

Burial at 64° North

ON BAFFIN ISLAND, AN ARCTIC CEMETERY HONORS INDIGENOUS TRADITIONS

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For thousands of years, the Inuit people of the Canadian Arctic lived lightly in a landscape of ice and snow, ocean and tundra, moving with the animals and the seasons. Neither their dwellings nor their graves broke the surface of the land.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, however, cities sprouted in the north. Iqaluit, on Baffin Island's Frobisher Bay, is one of these: latitude 64°N, population 7,700 and growing. For decades Iqaluit's funerary infrastructure consisted of a municipal cemetery that was little more than functional; and then it was full. Now a new cemetery, winner of a 2017 Canadian Society of Landscape Architects (CSLA) National Award of Excellence, offers the community a sacred place that "expresses spirituality, the passage of time, the circle of life," said the awards jury. "Austere and perfect, this is a place with soul."

Located on a peninsula three miles southeast of Iqaluit, the 3.4-hectare cemetery uses natural materials and simple forms to honour indigenous traditions. "We tried to let the land speak for itself," says Eric Lees, Vancouver-based principal of Lees+Associates, landscape architects for the project. Local boulders delineate paths even under snow. Weathering steel gates and memorial walls harmonize with the colours of arctic willow and the northern lights. Motifs in the gates refer to the amauti (the parka in which a woman carries her child), the runners of the qamutiik (the Inuit sled), and the northern lights. At the ceremonial gathering place to which the paths lead, a monumental arch frames a view toward the sea, symbolizing a connection to the afterlife. Composed of bowhead whale jawbones from a hunt which fed hundreds—the community's first in over 75 years—the arch and its framed view also honour the traditional Inuit way of life.

To preserve the fragile tundra during the cemetery's construction, turfs were carefully cut and salvaged from road ways, and later replaced over disturbed areas; in late summer, blooming tundra grasses witness the success of the strategy. Taking the conservation priority into the cemetery's operations, active burial areas are being phased to ensure the tundra ecosystem will be sustained over time.

The design originally called for pre-placed concrete boxes to facilitate winter burials and to mitigate subsidence and muck from the thawing of excavated permafrost, but the municipal council balked at the up-front cost. Without the boxes, however, the complicated and dynamic ground conditions make operations and maintenance intensive and expensive. "We're trying to maintain the aesthetic qualities of the site," says Cameron DeLong, a landscape architect who serves as manager of public works for the city of Iqaluit. "In such a cold climate, a lot of the time we just have to say it is what it is."

In important aspects, though, the cemetery surpasses what it is. Beyond its formal use as a place of passage and remembrance, it is serving more widely as a place of contemplation, a destination for a Sunday outing, or a photo opportunity for visitors, transforming residents' perception of what a cemetery can and should be, says Lees. A public open space that celebrates the community and its arctic landscape has proven welcome in this under-served municipality. "Thank you," said Iqaluit mayor Mary Wilman at the opening, "for creating this cemetery that is so respectful of this place."