic built environment today.<sup>37</sup>

Ultimately, I do not think that Wilkinson’s praise of Tupac and Aceutaut as “good architects” was either wrong or misplaced. However, by showcasing a snow hut intended for short-term use rather than a family-sized seasonal dwelling, *How to Build an Igloo* obscures the material innovations and cultural hybridity that characterized many igluit constructed in the early and mid-twentieth century—the very moment the documentary was produced. While traditional igluit like the one built by Tupac and Aceutaut have largely disappeared from the Arctic landscape since then, the shape and symbolism of the iglu continue to reappear in new architectural forms imagined by non-Indigenous architects.<sup>38</sup>

### **Fourth Myth: “good use of the fundamental laws of architecture”**

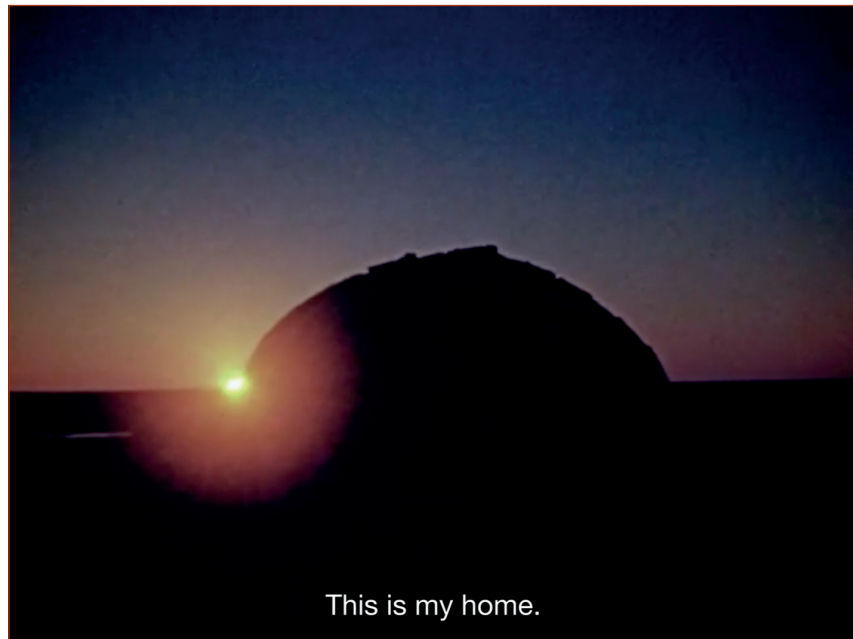
Let us now tackle the deconstruction of a fourth and final myth. Near the end of *How to Build an Igloo*, Wilkinson invokes the authority of the architect to underscore Inuit mastery in iglu construction. Notably, he praises the circular form of the iglu built by Tupac and Aceutaut as “another example of good use of the fundamental laws of architecture,” adding that “engineers and architects have found no better way of building an igloo.” These comments are arguably true from a strictly spatial and technical perspective. In Inuit and other Indigenous traditions, the circle is nonetheless associated with other types of so-called laws rooted in a fundamentally different cosmological framework.

In his seminal paper “What is an Indigenous Perspective?” (2021), Lewis Cardinal, an educator from the Sucker Creek Cree First Nation in northern Alberta,<sup>39</sup> discusses the significance of the circle for Indigenous cultures across Canada:

So many symbols, circular Indigenous symbols used in mythology, are found throughout the world. The circle, then, is a human cultural expression of nature, of the natural and supernatural experience: the universe.<sup>40</sup>

In light of this theorization, it becomes clear that the circular shape of the iglu reflects a deeper cosmological significance that transcends the idea of it being a “good use of the fundamental laws of architecture”—as might be found, for instance, in architectural construction textbooks. In the same paper, Cardinal also stresses that Indigenous creations (whether architectural or not) are traditionally “shaped by the environment, by the land.”<sup>41</sup> Such claims not only complicate the meanings of the circle but also challenge Western interpretations of iglu construction as spatially efficient or merely practical from a construction viewpoint.

A deeper art-historical analysis might also consider whether the film’s cinematographic effects romanticize the circular shape of the iglu as “pure” or “untouched.” The final scene of the film, featuring the curvature of Tupac and Aceutaut’s iglu rising above the horizon line of the Arctic winter at sunset, strongly suggest as much (fig. 5). Together, the scene’s lighting, angles, and overall framing emphasize the aesthetic perfection of the iglu through a Western gaze, reinforcing the myth of its timelessness while discounting its historical



**FIG. 5.**  
STILL FRAME FROM THE  
FINAL SCENE OF THE  
DOCUMENTARY FILM *HOW  
TO BUILD AN IGLOO* (1949).  
SOURCE: THE NATIONAL FILM  
BOARD OF CANADA.

transformations. Such representations risk detaching the igloo from its material, environmental, and human contexts—especially when displayed in contemporary settings like the NFB’s installation in downtown Toronto, and without the critical context this essay provides. With the absence of Inuit voices or perspectives, the igloo may unfittingly be viewed as an isolated cultural artifact, rather than a rich architectural object that has greatly evolved over time thanks to Inuit builders’ ingenuity.

## Toward a Decolonized Architectural History of the Igloo

While traditional igluit like the one built by Tupac and Aceutaut largely disappeared from the Arctic landscape sometime after the mid-twentieth century, this igloo has since been replaced by modern architectural symbols across the Canadian North.<sup>42</sup> One of the most striking examples is St. Jude’s Anglican Cathedral in Iqaluit, Nunavut (fig. 6). Designed in 1970 by renowned Canadian architect Ronald Thom (1923–1986),<sup>43</sup> the cathedral, shaped like a monumental igloo, carries deep cultural symbolism. According to the Diocese of the Arctic, the building’s owner, the igloo shape is “a reminder of what was once found all over the Arctic and a symbol of the uniqueness of the Inuit people and their lives.”<sup>44</sup> Yet this narrative overlooks the Diocese’s colonial history that, since the nineteenth century, actively contributed to undermining traditional Inuit lifeways and hastened the disappearance of real igluit as primary winter dwellings.

The presence of this iconic Inuit form reimaged as an Anglican cathedral raises urgent questions about how igloo-related cultural symbols are continually recontextualized and, at times, appropriated insensitively non-Indigenous actors (fig. 7). The contrast between Iqaluit’s cathedral and the small snow hut featured in *How to Build an Igloo* reveals that the igloo is not a frozen architectural relic of the past. Rather, as this essay has demonstrated, it is a historically layered and culturally negotiated structure that should most definitely not be confined to purely anthropological interpretations or nostalgic clichés.



FIG. 6.  
ST. JUDE'S CATHEDRAL IN  
IQALUIT, NUNAVUT (2022).  
SOURCE: SAMUEL DUBOIS.

Through its enduring visual and cultural presence across Canada and beyond, the igloo embodies the complex tensions between tradition, colonization, and transformation within Inuit Nunangat. By critically analyzing the NFB's *How to Build and Igloo*, this essay ultimately argues that decolonizing the architecture and iconography of the igloo requires centring its material complexity and rich cultural history, as lived and remembered by Inuit themselves. Together, we must resist efforts to relegate this iconic Inuit shape to a mere artifact of nostalgia in Canadian visual culture, and instead recognize it as an architectural expression of Inuit resilience and identity in an ever-evolving world.

## Notes

1. Desrosiers-Guité, Laurence, and Dan Thornhill, May 8, 2013, "How to Build an ᐃᓄ," *NFB Blog*, : [https://blog.nfb.ca/blog/2013/05/08/how-to-build-an-igloo/], accessed September 19, 2025.
2. Wilkinson, Douglas, dir., 1949, *How to Build an Igloo*, With Neil Harris, Montreal: National Film Board of Canada, 10 min. 30 sec.: [https://www.nfb.ca/film/how\_to\_build\_an\_igloo/], accessed September 19, 2025.
3. Bruemmer, Fred, 1987, *Arctic Animals: A Celebration of Survival*, Minocqua, WI, NorthWord, p. 75.
4. In addition to Toronto, the NFB co-sponsored a similar public iglu-building event in April 2013 at the Canadian Museum of Nature in Ottawa. This event was part of the centennial celebrations of the Canadian Arctic Expedition (1913–1916), a major scientific and exploratory mission that marked a significant moment in Canada's engagement with the Arctic and its Indigenous peoples.
5. Douglas Wilkinson, affectionally nicknamed Qimmiq ("sled dog") by many Inuit, wrote and directed over forty documentary films for the NFB. The majority of his work was produced in the Eastern Canadian Arctic between the late 1940s and late 1960s—a period marked by profound social and technological transformation in Inuit communities. Bell, Jim, 2008, "Douglas Earle 'Qimmiq' Wilkinson: 1919-2008," *Nunatsiaq News* (Iqaluit), March 27, [https://nunatsiaq.com/stories/article/Douglas\_Earle\_Qimmiq\_Wilkinson\_1919-2008/], accessed September 29, 2025.
6. National Film Board of Canada, 2024, *How to Build an Igloo*, 10 min, [https://www.nfb.ca/film/how\_to\_build\_an\_igloo/], accessed September 19, 2025.
7. Other mid-century ethnographic films similarly reflect a colonial gaze by framing Indigenous life in contrast to Western norms. For example, *People of the Seal* (1970), directed by William Weintraub for the NFB, stages Inuit hunting practices with scripted narration that emphasizes their "primitive" status. Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922), though earlier, remained widely influential during this period and presents a romanticized yet patronizing view of Inuit life, omitting contemporary realities such as the use of rifles. See: Robinson, Richard, and Michael McKennirey, prods., 1971, *People of the Seal, Part 1: Eskimo Summer*, British Broadcasting Corporation and National Film Board of Canada, 51 min., [https://www.nfb.ca/film/people\_of\_the\_seal\_part\_1\_eskimo\_summer/], accessed September 19, 2025; Robinson, Richard, and Michael McKennirey, prods., 1971, *People of the Seal, Part 2: Eskimo Winter*, British Broadcasting Corporation and National Film Board of Canada, 51 min., [https://www.nfb.ca/film/people\_of\_the\_seal\_part\_2\_eskimo\_winter/], accessed September 19, 2025.
8. "Inuk" is the singular form of "Inuit," referring to one person of Inuit identity. In many Indigenous communities, including Inuit, an elder is a respected individual recognized for their cultural knowledge, life experience, and connection to traditional practices and land-based teachings.
9. Iqaluit is the capital of Nunavut and is located at the head of Frobisher Bay on southern Baffin Island in the Eastern Canadian Arctic. Nunavut, officially established as a territory in 1999, encompasses much of the traditional homeland of Inuit in Canada.
10. Quoted in: Martin, Keavy, 2012, *Stories in a New Skin: Approaches to Inuit Literature*, University of Manitoba Press, p. 1.
11. Since the early 2000s, a growing body of scholarship has contributed to an Indigenous Research Agenda aimed at decolonizing Western research methodologies and centering Indigenous epistemologies. Foundational works in this area include Tuhivai Smith, Linda, 2012, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 2nd edition, Zed Books; Kuokkanen, Rauna Johanna, 2014, *Reshaping the University: Responsibility, Indigenous Epistememes, and the Logic of the Gift*, UBC Press, 2; Altamirano-Jimenez, Isabel, 2014, "Neo-Liberal Education, Indigenizing Universities?" *Canadian Journal of Native Education* vol. 37, no. 1. More recent scholarship in the architectural humanities contributes to this ongoing critique of disciplinary knowledge production, as in Doucet, Isabelle et al., 2024, "On Disappearance within Architectural Writing," *Thresholds* 52: Disappearance, p. 108–17.
12. To be clear, this essay is not a cultural critique of *How to Build an Igloo*. Rather, I use Wilkinson's narration as a framework for structuring an architectural analysis of the iglu from a historical perspective.
13. *Inuit Nunangat*—the Arctic homelands of the Inuit people within the settler-colonial state of Canada—is a vast territory spanning 3,304,740 sq km. In Inuktitut, Inuit Nunangat translates to "the land, water, and ice of the [Inuit] people." For more information about the region, see: Canadian Geographic, *Inuit Nunangat*, Indigenous Peoples Atlas of Canada = Atlas Des Peuples Autochtones Du Canada (Royal Canadian Geographical Society : National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation : Assembly of First Nations : Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami : Métis National Council : Indspire, 2018), [https://indigenouspeoplesatlasofcanada.ca/article/inuit-nunangat/], accessed September 29, 2025.
14. Although Wilkinson uses the English term "igloos" in his narration, this essay adopts the Inuktitut spelling. *Igluit* is the plural of *iglu*, meaning "house" in Inuktitut. While commonly associated in English with snow houses, *iglu* more broadly refers to any form of dwelling traditionally used by Inuit.
15. Tavani is located on the western shore of Hudson Bay in the Kivalliq region of Nunavut, Canada. Established in the early twentieth century, Tavani functioned as a seasonal Inuit camp and a Hudson's Bay Company trading post, serving as a hub for fur trade and supply exchange between Inuit hunters and European traders.
16. Quoted in: Karetak, Joe, et al., eds., 2017, *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit: What Inuit Have Always Known to Be True*, Black Point, NS: Fernwood Publishing, p. 43.

17. Inukjuak is a community situated on the eastern shore of Hudson Bay in the Nunavik region of northern Québec. Established in 1946 as a trading post by the Hudson's Bay Company, Inukjuak grew into a permanent Inuit settlement and remains one of the largest communities in Nunavik.
18. Inuktitut is one of the main Inuit languages of Canada, spoken principally in the central and eastern Arctic regions. The original Inuktitut title of Patsauq's story is *Uumajursiutik Unaatuinnamut*. Its publication marks a historic shift from the Inuit oral traditions to the emergence of written Inuit literature—a development made possible by a larger methodological intervention blending Inuit storytelling practices with Western textual forms. Before *Hunter with Harpoon*, Inuit culture and history were transmitted mainly through oral methods. The novel's translation into English by McGill-Queen's University Press allowed Indigenous Arctic narratives to reach a global audience, providing an insider's perspective often missing from Western accounts. Over recent decades, many Inuit writers have embraced the novel format to tell stories about their homeland, history, and people, offering new and often divergent viewpoints from those of Western authors. Notable examples include Tagaq, Tanya, 2018, *Split Tooth*, Viking Penguin; and Nappaaluk, Mitiarjuk, 2014, *Sanaaq: An Inuit Novel*, trans. Peter Frost, Contemporary Studies on the North, University of Manitoba Press.
19. McGill-Queen's University Press, "Harpoon of the Hunter," [https://www.mqup.ca/harpoon-of-the-hunter-products-9780773502321.php], accessed September 19, 2025.
20. Patsauq, Markoosie, 2020, *Hunter with Harpoon*, 2nd ed., translated by Valerie Henitiuk and Marc-Antoine Mahieu, Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, p. 35.
21. *Id.*, p. 38.
22. *Id.*, p. xv.
23. Quoted in: Bennett, John, and Susan Rowley, eds., 2008, *Uqalurait: An Oral History of Nunavut*, McGill-Queen's Indigenous and Northern Series, Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, p. 232.
24. Kangirsuk is a small Inuit community located on the eastern shore of Ungava Bay in the Nunavik region of northern Quebec, Canada. Traditionally inhabited by Inuit hunters and fishers, it was formally established as a permanent settlement in the mid-twentieth century.
25. Also known as Olivia Lya Thomassie, Ulivia Uviluk is a multidisciplinary artist.
26. Thomassie, Olivia Lya, 2024, "Documenting Inuit Life." In ᐃᓂᓂᓂᓂᓂ / Ruovttu Guvlui / Towards Home: Inuit and Sámi Placemaking, edited by Joar Nango et al. Montreal, Canadian Centre for Architecture; Amsterdam, Valiz; and Mondo Books [https://www.cca.qc.ca/en/articles/95271/documenting-inuit-life], accessed September 19, 2025 Emphasis added by author.
27. For further context on the early exchange of material goods between Inuit communities and Western traders, see Rasing, Willem, 2017, *Too Many People: Contact, Disorder, Change in an Inuit Society, 1882–2015*, Iqaluit: Nunavut Arctic College Media.
28. Eber, Dorothy Harley, 1989, *When the Whalers Were Up North: Inuit Memories from the Eastern Arctic*, Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, p. 11.
29. Naujaat, formerly known as Repulse Bay, is a hamlet located on the northwestern shore of Hudson Bay in Nunavut. It was established as a permanent settlement in the mid-twentieth century.
30. Quoted in: Pelly, David F., 2016, *Ukkusiksalik: The People's Story*, Toronto, Dundurn Press, p. 129.
31. Qamani'tuuq, also known as Baker Lake, is a small community located at the mouth of the Thelon River where it flows into Baker Lake, in the Kivalliq region of Nunavut. It was established as a trading post in the early twentieth century and subsequently became a permanent Inuit settlement.
32. Quoted in: Bennett and Rowley, *Uqalurait: An Oral History of Nunavut*, p. 235.
33. Kinngait, also known as Cape Dorset, is an Inuit hamlet located on Dorset Island in Nunavut, Canada. Established as a Hudson's Bay Company trading post in the early twentieth century, it has since become renowned as a vibrant centre of Inuit art.
34. Peter Pitseolak acquired his first camera in the early 1940s while working for the Baffin Trading Company on Baffin Island, Nunavut. He extensively photographed himself, his family, and community life, frequently including architectural structures within his compositions. For more, see Pitseolak, Peter, 1978, *Pitseolak: Pictures out of My Life*, Design Collaborative Books and Oxford University Press.
35. Quoted in: Eber, Dorothy Harley, 1977, "How It Really Was," *Natural History* vol. 86, no. 2: p. 70.
36. Bhatt, Vikram, et al., 2020, *Blueprint for a Hack: Leveraging Informal Building Practices*, New York: Actar Publishers; Montreal: McGill University; Canadian Centre for Architecture, p. 21.
37. For a comprehensive analysis of material hacking in contemporary Inuit-made architecture, see Havelka, Susane, 2018, "Building with IQ (Inuit Qaujimatuaqangit): The Rise of a Hybrid Design Tradition in Canada's Eastern Arctic," PhD diss., McGill University.
38. An example of an iglu-inspired architectural project is examined in detail in the concluding section of this essay.
39. The Sucker Creek First Nation is a Cree community located near the town of Enilda in northern Alberta, Canada. It is part of Treaty 8 territory and is governed by its own band council.

40. Cardinal, Lewis, 2001, "What Is an Indigenous Perspective?" *Canadian Journal of Native Education* vol. 25, no. 2: p. 180.
41. *Id.*, p. 180.
42. For example, Our Lady of Victory Church in Inuvik, Northwest Territories, is a notable place of worship whose architectural form draws inspiration from the iglu. Designed by Catholic missionary Maurice Larocque—who had no formal architectural training—the church was constructed by local volunteers in 1960, predating Thom's design for the cathedral in Iqaluit by a decade.
43. Ronald Thom was a prominent Canadian architect known for his modernist approach and sensitive integration of architecture with the landscape. Among his notable projects are Massey College at the University of Toronto (1963), the Toronto Zoo (1974), Toronto Metropolitan University Architecture Building (1979–1981), and the design of the Nunavut Legislative Building in Iqaluit (originally completed in the 1990s, with Thom's early influence).
44. Cathedral Parish of St. Simon's & St. Jude's, "Welcome | ᐅᓐᓄᓐᓂᓐ | Tunngasugit,.". [<https://iqaluitcathedral.ca/>], accessed September 19, 2025.