Algonquin Pikogan?s design speaks to equality and Indigenous ingenuity

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By Nate Smelle

Since time immemorial the land we have come to know as North Hastings has been inhabited and cared for by the Algonquin people. Recently, birch bark canoe builders Chuck Commanda of the Kitigan Zibi Algonquin First Nation and Stephen Hunter, leader of the Kijicho Manito Madaouskarini Algonquin First Nation spent a week working with a small group of volunteers on recreating an Algonguin dwelling used by their ancestors throughout history known as a Pikogan.

Made of 100 per cent natural materials sourced from ?nature's toolbox,? Commanda said the Pikogan was traditionally built of overlapping sheets of birch bark, woven together with spruce roots and leatherwood bark over an elongated dome-shaped frame of maple saplings. Because of its design and ability to remain dry and well insulated, he said the dwelling can be occupied year round.

Explaining the functionality of the design, Commanda said ?If you look at the teepee, the teepee was off the ground outside just like this one, so ideally it would be nice if it sat like that. Inside we would put a liner, and in our case it probably would have been animal skins. So it comes up so high but then the liner goes right to the ground and stops the flow of cold air coming in. It produces a chimney effect so the cool air would come in go up the liner and then exhaust at the top just like a teepee. There is more to a teepee than just putting it up. If you look at a well-made teepee you will see that liner inside. With today's modern materials they use canvas, back then it would have been buffalo hide.?

Although the structure took approximately a week to build, Commanda said it could be built in a day if necessary. If the occupants of such a dwelling were planning on staying in it for an extended period of time, for example throughout the winter, he said they likely would have taken longer than a week to modify it and make it more accommodating and semi-permanent.?As Algonquin people we were nomadic, we followed the food,? explained Commanda. ?So anthropologically speaking you wouldn't see a lot of these because they would rot and decay over time. If you are lucky enough maybe you could come back the following year, and it might last five to 10 years, maybe longer we don't know because there is no proof. If you go out and search for one you might see remnants of the poles in the ground, but I mean where do you start to look? So we have based this on our people's memories.?

In listening to people in the Algonquin community share their memories and Commanda and Hunter said they learned a great deal about the Pikogan and its significance to their ancestors. For example, Commanda said they recently found out that when constructing a Pikogan, the builder would use a live sapling as part of the structure. ?It would be tied to Mother Earth, and that would help anchor it. It's as close to getting back to nature as you can get,? Commanda said.

?This thing is a testament to Indigenous First Nations people's capacity to work within the environment we are given,? added Hunter. ?We didn't need to hike down to Hiawatha and look for basswood bark, we used what we had. It is a testament to our resilience and ingenuity and clearly our understanding of the great marriage of natural materials, the natural world and how they compliment each other. It speaks to how we believe that everything you need is right around you. You just need to watch and pay attention.?

While seated inside the Pikogan, Commanda shared a story from his family's past, providing insight into the resilience and compassion at the heart of Algonquin culture. One day while paddling along a river near Maniwaki with his family, Commanda's great grandfather came across an injured man washed up on the shore. Realizing the man needed immediate medical attention, Commanda said his great grandfather responded to the situation by improvising and quickly finding a solution.

?When they saw this guy who was hurt on the riverbank, and that he needed to get to medical attention, the old man gave up his seat and the rest of the family took him down. Over the span of 24-hours [my great grandfather] made some kind of a crude vessel to get himself down to where they were going and meet up with the family. This is where that improvisation comes in. It also showed the compassion that our people have.?

?That is a great story and that's what is great about the Pikogan ? it is a great place to be open and honest,? Hunter said.?There are no corners in here, it's round. There is very much a sense of equality in here that I think is pretty important. We are equal, we are all sitting at the same level, the same distance from a fire at the centre. It's a circle to talk in and to be safe in. It represents safety, it represents conversation, community and security. It's like a beehive for humans. The circle speaks to equality. Like Chuck always says Ginowaydaganuc ? it speaks to how we are all connected, the circle, the responsibility each thing has to another. Like the responsibility of the maple pole, to the bark to the root to the leatherwood. All these things work beautifully, naturally, organically together ? that's Algonquin!?

The Pikogan will soon find a new home at the Canadian Museum of History in Gatineau beside the statue commemorating the 450th anniversary of the birth of Chief Tessouat. Before it is put on display at the museum, Hunter said they plan to adorn the inside the structure with feathers, dried tobacco bundles, as well as etchings of Algonquin symbols and maps of the traditional territories of the Kitigan Zibi Algonquin and Kijicho Manito Madaouskarini Algonquin. By adding these details, he said they will enhance the storytelling and teaching potential of the Pikogan.?These are all stories passed on, that were immortalized in the natural environment,? explained Hunter. "Whether it was carved into stone or into bark, it was our way of immortalizing these stories.?