

## CO-DESIGNING WELLNESS:

### Arctic Indigenous Wellness Centre Yellowknife, NWT, Canada

"Culture is the foundation of Indigenous frameworks of individual and community well-being. Culture encompasses Elders, cultural practitioners, kinship relationships, language, practices, ceremonies, knowledge and land. These cultural values are an important social determinant of health and wellness."

- Susan Chatwood, Institute for Circumpolar Health Research.

The traumatic impacts of colonization have had significant impacts on the mental health and community wellness of Indigenous peoples all across Canada, and even more so in Arctic territories. Indigenous communities have repeatedly expressed the need to ground health and wellness programs in community priorities, Indigenous culture, and land-based traditions. In Indigenous worldview, wellness is a holistic relationship between culture, community, and environment, unlike Western perspectives of medical care.

Founded in 2016, the Arctic Indigenous Wellness Foundation (AIWF), based in Yellowknife, has the mandate of culturally reviving traditional healing knowledge and practices in Arctic regions. Led by Indigenous leaders, elders and healers, the AIWC offers cultural programming and advocacy with focus on mental wellness, traditional medicine revitalization, elder to youth skills programming, and traditional gardening. The AIWC bridges a service gap between informal wellness camps and institutionalized Western-oriented medical hospitals.



AIWC has developed over three years of sustained community engagement (2016-19) with Indigenous elders, healers, and youth to define program, siting, and form, and ensure it reflected Indigenous priorities and principles. In strong contrast to the institutional architecture of the adjacent Stanton Hospital, the AIWC is intimate, de-institutionalized, and camp-like in its organization, form, and expression with strong connections to the unique northern environment and landscape. The AIWC is organized into three distinct yet unified volumes—traditional knowledge, gathering, and wellness—each defined in form, views, and materiality. The circulation space that ties them together has various breakout spaces that can be used for informal events and activities. The AIWC is completed with a large outdoor gathering space inscribed on the southeast.

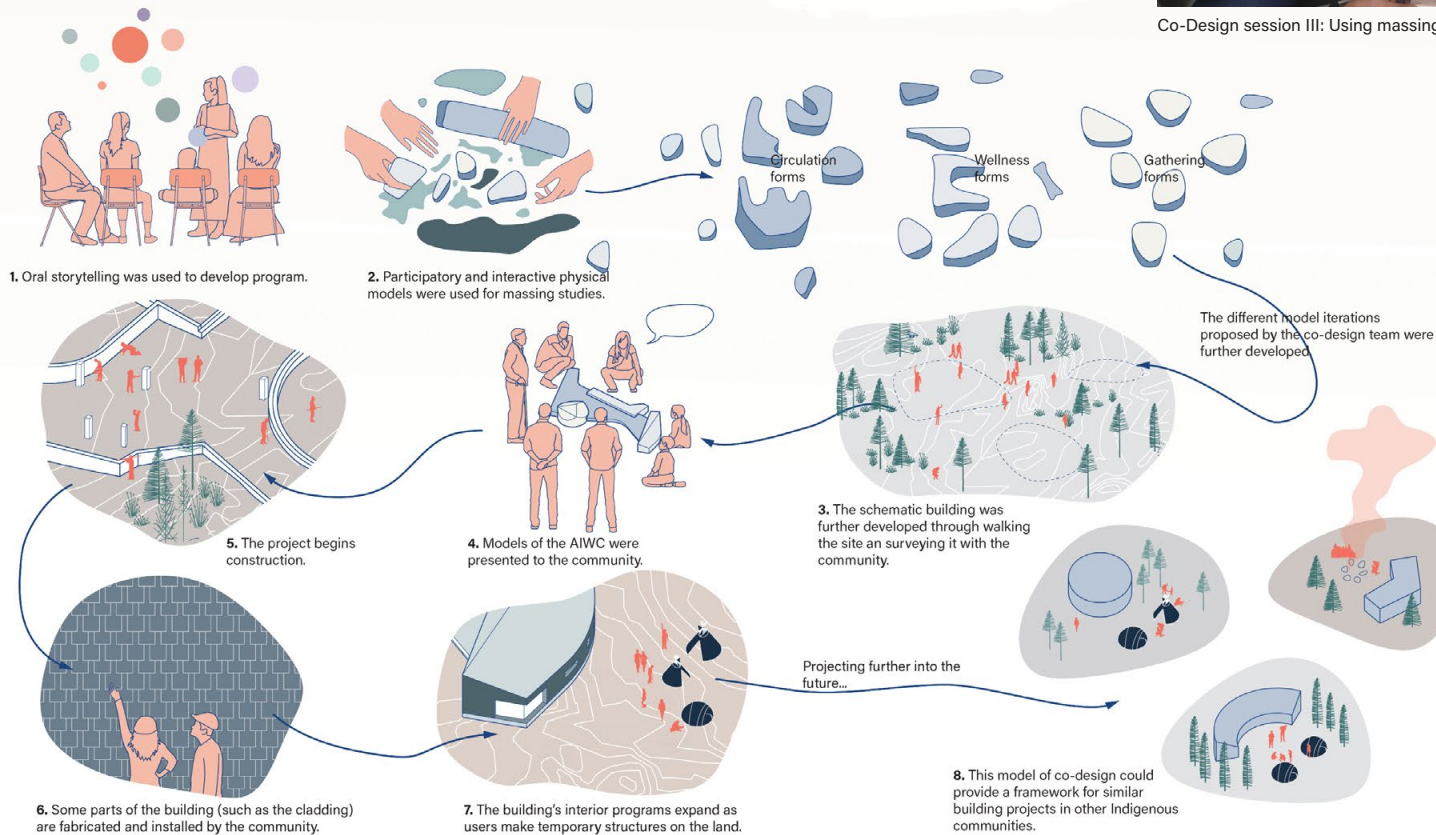
AIWC is designed—in siting, form and materials—to be closely tuned to the environment, climate, and ground conditions of this northern site. The building uses passive and active environmental strategies in response to the extreme climate, limits disturbance to the ground during construction, and uses regionally sourced timber and stone, minimizing embodied energy expenditure.

## CO-DESIGN & TRANSFERABILITY

Architecture has been a tool of colonization in the North, used to negate cultural expression and impose ways of living. The AIWC serves as a model of community co-design that seeks to decolonize the design process and make it more inclusive. Community participation "opens a process in architecture that has no prescribed itinerary and no final solutions" (de Carlo, 1980). Embracing a 'Two-Eyed Seeing' approach that merges Indigenous and Western knowledge systems, AIWC used (1) oral "storytelling"; (2) participatory and interactive physical models; and (3) drawings as tools of storytelling/narrative making. During construction, community-build will be key to continuing the participatory process.

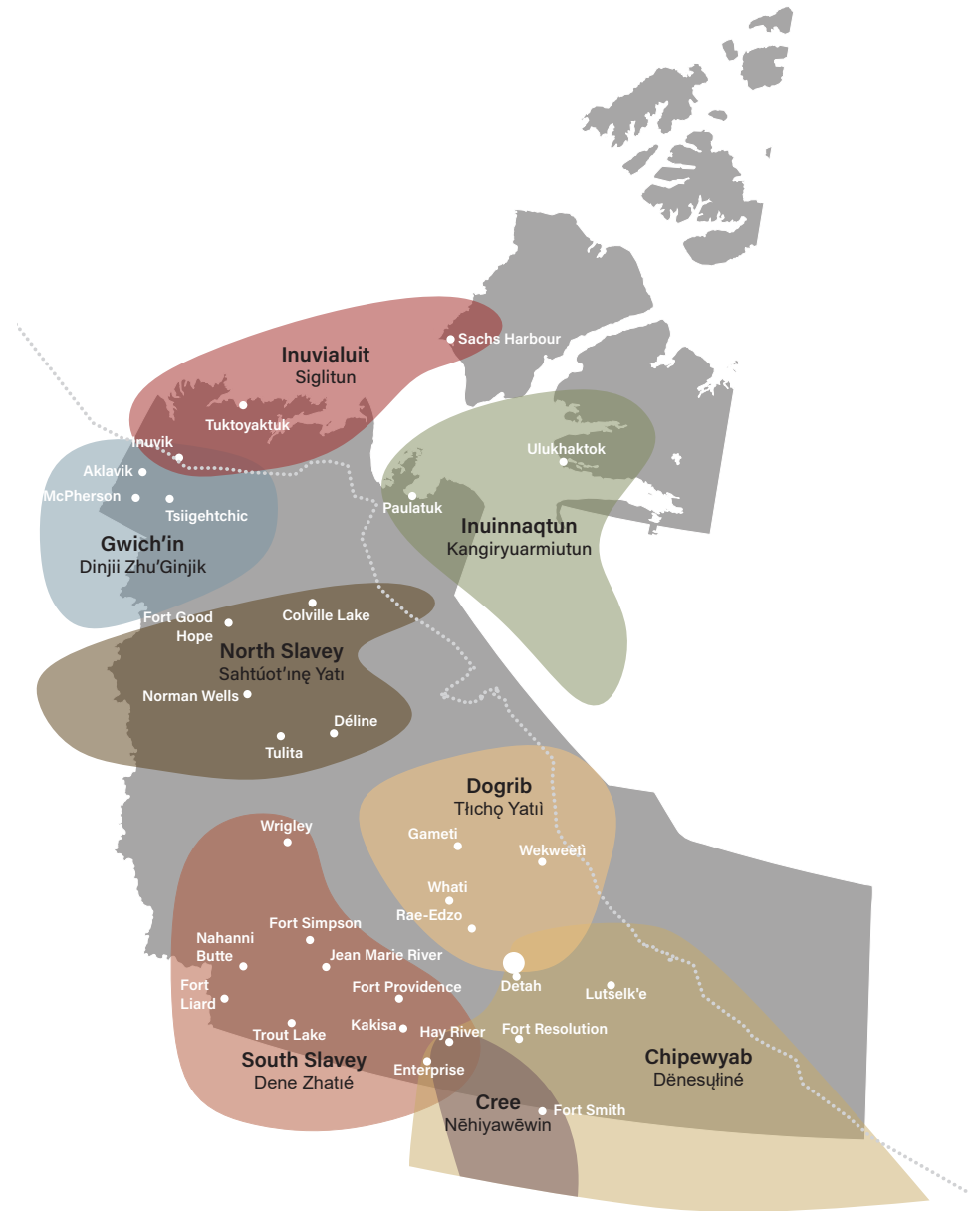


Co-Design session III: Using massing blocks to organize and orient programs.





Northwest Territories (Canada): Current health services map.



Northwest Territories (Canada): Diversity of language and governance.





The existing healing camp in Yellowknife is open year-round despite the winter extremities.



Dene elder and activist Francois Paulette teaching the design team about Dene worldview.



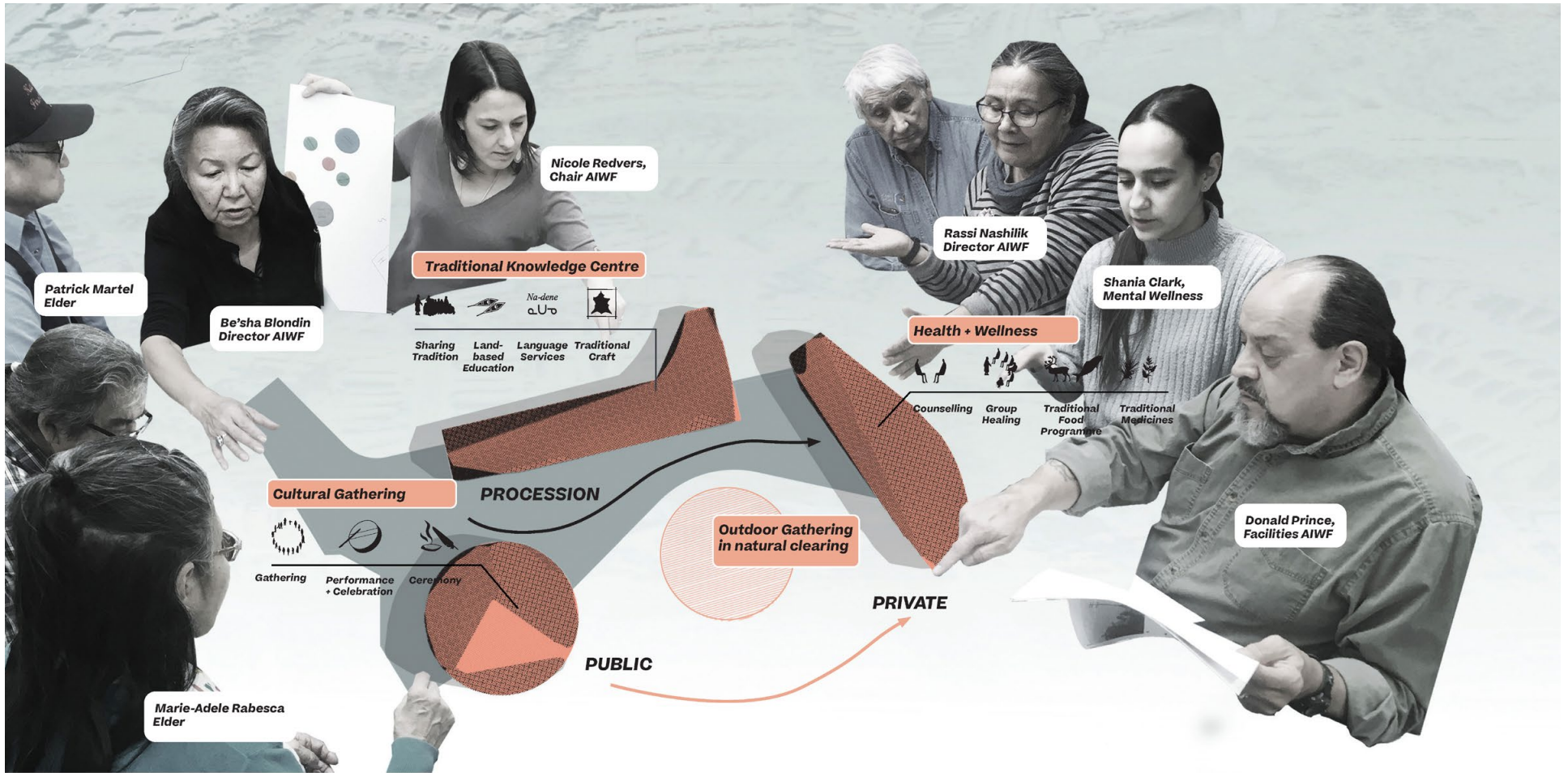
Ample space outside for ceremony and gatherings is important.

## DEEP LISTENING

AIWC developed from three years of engagement (2016-19) to define program, siting, form, and materials, and ensure it reflected Indigenous priorities and principles. Collaborative design workshops engaged Indigenous elders, healers, and youth in the design process through game-based participatory drawings and models. From this collaborative process, the AIWC is organized into distinct yet unified parts. Three volumes serve the primary functions—gathering, traditional knowledge, and wellness. The foundation established a wellness camp in 2018 and has secured funds toward the construction of a dedicated wellness facility to open in 2022.

The AIWC project has evolved through sustained community engagement with Indigenous elders, healers, and youth to define program, siting, and form. It began as a research studio at the University of Toronto, led by Mason White. During this time, he met and talked with Elders leading the AIWF, visited possible sites, and developed an understanding of key cultural priorities. Government funding then enabled extensive community engagement to define programmatic needs, and select a final site.





Co-Design process involved many team members from AIWF, the community, and Elders.

**Community Engagement Timeline, 2016 - 2021**

**How it began:**

The Indigenous Elders Council had formed to advise the Stanton Hospital on including an Indigenous Wellness programs.

Unfortunately, their recommendations were not included in the final government hospital project.

The Arctic Indigenous Wellness Foundation formed to advocate for an inclusive Indigenous Wellness services and facility.

The Elders Council, AIWF, and Lateral Office began collaborative design on a permanent facility for Indigenous Wellness in Yellowknife, NT.



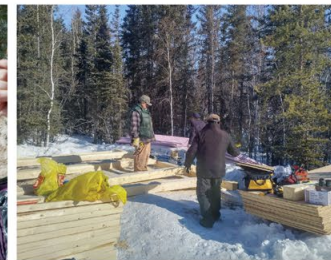
**September 2016**  
Elder Francois Paulette (Dene) - teaching Indigenous worldview.



**October 2016**  
Team site visit to Yellowknife, NT.



**October 2016**  
Elder Be'sha Blondin (Dene) - giving thanks to the land.



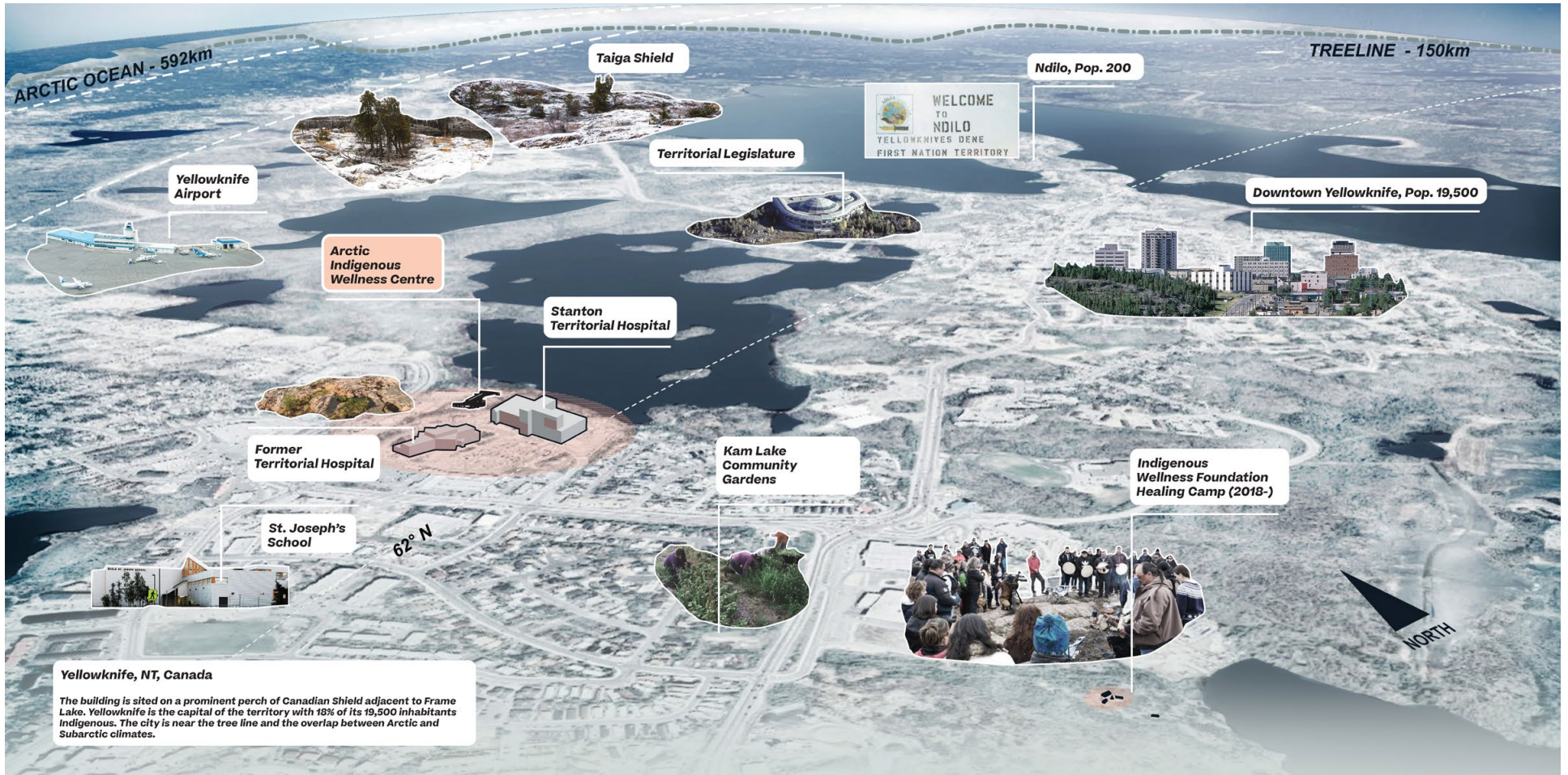
**April 2018**  
Beginning Construction of Healing Camp in Yellowknife. Donald Prince, William Greenland



**October 2018**  
Co-design on building concept and programming.



# Arctic Indigenous Wellness Centre T'satsaot'ine | Yellowknife, N 62°



**Yellowknife, NT, Canada**  
 The building is sited on a prominent perch of Canadian Shield adjacent to Frame Lake. Yellowknife is the capital of the territory with 18% of its 19,500 inhabitants Indigenous. The city is near the tree line and the overlap between Arctic and Subarctic climates.

The AIWC site as located among landmarks in Yellowknife, NWT, population 19,500.

## Community Engagement Timeline, 2016 - 2021



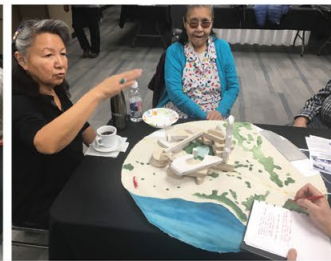
**October 2018**  
 Co-design workshop on programming.  
 Rassi Nashalik, Magnolia Unka-Wool, Robert Sayine, Donald Prince



**November 2018**  
 AIWF Healing camp opens and is in full use at Kam Lake site.



**February 2019**  
 Co-design workshop on AIWC siting and translating needs.  
 Patrick Martel, Nicole Redvers, Francois Paulette



**February 2019**  
 Co-design workshop on massing and activities on-the-land.  
 Be'sha Blondin, Marie-Adele Rabesca



**October 2019**  
 Surveying the site for the new Indigenous Wellness Centre.  
 Patrick Martel

**What's Next:**  
 Despite COVID-19 pandemic impacts, especially in Indigenous communities...  
 A site has been secured and infrastructural services needs has been complete.  
 AIWF and Lateral Office continue to advocate for the project with the Government of Northwest Territories.  
 The project team continues fund-raising efforts for both public and private support.  
 Prepare construction documents for a 2022 phased construction.





Elder and knowledge keeper from Deline comes in for winter drum-making event, as well as to participate in storytelling in the family centre while parents are seeking wellness counseling.



A mother and two children drive once every two weeks from Edzo for maternal health classes and on the land and language classes for the older child. Group parenting wellness sessions offer a unique space to view the lake.



Elder from Yellowknife comes weekly for readings and ceremonies such as smudging. She visits both the indoor ceremonial space, the outdoor campfire and the land camp.



Taking transit, a youth group visits twice a week for after-school on-the-land education, language, and music activities. Except for extreme cold, youth programs can take place outdoors on the land camp, campfire and traditional knowledge landscape.



NORTH

Aspect-Spiritual  
Colour-White  
Animal-White Buffalo  
Medicine-Sweetgrass



WEST

Aspect-Physical  
Colour-Black  
Animal-Bear  
Medicine-Sage



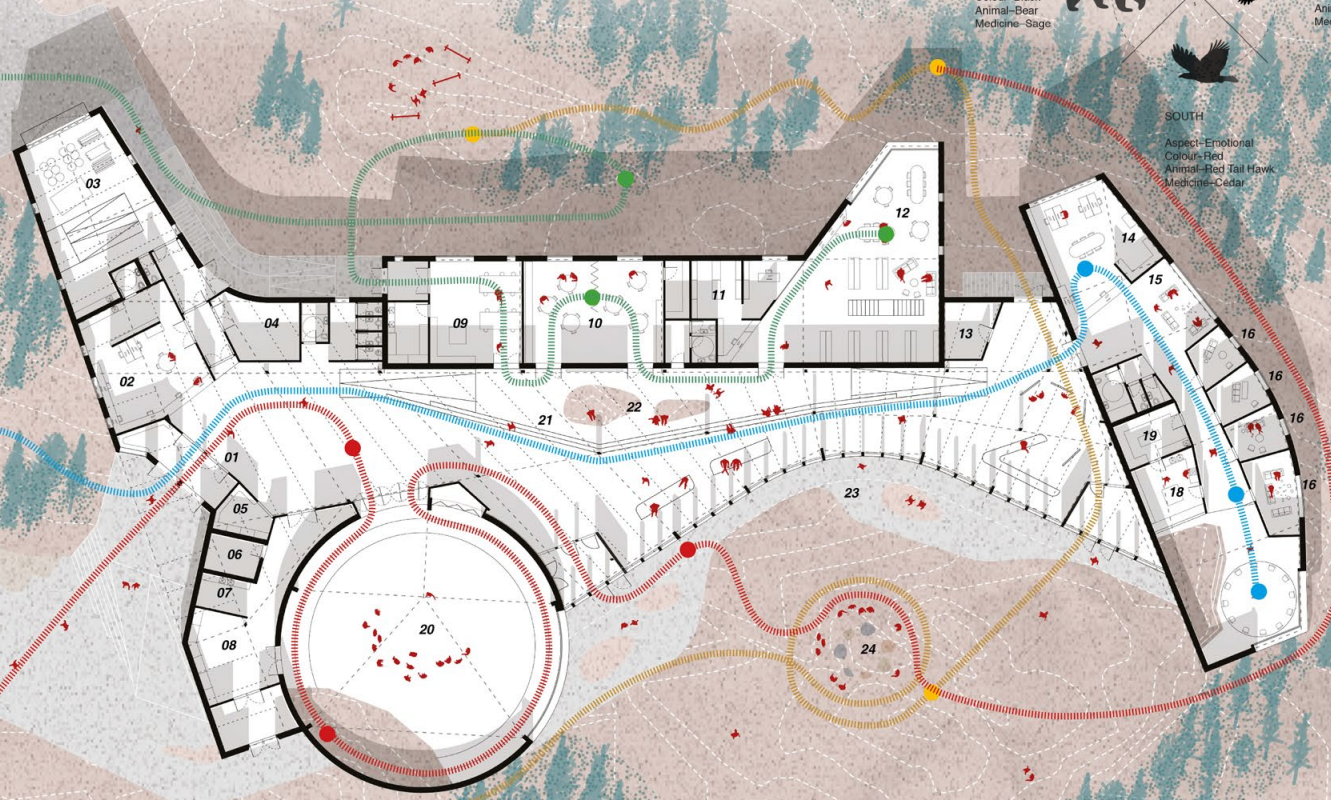
EAST

Aspect-Mental  
Colour-Yellow  
Animal-Eagle  
Medicine-Tabacco



SOUTH

Aspect-Emotional  
Colour-Red  
Animal-Red Tail Hawk  
Medicine-Cedar



SITE PLAN: AIWC PROGRAMS

Traditional Knowledge Wing

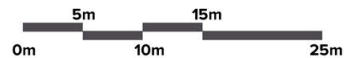
- 01 Entrance Hall
- 02 Welcome desk
- 03 Workshop + loading
- 04 Mechanical
- 05 Public coatroom
- 06 Cold storage
- 07 Staff kitchen
- 08 Event storage
- 09 Land education
- 10 Partitionable
- 11 Classroom
- 12 Archive + Office
- 13 Gathering + library Mechanical

Health + Wellness Wing

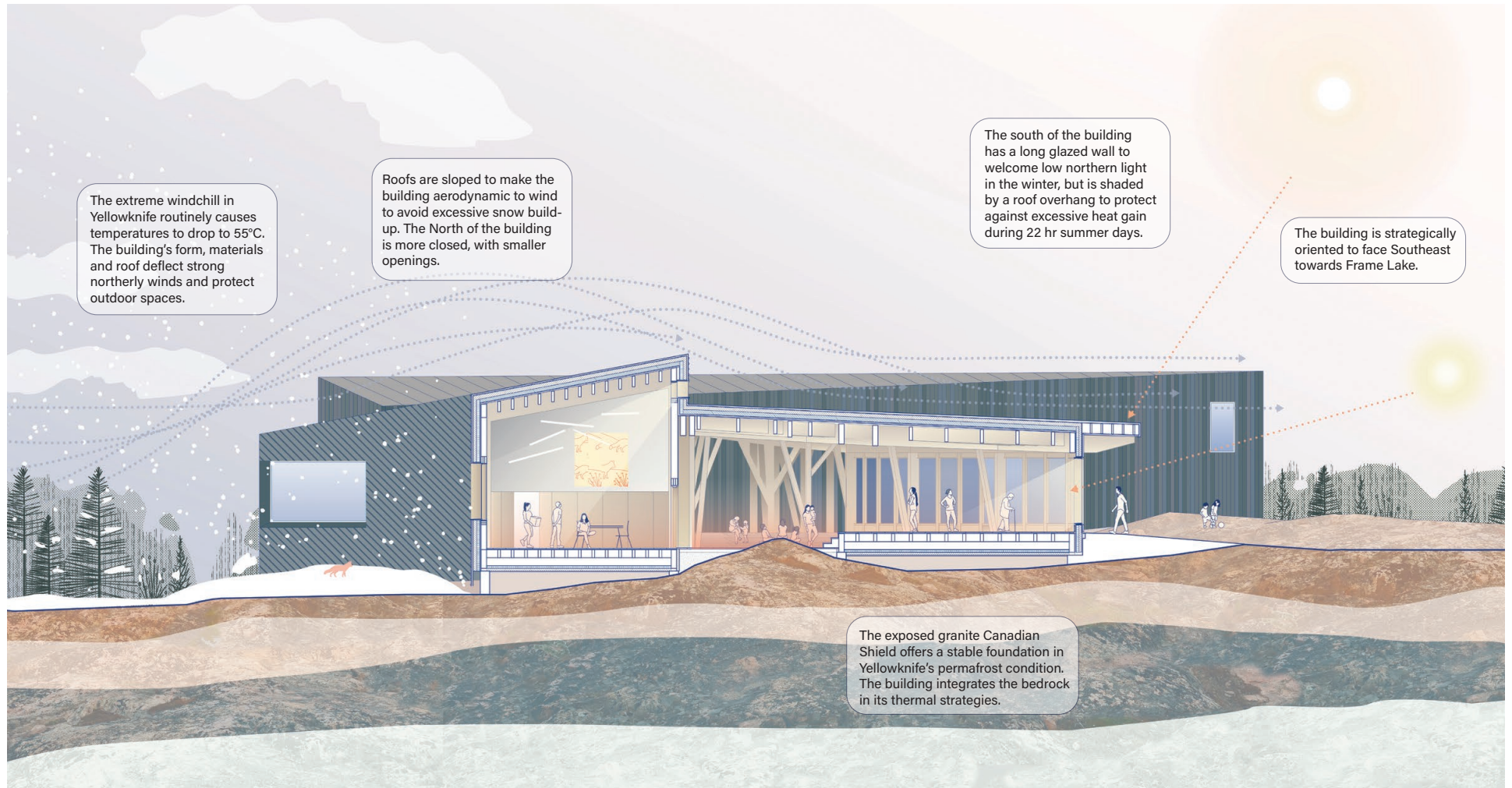
- 14 Intake + offices
- 15 Waiting area
- 16 Individual counselling rooms
- 17 rooms
- 18 Group counselling
- 19 Dry Storage
- Staff kitchen

Gathering

- 20 Main cultural gathering space
- 21 Public seating + meeting place
- 22 Presentation screen
- 23 Covered outdoor area
- 24 Great fire
- 25 Land education area





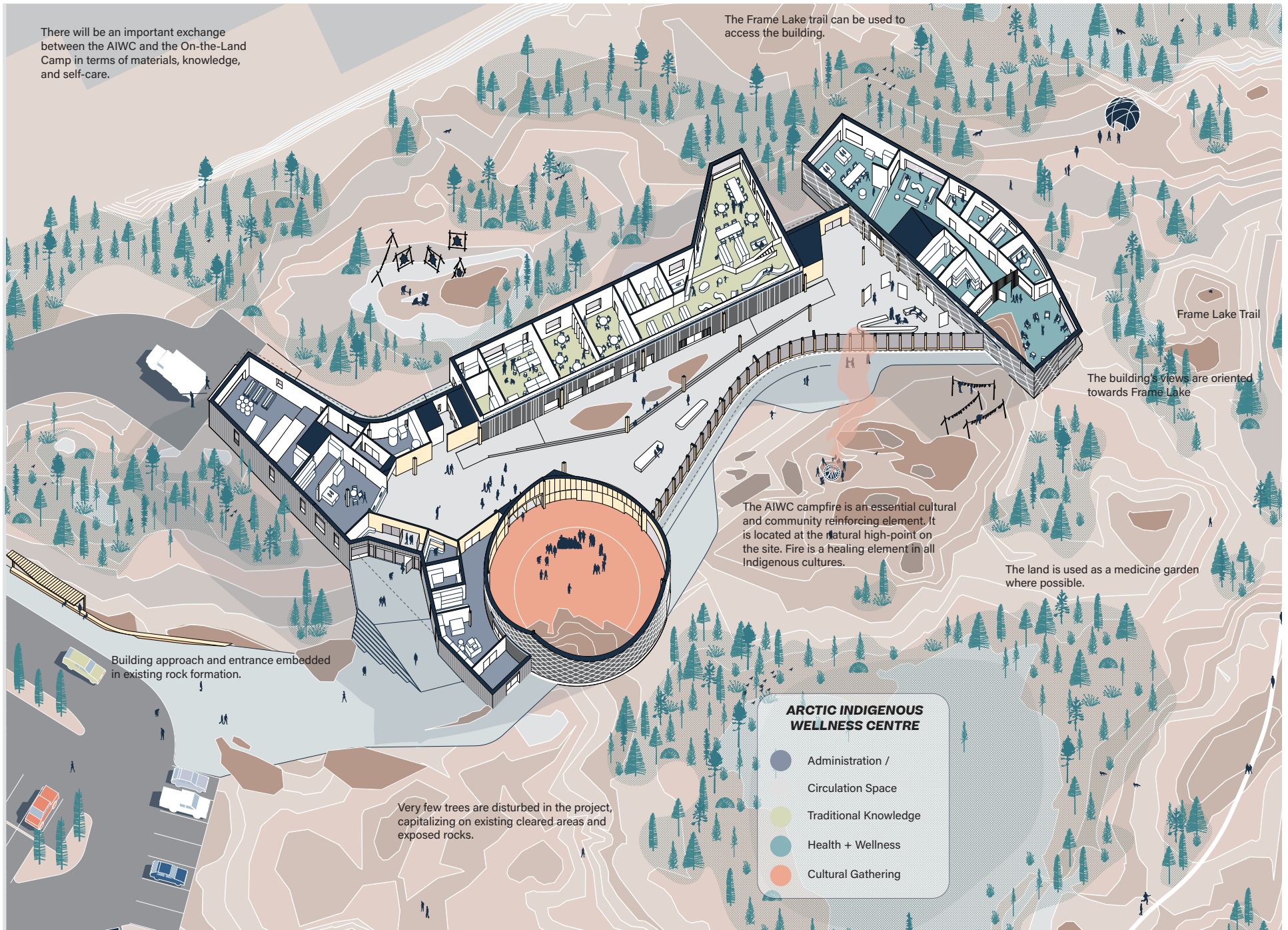


AIWC is designed—in siting, form and materials—to be closely tuned to the environment, climate, and ground conditions of this northern site, and is intended to create as little disturbance to the ecology as possible. The building uses passive and active environmental strategies in response to the extreme climate, and takes many context-specific measures to reduce emissions. In a remote region dependent on fossil fuels, the building uses district heating, leveraging waste heat from the adjacent hospital. The glazed south facade encourages heat gain in the winter months when the sun is limited and low, while a cantilevered roof limits heat gain in the summer when the sun is higher and prolonged.

Because the ground is sacred, Elders asked that no rock be blasted or excavated in constructing the building. Thus, the building is perched on top of the Canadian Shield rock that exists on the site. In key spaces, the rocky ground will pierce through the floor decking. The inherent thermal mass of the Shield rock will release warmth to those sitting on the interior rock outcroppings, even in the winter.

The building's structure is glulam spruce wood, and the long circulation space is conceived as a forest of beams and columns, reflecting the larger landscape beyond. The exterior cladding of each of the three main programmatic volumes are different uses of wood.





There will be an important exchange between the AIWC and the On-the-Land Camp in terms of materials, knowledge, and self-care.

The Frame Lake trail can be used to access the building.

Frame Lake Trail

The building's views are oriented towards Frame Lake

The AIWC campfire is an essential cultural and community reinforcing element. It is located at the natural high-point on the site. Fire is a healing element in all Indigenous cultures.

The land is used as a medicine garden where possible.

Building approach and entrance embedded in existing rock formation.

Very few trees are disturbed in the project, capitalizing on existing cleared areas and exposed rocks.

**ARCTIC INDIGENOUS WELLNESS CENTRE**

- Administration / Circulation Space
- Traditional Knowledge
- Health + Wellness
- Cultural Gathering



### HEALING IN THE FOREST



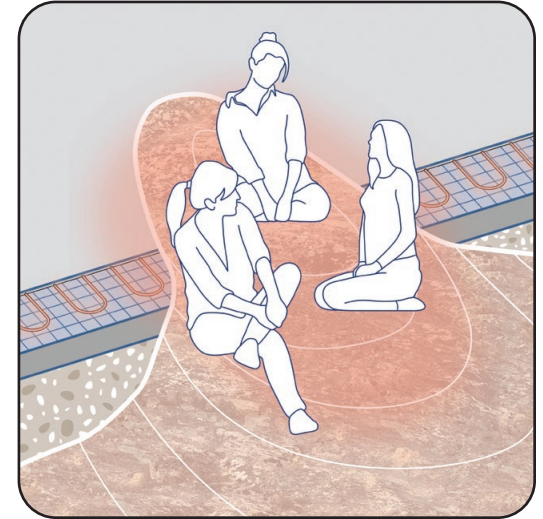
The site possesses many existing aspects to be preserved: a long view, exposed shield rock, and many fir trees that have endured harsh winters and effectively block cold wind.

### PRESERVING THE LAND



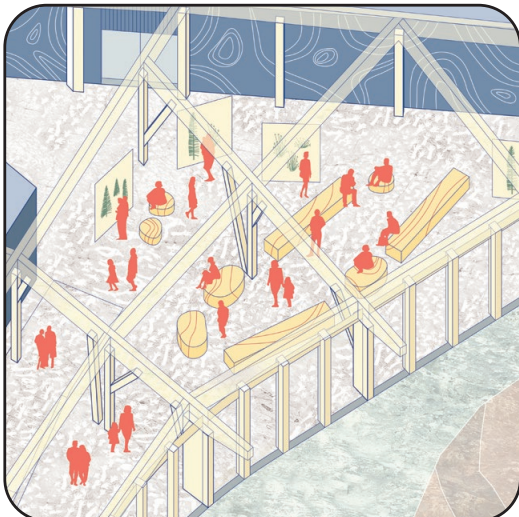
The building's foundations will be poured directly onto the landscape, raising the building up and preserving the ground instead of blasting it.

### THE WARMTH OF ROCKS



Natural bedrock intersects with the radiant floor heating assembly, extending the thermal mass. These "warming rocks" offer informal gathering areas dispersed throughout the building.

### BUILDING WITH THE FOREST



The building's structure is glulam spruce wood, and the long circulation space is conceived as a forest of beams and columns, reflecting the larger landscape beyond.

### LOCAL BUILDING



The project will employ local, Indigenous skilled labour including artists and craftspeople, to build local capacity, minimize travel and keep the investment local.

### INSULATING FROM COLD



The exterior cladding of each of the three main programmatic volumes are different uses of wood. The ceremonial space are charred /blackened shingles.





View west of the large outdoor space for celebrations and a fire for ceremonies, all framed by the glazed wall of the circulation space.



Tee-pee building



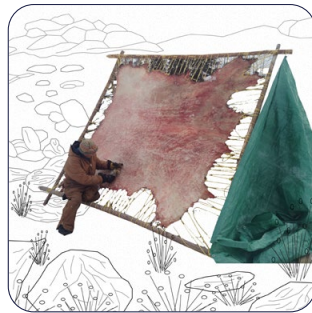
Smudge sticks (sage)







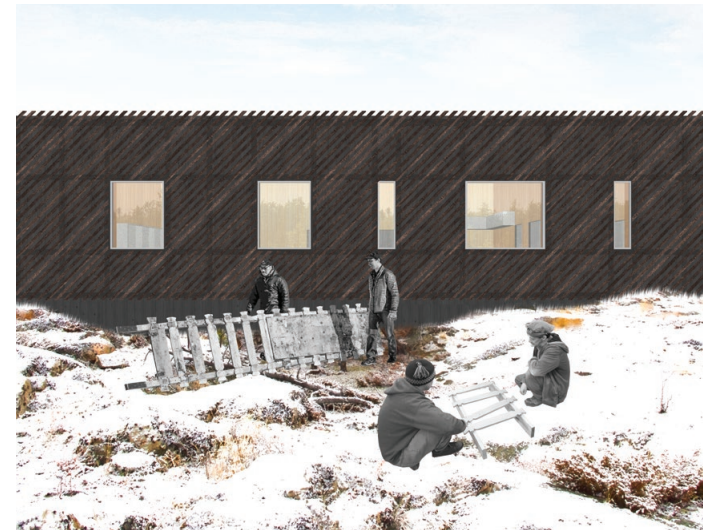
View of the entry approach reveals a building settled in and among the Canadian Shield. The recessed entrance draws visitors into the forested circulation space beyond.



Hide-stretching



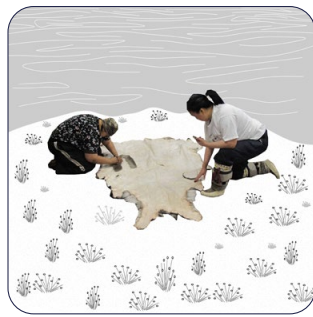
Wood-working







Interior circulation space creates an interior collective realm, defined by the timber structure as a forest of columns and beams.



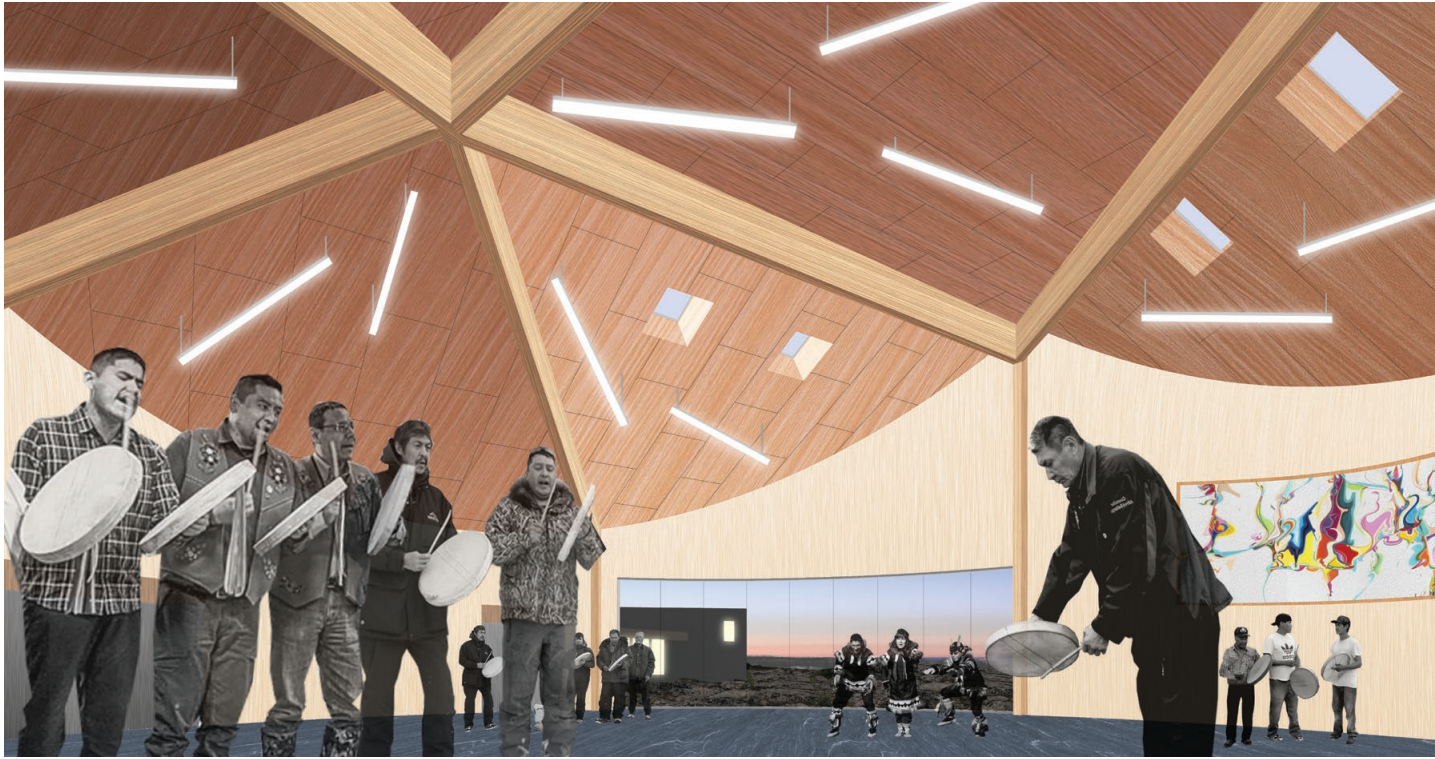
Hide tanning



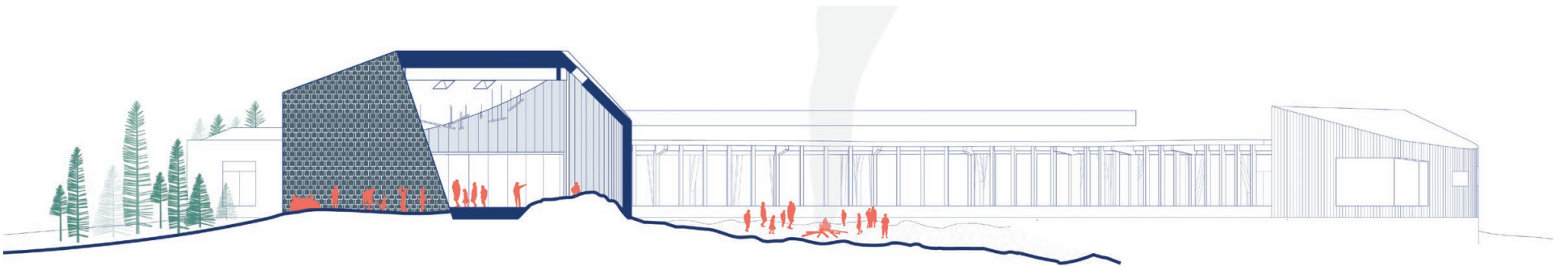
Gathering traditional medicines







The ceremonial space offers a large gathering space for 50-80 people. With generous height, it creates impactful acoustic conditions for music and dance. The ceremonial space has a direct access from the entry as the most public space of the AIWC, and also direct access to the outdoor gathering space for connections between indoor and outdoor programs.



Section through ceremonial space.





The teaching of language, music and craft is central to cultural community well-being and individual healing. Facing North, this volume includes a community resource space and arts and language classrooms.



Section through healing wing and circulation hall.







The bowed volume to the east, the most private, is dedicated to wellness. It contains spaces for larger group meetings, one-on-one meetings, and knowledge transfer of traditional healing and medicine.



Section through traditional knowledge wing and circulation hall.

