

Art and Sustainability in Nunavut

by Douglas Worts

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Images from a video filmed in Baker Lake, Nunavut, July 2000 (l to r): traditional clothing being displayed at Canada Day Festivities; a view of Baker Lake from an ATV (all-terrain vehicle); an inuksuit (a beacon or marker), near Baker Lake; elders and youth talking in Baker Lake—Lucy Tunguaq, Diane Webster, Lillian Mannik, Silas Aittauq, Kaviq Kaluraaq.

Images d'une vidéo tournée à Baker Lake, Nunavut, en juillet 2000. De g. à d. : vêtements traditionnels exposés lors de la Fête du Canada; vue de Baker Lake prise depuis un véhicule tout-terrain; un inuskshut (balise ou repère) près de Baker Lake; discussion entre jeunes et anciens de Baker Lake : Lucy Tunguaq, Diane Webster, Lillian Mannik, Silas Aittauq, Kaviq Kaluraaq.

Last June, I travelled to Baker Lake, Nunavut to record interviews with Inuit carvers and community members about the exhibition *An Inuit Perspective: Baker Lake Sculpture* that was about to open at the Inuit Heritage Centre. Known as the geographic centre of Canada, Baker Lake is a town of about 1500 people, mostly Inuit. I felt privileged to be able to travel to the Arctic, but having the opportunity to speak with elders and community leaders made this trip all the more special. My assignment was relatively straight-forward—to capture reactions to a collection of 34 carvings that had been made in Baker Lake 20 to 40 years earlier. I would speak with a number of carvers who had created these sculptures decades before, but who had not seen the works since, as well as to community leaders, Inuit youth and descendants of deceased carvers whose works were in the show. Considering that there has never been a tradition of the Inuit keeping any of their art, it was unclear how the residents of Baker Lake would respond to this exhibition.

The trip evoked a realization for me of how art and culture are poised to play a potentially important role in the development of the North—particularly within the new territory of Nunavut. My long-standing interest in Inuit art converged with my recent explorations into the role of culture in the development of a sustainable world. The following are my reflections on the potential of Inuit culture to help shape the future of Nunavut—and the possible role that museums might play.

Creating sustainability in today's world is no small task. The most common model of sustainable development is a balanced approach to the social, environmental and economic dimensions of human activity. It was defined almost 15 years ago by the Brundtland Commission report *Our Common Future* as, "meeting the needs of today's world without compromising the ability of future



generations to meet their own needs.” This means ensuring social justice globally; creating economies that provide employment and distribute wealth fairly to all; as well as living within a biosphere without damaging it. In a world of nation states in which each country strives for autonomous self-determination, coordinating the spheres of economy, society and environment is exceedingly challenging. To complicate matters, multinational corporations are undermining the assumption that national governments are in control of the planet’s future. So, when territories like Nunavut are created and begin to define how they will operate, there are many variables that they cannot control.

Approximately 25 000 people inhabit the vast region of Nunavut. Its territorial government is committed to building a strong and sustainable society in which the Inuit take control of their own destiny. There are many hurdles to clear—for example, employment rates historically are very low, and the formal education system has produced at best mediocre results. Living in isolated communities of prefab houses, perched atop the permafrost, might seem to be an improvement over snow houses on the land. But when people feel disconnected from their world, life can lose its sense of purpose. Substance abuse, lethargy and apathy are all common byproducts of such a situation, and the inhabitants of Nunavut know these symptoms well. Yet, there are signs that things are changing. Whereas decades ago the Inuktitut language was prohibited by missionaries and government leaders, it is now an official language of Nunavut. Economic development strategies are being created to attract investment. Environmental protection policies being developed will be critical to the Arctic’s development since its fragile ecosystem has already been harmed by both local activities (eg. mining) and pollution from other parts of the planet



A street in Baker Lake, summer 2000 (far left).

À gauche : rue de Baker Lake, été 2000.

Sustainability is a matter of balance (left).

Le développement durable est une question d’équilibre.

(the best-known examples are ozone depletion and the melting of polar ice caps from global warming).

The Inuit of Baker Lake have a rich cultural heritage dating back thousands of years. Before their world was turned upside down by Southern influences, they belonged to five distinct groups that flourished in different parts of the region. The new era was created by three major forces: government, church and schools. During the 1950s, government policies relocated Inuit from diverse groups to southern-style towns—attempting to halt the starvation of Inuit on the land, which occurred when caribou migration routes were upset by new mining operations. Since the late 1920s, Catholic and Anglican missionaries displaced Inuit spiritual beliefs that had evolved as an integral part of daily life and survival, with a Christian ideology. Thirdly, formal schools—both local and residential—brought new attitudes, world-views and values—as well as new forms of social deviancy.

So, what does all this have to do with museums? Central to many political statements about the future of Nunavut is that Inuit traditional knowledge and culture will provide a foundation for development. As agents of culture, museums stand to play a role in the creation of this foundation. But how? One answer springs from seeing culture as the relationship we as human beings have with the forces that affect our lives—particularly the ones that we cannot fully understand or control, such as birth and

death. Traditionally for the Inuit, such relationships have been mediated through myth, story, ritual, music, sacred objects, and other media of symbolic experience. In particular, the dynamics of nature, including the availability of food and water, have been challenges to be contended with each day. Accordingly, many cultural forms, such as rituals and legends, evolved to help individuals and communities conceptualize and navigate the forces of nature. Museums are potentially physical and psychological spaces in which to discover values that help ensure balance in our lives. Such balance may well mirror the balance that our model of sustainability seeks.

“Inuit Culture, which thrived in the harsh Arctic environment, will also thrive and advance in a global environment. What will remain, and what links the past, present and future, is the sense of community, the willingness to help each other out, to be innovative and resourceful—in a word, to be Inuit. To be Human Beings.”

Jaypeetee Arnakak,
Nunavut Department of Sustainable
Development, 1999

Sustainability is a hazy and distant goal. Our best collective efforts will be required to create effective production technologies, economic models, pollution reduction strategies and approaches to social justice. As individuals, we must cultivate personal value systems which enable us to live our lives with conscious awareness of the forces that will always be bigger than human “progress.” It is in this context that I have come to see a tremendous opportunity for museums in the North to function at the heart of Nunavut. To be effective, their structures and functions would have to evolve from the needs and opportunities of the community—not dictated by a formulaic approach to institutionalized culture that characterizes many traditional Western museums.

About 50 years after the town of Baker Lake was established, community members identified the need for a heritage centre. Elders and leaders understood that traditional knowledge and wisdom was disappearing with the passing of a generation. Now, the Inuit Heritage Centre is grappling with the question of what constitutes Inuit

culture, especially in a context that is vastly different from a century ago. The centre has become a place for conducting oral histories, preserving cultural objects, undertaking research, facilitating community events and much more. It is within this setting that *An Inuit Perspective: Baker Lake Sculpture* was conceived and realized. As an agent of a major art museum in Toronto, my professional orientation to the interviews was largely object-centred as carvings constituted the core of the exhibition. In fact, the attitude I brought to the assignment was broader than this, but institutional expectations were fairly conventional.

It was not so easy to make sense of the interviews. What started as a fairly focussed initiative quickly generated new questions and issues with which to grapple. First, I had to acknowledge my own relative ignorance about Inuit life and culture. It has taken a while for me to truly appreciate the impact of relocation. Introducing houses, a consumer-based welfare economy, a formal education system and mass media turned Inuit lives upside down. The transition has been enormously complex and is far from complete. Secondly, any lingering thought I might have had that soapstone carving was an indigenous form of expression for the Inuit had to be jettisoned. As I listened to stories of how the older carvers had grown up living on the Arctic tundra, I realized how absurd was the idea of an Inuit tradition of stone sculpture. Nomadic people would not carve figures in stone and cart them about the North because they contained special meanings. Perhaps the Inuit might have made small carvings in bone or antler to function this way, but not stone.

My expectation that the carvers would speak of the symbolic meaningfulness of their creative process was corrected by their forthright comments about the ongoing need for income to help their families survive. In this community, money has been the traditional motivation for creating art. The carvers spoke enthusiastically about their work, but in very pragmatic terms—about subject, process, and what it meant to them financially. Many of the carvers said little about the individual sculptures. Some told me extraordinary stories about their lives on the land. I heard of experiences with missionaries before the town was founded. Virtually everyone I spoke with indicated their belief in Christianity. Only one person spoke openly about Shamanic practices. This struck me as odd, since I knew that Shamans were critical to Inuit life, at least until the Christian missionaries arrived (which largely annihilated the traditional belief system). Most elders related aspects of traditional knowledge that remain important to them: hunting techniques, making clothes from caribou and traditional family relationships. Some of these were obliquely referenced in the carvings. But commenting on how such themes are meaningful to them today was something that nobody seemed able to do.

Most of the elders spoke about how difficult they found communicating with young people. In the words of Silas Aittauq, “our young people seem to know more about other cultures than their own. They speak more English than they speak Inuktitut. We elders really don’t know what they want to know from us and we don’t know what to say to them, how to reach them.”

Interviews with Inuit youth confirmed what the carvers were saying—that young people have been raised under the significant influence of southern media and commercial forces that now permeate the North. Theirs is a world significantly impacted by music videos, Hollywood and products targeted at young people. There was some interest by the youth in what the elders might have to offer, but little belief that Inuit traditions were relevant to their own lives and futures. A communication gap between elders and youth was very apparent. One youth declared, “people today are lazy—they don’t want to work hard making art like the older carvers.” The same young woman went on to say, “I think that what the elders do is cool—I’d like to learn more.” But very few young people in Baker Lake are learning to carve or make other forms of art. They see more opportunities in fields like technology and government.

It may be exactly in this place and moment of uncertainty that there is an opportunity for museums and heritage centres in Nunavut to carve out a valuable role for themselves—one of cultural facilitator. When *An Inuit Perspective: Baker Lake Sculpture* opened last July, the centre was packed with people; many were turned away and had to come back at a later time. As I spoke with some of the visitors, I realized that various kinds of connections were being made—almost all of them personal. Some visitors used the carvings to tell youngsters about relatives who are no longer alive. Others fell into reveries surrounding their memories of when carvings were made. One of the most poignant reactions was expressed by the daughter of the late Luke Iksiktaaryuk, Uliut Iksiktaaryuk, who said, “I remember when my Dad was working on his carving, but I have not seen it since—it was his way of making money for us to be able to eat—it’s great to see it again, but it will be very sad to see it go.” Although when the carving was made it had little meaning other than that related to income, 25 years later it has gained new meaning—as a means of remembering. Although the memory that was activated was personal, I had the feeling that this new valuing of the work was the beginning of a cultural reclamation. It may be a fairly small step for the people of Baker Lake to value their carvings for what they reflect of their culture.

At this point, Nunavut has many options as to how it creates a cultural foundation for its economic, social and environmental policies. With a strong commitment to sus-



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tainability, the government will likely want to find ways in which individuals across the Arctic feel connected to their deep ancestral roots. But just as important, they need to feel fully part of an emerging global community that lives in a responsible way. Finding a way to do this will be the challenge of individuals, communities and governments across the North.

Fostering individual and collective values that support sustainable lifestyles for the earth’s six billion people is almost unfathomable—yet it will be required of humanity in the future. In some ways, it may be an easier task for the Inuit than for many of us in the Western world. ¶

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Note: The exhibition *An Inuit Perspective: Baker Lake Sculpture* is currently travelling, with scheduled stops in Toronto, Vancouver and Iqaluit.

At the opening of the exhibition, *An Inuit Perspective: Baker Lake Carving*, July 2000.

Inauguration de l'exposition *An Inuit Perspective: Baker Lake Sculpture*, juillet 2000.