

Of t L a h n d



Nestled in nature, Indigenous House at the University of Toronto's Scarborough campus evokes both the wigwam and the longhouse. Like those traditional structures, it was designed (by Formline and LGA) to nurture learning and ceremony

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INDIGENOUS HOUSE EMERGES FROM THE LAND. It takes conceptual root in the Highland Creek Ravine, which surrounds it, and flourishes within its own distinct landscape, which is as integral to the building (indeed, it's almost indecipherable from it) as is its architectural form. Earth ramps that rise from a landform planted with medicinal and other native tree and plant species lead up to the second storey of the ovoid building, which is composed of a curving grid of glue-laminated timber. Its shingle-clad roof resembles a downturned canoe. When you are under its jutting eave, on the sinuous balcony that wraps the second level and provides an elevated view of the landscape, you sense the building's full impact. At 995 square metres, it's a relatively small structure — and a low-slung one, with a hand-hewn appearance at that — amid the hulking institutional blocks on the University of Toronto Scarborough campus. And yet, one of the newest addition to the scene somehow feels the most embedded in place.

The building is inspired by the wigwam and the eastern longhouse, stretched to span two round rooms on either end and enclose “the village in between,” says architect Alfred Waugh. “They used to peel the bark off of trees to cloak the wigwam structure, and it was held in place by saplings. We wanted to create that kind of contrast between a very modern building and something that links us back to the past. A rough-sawn cedar accepts the curve of the building a little easier.” Waugh, a status Indian and part of Treaty 8, is the founder of Formline Architecture + Urbanism, which designed the building with Toronto's LGA Architectural Partners. The firms conceived Indigenous House as a gathering place where learning spaces are also used for ceremony and community.

You can access Indigenous House from so many entry points that it truly feels like a porous building. On its opening day, there was laughter, conversation and movement all around, from the rustic, rambling landscape — which was designed by PUBLIC WORK in consultation with local Elders and includes the Gathering Circle, with a fire pit, at its heart — to all the spaces along and within the building that welcome people in. The aforementioned ramps will lead you to the round rooms on either side of the second level, and concrete stairs (alongside an al fresco amphitheatre-style learning setting) step down to the round room on the lower level on the building’s western edge, where the sloped terrain is reinforced by a gabion wall.

If you walk through the main doors at grade and into the light-filled atrium, however, you are immediately greeted by a striking pair of photographic works in Lori Blondeau’s 2017 *Pakwâci Wâpisk* series — self-portraits in red draping gowns atop colonial architectural remnants — which serves up the first taste of the building’s incredible Indigenous-made art collection. From here, you ascend the staircase along a central cylindrical volume to enter the west-facing round room. Inside, white wash-stained black spruce ribs shape the domed ceiling (one of many ribbed vaulted ceilings throughout the building) and the wood flooring slats are oriented in the four cardinal directions.



PREVIOUS SPREAD: Sited on a former parking lot on the edge of an escarpment facing the Highland Creek Ravine, Indigenous House merges building and landform.

BELOW: The largest round room features a vaulted ceiling ribbed in black spruce; the space is wrapped in a basket-weave felt wallcovering by Kathryn Walter and Alysha McMullan.

OPPOSITE: Supported by concrete posts, the ovoid roof has a generous overhang, making the deck a pleasant perch over the landscape. The building’s shingled cedar cladding is stained a soft grey.



Wrapping the walls, a subtle felt basket weave handcrafted by Kathryn Walter of FELT Studio in collaboration with Alysha McMullan of the Oneida Nation of the Thames enhances the room's acoustics. This is a space that welcomes togetherness — and because the building has no smoke detectors, only high-heat detectors, it accommodates the smudging rituals that are so fundamental to Indigenous peoples.

The round room has direct connection to the outdoor deck, which for Waugh was a priority. “In the pre-design, the main gathering place had to be on the second floor. But I challenged Drew [Adams, senior associate of LGA] on that: ‘The gathering place has to be at the ground floor so it can spill out.’ Drew was pretty set on having it look over the ravine and have that distant connection to nature. So we used that opportunity to actually embed the building into the earth, and it became a really good analogy for that Indigenous connection to the landscape. The building literally arises out of the earth.” Adams takes up the logic: “You could start the landscape there. Come up this ramp. Come into the gathering room without actually going up a set of stairs or an elevator. Have the gathering event exit back outside of the building, and then travel back down again.”

Marc Ryan, a co-founder of PUBLIC WORK, explains that the original site condition was flat, the steep edge of the ravine abruptly terminating in a path and a parking lot. “The site is perched on the edge of the steep slope up from Ellesmere,” he explains, “and we imagined it could be transformed as a kind of bridging landscape that would connect this place with the valley and vast southern sky beyond. To do that, we created landforms that appear to absorb the building into the landscape, as if all the immersive qualities of the Highland Creek Ravine were pulled up and folded into the foundations of the building itself, through the interior and beyond into north campus. So the sense of what is ‘ground’ is ambiguous in a totally integrated building and landscape.” The site’s re-contouring — with ramps that emerge from the landform on one end of the building, a teaching garden seemingly sunk into the ground on the opposite end — makes the building feel both “expansive and intimate,” Ryan says.

1. Deck
2. East-facing round room
3. Atrium and staircase
4. Ground entrance
5. Offices
6. West-facing round room
7. Ground-level round room
8. Outdoor learning area



ABOVE: On the lower floor at the western end of the building, a more intimate round room leads out to a sunken teaching garden.

Having travelled back down the ramp from the deck outside the largest round room, you can walk alongside the 130 birch saplings planted around the building to reach the opposite end, where those two smaller round rooms are stacked one atop the other. The gabion wall, filled with limestone rocks that get smaller as they climb up, will one day be covered in plants, just as the saplings will create a thicket that further blends the building with nature. On this side of the building, the design team installed a concrete ventilation totem intake, one of several passive strategies they employed, including operable skylights and motorized windows. Like the building’s bentwood architecture, this gesture also has spiritual precedence in the wigwam: It’s analogous to the birchbark air shaft that pulls oxygen in to keep the fire fed.

Every aspect of Indigenous House feels integral and intentional. “It really announces a new place in campus, a new place that heightens your attention about nature,” says Waugh. “This building is not just sitting on the landscape: It can’t really exist without the landscape, just like we can’t exist without nature.” For him, Indigenous House is both a place that is welcoming to all — created for Indigenous peoples but open to everyone — and bridging a divide between cultures, architectural and otherwise. “It heightens that awareness of bringing Indigenous ways of knowing and Western knowledge together.” ^{AZ}

