

When the Spirit of the Place Becomes a Symbol

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Abstract. Canada is home to a myriad of cultural expressions of spirit of the place. From Haida totems to northern Inuksuit, native forms can be appreciated for their meaning in time, in space, and in their relation to the land. Even when removed from their context, these forms continue to express that spirit.

While used to inspire artists, these forms are observed in different ways by others. Can this 'spirit' be transferred from one culture to another? Is it universal?

The author will discuss the dual ideas of permanent-temporary, self-identity, and how the intangible embodies the recognition by others, ultimately to create a sense of belonging. The presentation will conclude discussion of how these forms have become symbols of Canadian identity and part of its collective memory.

The author will present examples from within Canada, and those abroad, ending with Québec and Ottawa to observe various 'migrated forms' in vernacular contexts.

Spirit of place refers to the unique, distinctive and cherished aspects of a place; often those celebrated by artists and writers but also cherished in folk tales, festivals and celebrations. It is thus as much in the invisible weave of culture as it is the tangible physical aspects of place or its interpersonal aspects. (Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spirit_of_place)

From this, one of many possible definitions, we can deduce that there are three main ideas linked with the spirit of place: the intangible, the tangible and their relationship with a cultural group. Using this as the framework for looking at various special places in Canada, I will try to articulate how these places have become Canadian symbols.

Canada is a vast country, boasting many First Nations cultures that have traditionally moved to fish or to hunt. In their long journeys, they

encountered other cultures and began to trade products for their own benefit. These cultures related their values to natural forces (wind, water), elements (trees, mountains, rocks) and beings (animals). These cultural values gave them the strength to be protected from other natural forces like storms and long, cold winters. A higher force would protect them or would help their people pass through difficult points on a journey: when arriving at protected areas like a bay, or near a river, the group would settle until they needed to move again. In that sense, people were never alone and they used to relate and move in groups. The sense of belonging to a community was very important.

It is in this context of First Nations people that we find the Haida Nation on the West Coast of Canada. The Haida territories comprise the Queen Charlotte Island archipelago, which Haida call Haida Gwaii, off the coast of British Columbia. The term Haida Nation refers to both the people and their government, the Council of the Haida Nation. Because of its uniqueness, their ancestral language has never been adequately classified by linguists. The Haida people were traditionally known as warriors and exuberant travelers, ranging into Alaska to the north and as far south as California. Their ability to travel was dependent upon ancient cedar trees that were carved and shaped into their formidable and famous canoes.

From the experience of tooling cedar canoes they became recognized as sophisticated designers and skilled artisans of wood, and eventually metal. Haida art consists mainly of two-dimensional paintings and three-dimensional sculptural works, namely totems. These totems have traditionally been created from large cedar trees by a family of carvers working as a clan. In the totem hierarchy, animals related to the earth world will be at the base, animals related to the sea world will be in the central part and birds on the top. Human figures might be inserted where the artist wanted to represent a special relationship with nature. The Haida also carved masks that were used in their Potlatch ceremony, a ritual-based event rooted in the concepts of reciprocity and indebtedness, which involved feasting and the exchange of gifts between chiefs and surrounding clans. These ceremonies drove the development of the Haida's cultural and artistic excellence, and were a major catalyst in the development of storytelling, music and songs.

The largest collection of totem poles that have survived in their original environment is at Haida Gwaii, and mainly at SGang Gwaay (Ninstints) National Historic Site of Canada. It was declared a World Heritage Site by the UNESCO in 1981 under Cultural Criterion III, i.e.

“bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared.” This site commemorates the living community of Haida people and their relationship to the land and sea, and offerings to their oral traditions. This site has great importance because of its integrity as a Haida village, dating back more than 2,000 years. While no longer inhabited, the three main totem poles types in their original setting are still evident: those that protected the village, with their symbolic sculptures representing the values attached to the community; the main poles of the houses that served in part as structural support while representing the values of a family; and, mortuary poles.



Figure 1: “Ninstints” Original acrylic 28_” x 57” © by Gordon Miller

On arrival at SGang Gwaay, visitors have the impression that these poles are Haida ancestors welcoming them to their land: Haida spirits have protected these visitors from the sea with the shelter of the smaller bay. These new visitors are, however, apprehensive to enter this sacred place and thus must rest awhile before landing: the atmosphere of fog, rain and isolation, the sound of the water, the calls of birds and the movement of branches in the forest prevent you from moving too quickly and voices fall to whispers as on entering cautiously and respectfully. Questions abound. Are the hosts of the past observing your movements? Are you in contact with the Haida’s ancestors? Can you feel the spirit of the place? Do you contemplate the fundamental relationship of human beings and nature and/or your own spirit?

Haida descendants, the Watchmen of these ancestral villages, provide guidance and enhance this most fascinating experience. Moving around the former settlement you can almost hear the sound of

the drums or the earlier voices mixed with the rustling of the leaves and the sounds of falling water: there is magic everywhere and you are reticent to leave. When you do, the sound of the sea again mixes with the figures of the poles, and the stories of the Haida Nation. Most importantly, the totems thank you for taking the time to travel there, to visit them and to share their culture values. You say goodbye and the spirits of the sea keep you safe until you once again reach the mainland.

On remembering or reflecting on this experience you conclude that the intangible, the tangible and their relationship related to a cultural group is but one incredible expression of the ‘the spirit of place.’

We now leave the West Coast and visit the Far North, beyond the 60th parallel.

Here we encounter the inuksuk, a stone figure made by the Inuit people. In the Inuit language of Inuktitut, inuksuk means ‘*likeness of a person.*’ Inuksuit, the plural form of inuksuk, are among the most important objects created by the Inuit, the first people to inhabit portions of Alaska, Arctic Canada and Greenland where they have lived for over 4,000 years.

These stone figures were placed on the landscape as navigation aids, coordination points, and message centers: they indicated refuge during storms or indicated good places to either hunt or to fish, thereby allowing them to survive during long, harsh winters. Some inuksuit sheltered food so that in the event of a storm those sheltered could survive: there is a tacit agreement that, on departure, the user must leave food for future travelers. The Inuit also built inuksuit that had spiritual connotations and were objects of veneration, often marking the threshold of the spiritual landscape of elder Inuits, or Inummarit, who knew how to survive on the land in the traditional way. Inuit who lived most of their life on the land retain a strong attachment to the old inuksuit because they were built by their ancestors, and somehow these ancestral spirits protected them and helped them to survive.

Each inuksuk is unique, created from flat rocks or curved bone, each with a totally different appearance. The manner in which they are placed on the land, their direction and shapes, will mean different things: this meaning and how it is interpreted belongs to their builders. However the user or finder may have another way of looking at them, or a different attachment because of their own experience in the circumstances in which they are discovered. In some inuksuit the predominant wings are positioned so that when the users sat and sang, their voices interspersed

with the wind to create a choral effect. This amplified sound would attract others: the spirits travel with the wind guiding the lost spirits.

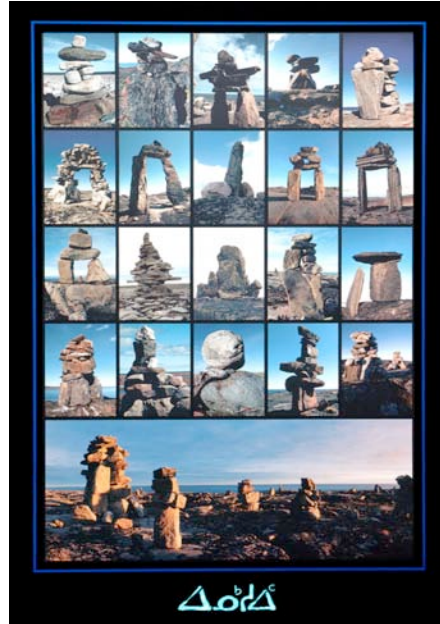


Figure 2: Inuksuit poster. (Photo: María Inés Subercaseaux)

In the Canadian Museum of Civilization website, *Places of Power*, there are a series of inuksuit figures that explain the many forms and meaning: location, direction and the view of these figures from a distance in the vast landscape is extremely important.

These figures have to be of suitable size and silhouette so to be seen in all seasons by travellers. The sacred inuksuit always have a certain positioning and order in space that commands certain rituals for individuals or for groups. Some, as the niungvaliruluit, acted as sightlines to important and powerful places beyond the horizon. We have to remember that in the North winter temperatures can reach to minus 60 degrees Celsius, therefore any assistance to get from point A to point B as quickly as possible is appreciated. In earlier days, families used to travel together with their children and elders: finding a shelter quickly in the midst of a storm could actually save lives. This integral relationship between humans and nature is such that at times it is hard to differentiate who modified what in order to survive.

The big open spaces of the Far North - the landscape that seems to go on forever - the aurora borealis, long days and even longer nights,

the same winter landscape for 360 degrees: the human being is but a small part of this world. However, the inuksuk provides human scale and a feeling of comfort. Even if their forms mean different things, these figures provide a sense of familiarity, safety, and hope to most Canadians. The new territory of Nunavut understood this when it included an inuksuk in its flag and its coat of arms, being for them the spirit of their people that will guide them now and in the future.



Figure 3: St-Laurence River (Photo: M. I. Subercaseaux)

I was once travelling through Québec to see the Métis Gardens on the Gaspé Peninsula. Arriving at the end of the day on the north shore of the St. Lawrence River, I could make out figures in the twilight that appeared as people walking on the water. The next day I returned to appreciate at close range these strange forms arising from the water. They were fabricated from concrete and some driftwood. The further I moved into the water the more I started feeling a part of this family of sculptures: I felt an incredible sensation, like the spirit of the river calling their people. I looked around and realized that I had wandered quite far into the river and it was now time to return as the tide was rising. On my return to the shoreline a small wind started and assisted me back. Once safely on the shore I looked back and felt something similar to that which others would have experienced in the Queen Charlotte Islands with its Haida totem poles: a melancholic sense of good-bye, yet an invitation to visit in the future.

I later visited the artist to understand why he had made these sculptures. He replied that in the beginning he had found some

driftwood with which he sculpted and then mounted. In autumn, when the cold winds started, the sculptures disappeared but were always discovered in the spring, albeit badly deteriorated. He then decided to create a more permanent installation. To him, these sculptures were like his family, each one with its own life and character: the water and the winter weather modified them each year in an artistic yet symbiotic partnership with nature. He felt that these forms came to him through the inspiration of the material found at low tide. Feeling that the river was talking to him and inspiring him, he then felt obligated to return his art to the source, i.e. the river. This profound view of the St. Lawrence River made me think back to the first explorers and to the hard times that they would have endured during those first winters in *Nouvelle France*, what is today Québec.

An artist in Ottawa, the capital of Canada, is also inspired by the stones he finds along the shores of the Ottawa River. His creations are more in a vernacular inuksuit style. The sculptures are by necessity temporary because wind, rains and the rapids become stronger in the autumn, and the figures eventually disappear as a result of the forces. However, the cycle resumes in the spring with the re-appearance of new figures. They are so popular that people will visit at sunrise or sunset to witness their peculiarity. Having discussed their meaning and impressions with visitors, the artist maintains photographic records of his installations and comments of the many admirers.



Figure 4: Inuksuit figures in the Ottawa River.
(Photo: John Zvonar)

Increasingly, inuksuit are constructed by hikers and campers in wilderness parks across Canada. Officials routinely dismantle these

creations since they could misdirect visitors from the actual cairns and other markers that signify approved hiking trails. These *ad hoc* creations are more related to the need of humans to leave a trace of where they have been, what they saw and perhaps impress future generations. Is this the natural way of communicating? Are these hikers following the traditional path of their ancestors?

It is apparent these days that landscape designers are more and more employing stone markers as signature features in their design work. Traditionally the integral relationship with vast, open spaces has given the inuksuk its importance and implied hierarchy. This 'new' relationship to nature in smaller, designed gardens has been a challenge with the appropriation of this element in a decidedly more wild, vegetated garden. While scaled and proportioned to the available space, this element injects new life and energy. How does the observer within these places experience and consider these new forms?

In Aylmer, Québec new housing developments boast vernacular versions of the inuksuk using excavated rock: these decorative sculptures recall the relation to the wide open spaces of the North and their relationship to the water. In winter particularly, they re-discover their natural context with the arrival of snow.

The inuksuk will be increasingly recognized as an iconic Canadian symbol around the world in large part to the 2010 Olympic Games. At that time, Vancouver, British Columbia will welcome the world. The logo for these games is a stylized inuksuk, a testimony of Canadian friendship, and concepts of reciprocity and indebtedness: it is an appropriately Canadian way by which to exchange with the international community that land offered to those athletes who will be competing on this wonderful landscape.

Many times Canadians abroad have felt compelled to leave a souvenir or 'informal gift' of their country in a foreign land. In the case of a friend that was an exchange student in China in 1987, two of his classmates built an inuksuk as an appropriate, yet temporary reminder of Canada along the Lhasa River in Lhasa, Tibet.

On numerous occasions, this concept of 'friendship' has been expressed with the Government of Canada's gifts of authentic inuksuit which now reside in Monterrey, Mexico, Oslo, Norway, Washington, D.C. and Guatemala City, Guatemala.

In the review of each of these expressions of spirit of place, we observe that humankind has always felt part of the natural world rather than separated from it. Drawing sustenance from the land and the sea

entailed special responsibilities including the sharing of resources with others and giving back to nature what it was due, for example, the skeleton of the first salmon caught in a season was always placed back where it was caught. This was an offering to ensure that the salmon would return the following season. This harmonious balance is what today, we today call ‘sustainable development.’

Finally, we might say that the spirit of place represents the universal concept of the relationship between humans and nature. The respect, peace, equity and friendship that is similarly embodied in this spirit, can then become part of national symbols, a natural, if not rational, phenomenon. Humans often create these symbols without any attachment to forms having national meaning. Take for example the Canadian flag. It is apparent in the vivid red maple leaf which occurs naturally in the autumn in most provinces across the country; the blood of the people that fought to make this country free for all; all set on a white base representing the omnipresent snow. In an image from Canada Day celebrations in Ottawa in 2006, the Canadian flag shares its importance, and the stage, with the two symbols that we have been discussing - totem and inuksuk - over the past while.



Figure 5: Canada Day in Ottawa. (Photo: John Zvonar)

Canada is home to a myriad of cultural expressions of spirit of the place. From Haida totems to northern inuksuit, native forms can be appreciated for their meaning in time, in space, and in their relation to the land. Even when removed from their context, these forms continue to express that spirit, and have become a symbol for all Canadians

being the essence of friendship, sharing and respect for the traditions of our ancestors and those of more recent cultures.

I would like to thank the organizers of this forum for this opportunity to explain to you my observations on this theme, and to express the fondness and attachment that we as Canadians, whether native born or adopted, have with these forms. They provide to us a tremendous sense of belonging to this great nation.

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