"We believe in a totally flexible approach in terms of dealing with changes as they occur."

Blouin Orzes

Montréal-based Blouin Orzes architectes have been working in Nunavik, Québec, since 2000. Their projects include hotels and other residential, commercial, and institutional buildings in northern communities such as Kuujjuarapik, Puvirnituq, Salluit, and Kuujjuaq. Blouin Orzes also designed Polar Bears International House in Churchill, Manitoba.

With a sustained presence in Northern Canada, Blouin Orzes have acquired an intimate knowledge of the land, the people, their needs, and their values. Profoundly attached to the North, Marc Blouin and Catherine Orzes have developed their unique expertise in design and construction techniques for this region.

PROJECT NAME---Katittavik Centre
LOCATION---Kuujjuaraapik, Canada
COMPLETED---2017
AREA---7,319 square feet (680 square meters)
DESIGN---Blouin Orzes architectes
PHOTOGRAPHY---Blouin Orzes architectes

Katittavik Centre is located in the Northern Village of Kuujjuaraapik, near the mouth of the Great Whale River. The slightly lopsided one-and-a-half-story building seems to have been shaped by the strong winter winds. A light aerial structure signals the entrance portico, where people can linger and enjoy views of the river.

Openings are kept to a minimum given the hall's function, harsh climate conditions, and high energy costs. A well-lit lobby, adjacent to a small office area, leads to the large multipurpose space, which is the project's raison d'être. The unconventional ceiling height is intended to create a

warm, welcoming feeling for community members. A small platform, serving as a control booth for sound, lighting, and projections floats above the hall. The backstage area is equipped with services, storage, and a small kitchen.

The center has retractable seating to accommodate up to 300 people. The main hall can be rearranged for banquets, performances, lectures, and film projections. State-of-the-art video conferencing equipment enables community members to be in contact with the rest of the world—a must for this geographically and linguistically isolated community.

Katittavik Centre is the first phase of a larger project that will integrate nearby St. Edmund's Anglican Church, Nunavik's oldest standing structure. The architects hope that the center, the church, and the adjacent public space will eventually form a significant cultural and civic pole.

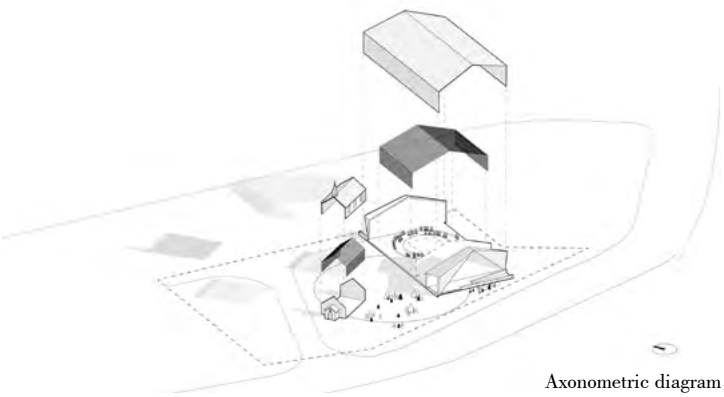
How do you resolve the unfavorable aspects of site conditions?

The challenges encountered by our office are not so much related to the actual sites, but rather, to their remoteness in Nunavik's northern locations. Building materials and components are purchased in the southern part of Canada and can only be shipped during a very short summer season. Typically, a shipment will leave Montréal at the end of June and reach a destination such as Kuujjuaraapik a month later.

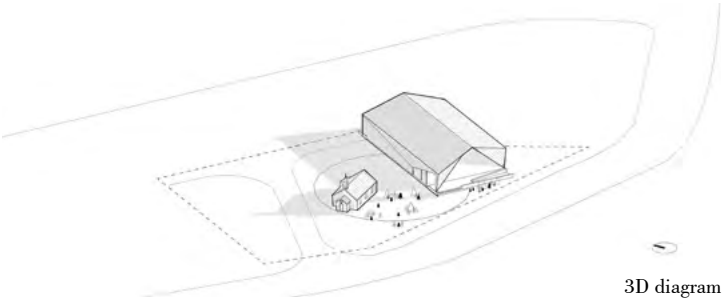
Another important challenge relates to weather conditions in the North and the need to provide workers with a protected environment as soon as possible. Our solution has been to use prefabricated elements, which can be rapidly assembled. Once the exterior shell is up, construction work can take place under satisfactory conditions.

How do you put forward solutions comprehensively and objectively without any prejudgments?

As architects who build for the Inuit people, we have to adapt to their cultural ways—very different from what we are accustomed to in southern locations. It usually takes years to build the necessary trust to engage in a satisfactory



Axonometric diagram

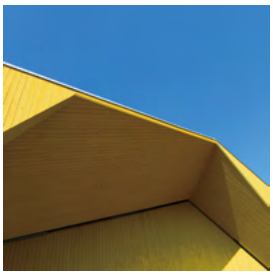


3D diagram

working relationship. No decision is made without a lengthy consultation process and consensus has to be reached. Changes are also quite common as members of a community become more aware of a project. In the case of Katittavik, the original request was to host the traditional Inuit Games, a popular event among northern communities. The program expanded into a multifunctional hall, which meant more space, but also higher costs. Our team not only helped redefine the project but also got involved in finding additional sources of financing.

How do you perceive the abstract architectural space?

The structures that our team builds in the North are often very straightforward. We have already completed a number of small hotels, as well as municipal, cultural, and industrial buildings. Contrary to architects working in dense urban contexts, we often build on open land. Movements in and out



of buildings are dictated by weather conditions, which can be extreme at times.

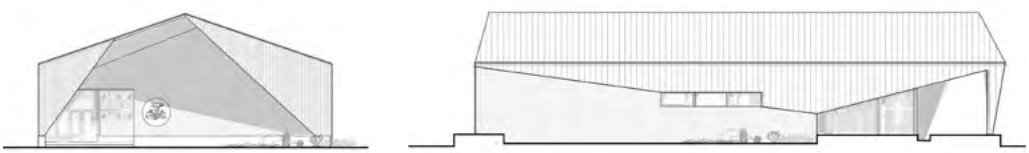
In Kuujjuaraapik, the close proximity to an existing nineteenth-century historical church was a major factor in the siting of the multipurpose hall. The eventual renovation of the church as an interpretation center helped create a new cultural pole as it shares a common exterior space with the center.

How do you coordinate the relationship between function, space, style, and circulation?

The transition from the outside to the inside takes on extreme importance for the Inuit people. Going from a cold environment to a warm interior usually occurs through a series of transitory porticoes. Symbolically, the journey from a public sphere to more intimate or private spaces is also significant. As we worked on the Katittavik project, we integrated these specific cultural elements by introducing a slightly elaborate entry sequence. It starts with a protected outdoor space, which then opens to an interior lobby. From there, one reaches the heart of the building—its warmest space, both physically and symbolically. The central hall is where community members and visitors congregate, communicate, and share.

How do your plans and ideas contribute in deriving a design?

When our office started working in Nunavik twenty years ago, we were asked to build a small hotel for professionals and

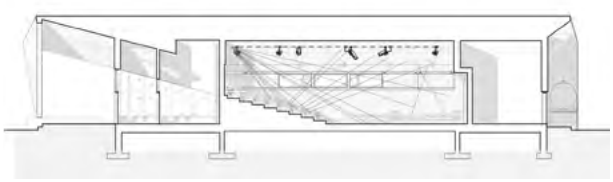


Elevations

visitors who needed accommodation when they visited for a few days. We developed a first prototype with a few rooms and a common living area, which doubled as a meeting room when needed. The plan was used a number of times over the years with slight improvements or variations to adapt to different sites or program. Given severe construction constraints and high costs, as well as the need to protect buildings from natural elements, volumes are compact, and openings are strategically located. In the case of Katittavik, the hall itself is practically windowless to ensure maximum protection from the cold and wind.

How do you try to understand your clients' intentions?

Our office is usually called in to work in Nunavik once a community has made a decision that there is a need for a new facility, or to upgrade an existing one. Our job is to accompany the community and its representatives through



Sections

the process that will eventually result in a building. Thanks to a climate of trust, which we have built over the last two decades, we are able to explore possibilities or avenues that can enrich a project, while keeping within reasonable budgets. We believe in a totally flexible approach in terms of dealing with changes as they occur. We are also willing to get involved in the search for funding, which can sometimes make a huge difference as far as budgets are concerned.

How do you incorporate your client's proposals into your design schemes?

Once our clients have stated their programmatic intentions, long discussions take place until we fully understand their needs. Some of the wishes expressed on these occasions deal with minor points, such as the color of the exterior siding. Other requests are much more significant to the community, such as the integration of a particular object or

art piece. Agreeing to these requests is often not that crucial for the professionals, but it means a lot to the concerned community members who can then feel that they have had a true impact on a given project.

How do you make evaluations and judgments on your own schemes?

Every time we tackle a project, we make a deliberate effort, in terms of design, and resisting the transferring our southern reflexes to northern situations. We try to constantly remain aware of each project's specific geographical and cultural context. We strongly believe that this constant questioning on our part will help future users fully identify with their new facility.

How do you stay curious in complex and disordered situations?

Public consultations are an essential component of the process, which leads to the development of numerous projects. It allows us to not just meet with the decision makers, but also with the locals who are the future users of a particular facility. Discussions are often disorderly and at times, openly critical toward community leaders, but they can also lead to unusual remarks. These may seem out of context at the time, but somehow they linger in our memory until we finally understand what they mean. The outcome of great wisdom—these observations sometimes guide us toward new architectural avenues—is unexpected yet promising.

When designing, not all of an architect's ideas can always be fully realized. Could you share on how to handle such a situation?

Every time we work on a project, there are always unexpected issues that come up. The knowledge we gain from this does not always apply to the project at hand, either because it is too late in the process or because it is not relevant. We take note, however, and look for opportunities to use this information, which helps us better respond to the context.

When you worked on this project, how did you strive to maintain your original idea from beginning to end?

As architects, our role is to help our clients answer their needs and reach their goals. We do believe in the importance of good design, but we also try to stay pragmatic when faced with issues such as remoteness, low budgets, or having to use non-descript existing structures to do a retrofit project. We never give up.

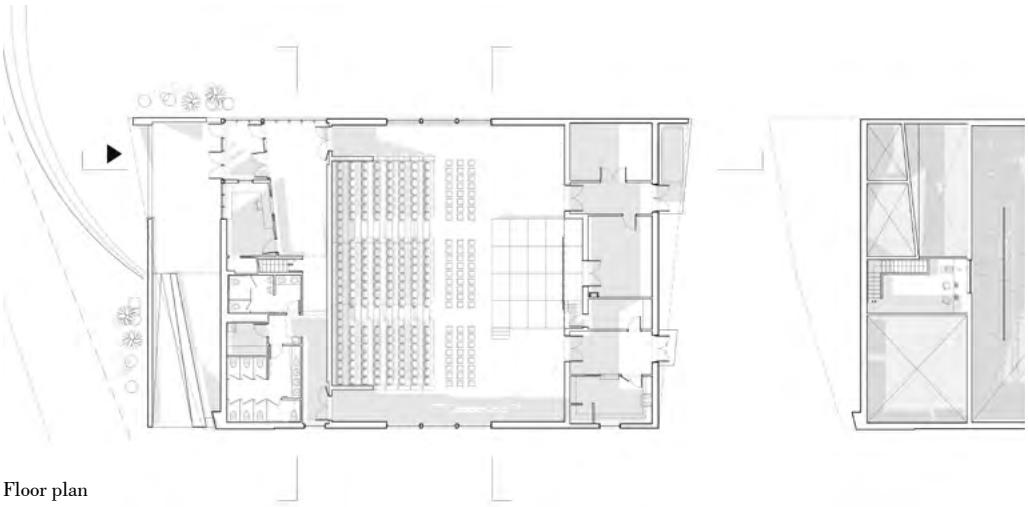
How do you make a comprehensive judgment on a design's progress and optimize the process?

There are many technical aspects to take into account when building in northern communities. With climate changes affecting polar regions even more severely than the South, new challenges have to be faced and a variety of solutions must be developed. The gradual melting of the permafrost layer requires architects to use extreme care when they choose sites for buildings or when figuring out the details of foundations. We have to learn from trial and error as we try to adapt to the major changes awaiting us.

How do you identify critical problems and seek solutions?

One of the critical problems we encounter when building in the North has been the lack of local workers with the skills we need. One of the solutions has been training people locally, but we are also relying heavily on prefabrication techniques. Building in Nunavik means the contractor selected for a project must be able to fully understand the architects' intentions and translate them into a building.

To facilitate the building and site supervision process, simple 3D models are generated to facilitate the understanding of how the project has to be put together. Prefabrication helps speed up the building process—an important aspect of building in the North where workers have to be protected from the cold as soon as possible.



Floor plan

What role does teamwork play in identifying problems that may have been overlooked?

The Inuit people lived as nomads and had no building tradition comparable to the traditions of the Western world for thousands of years. Despite this, however, professionals and community members are able to have real discussions on questions of architecture and construction. Once a building is up, it truly represents the outcome of close collaboration and teamwork.

How do you respond to unexpected problems that occur during the design process?

The most common problems that can occur when building in the North are related to missing materials or components due to a delivery mistake. This is the type of situation that has made us intensely aware of the Inuit people's amazing resilience and resourcefulness. Using recycled materials or available parts, they come up with temporary solutions that can at times become permanent. This motivates us, as architects, to look for new approaches based on recycling and simpler details.