

PATHS FORWARD

AS CANADA COMES TO TERMS WITH A BRUTAL COLONIAL LEGACY, TWO LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT-LED PLANS LIGHT THE WAY TOWARD RECONCILIATION.

BY KATHARINE LOGAN



ABOVE
Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in elders shared their stories at significant sites along the Top of the World Highway.

OPPOSITE
Tors and other rock formations were navigational markers for a people constantly walking the land.

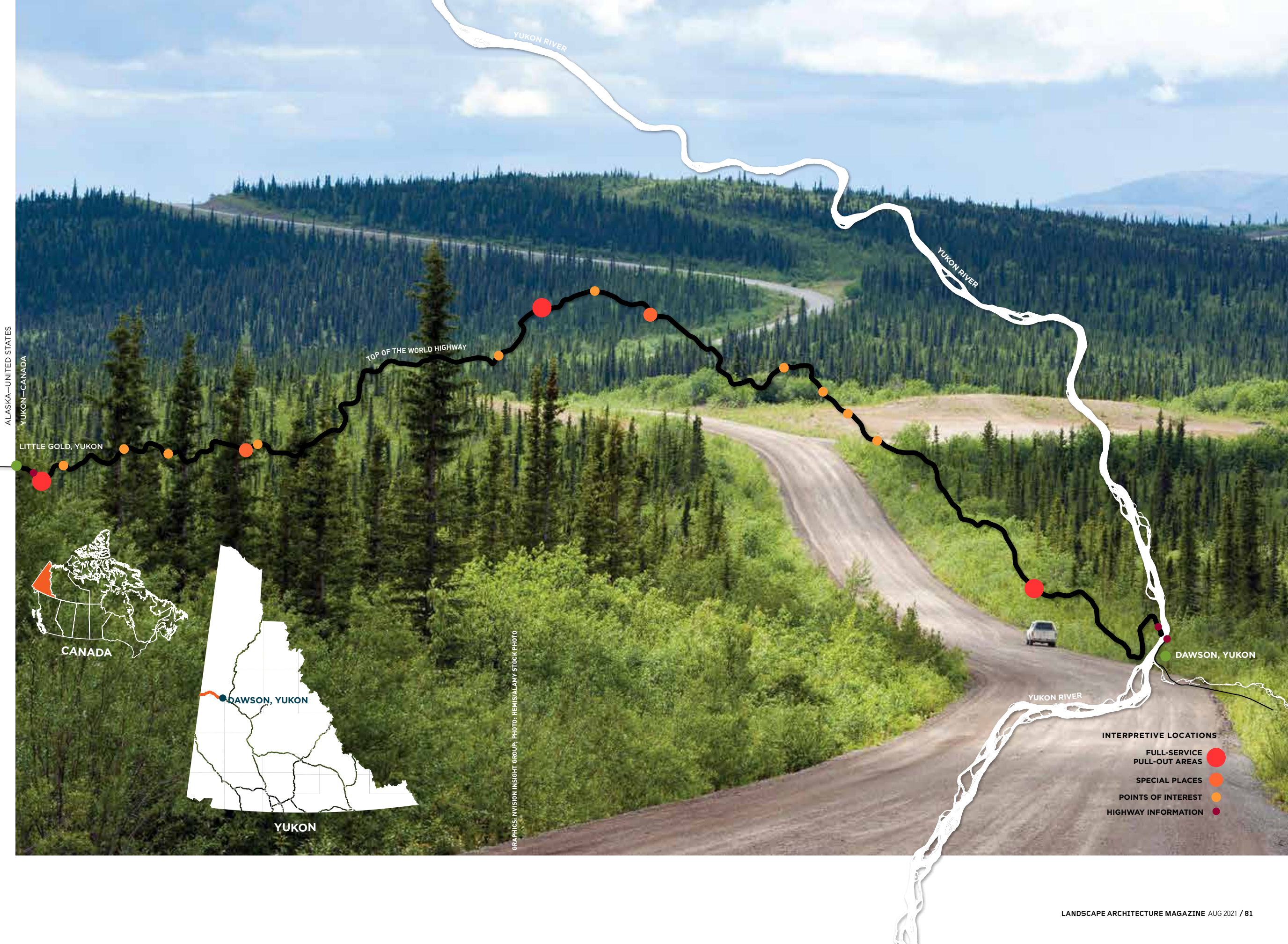
NAOMI RATTE, INSET

RIGHT
The plan proposes a range of site infrastructure and interpretation, including a downloadable app with narration by Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in elders.

A

CROSS THE YUKON RIVER from Dawson City, up around 64 degrees latitude, the Top of the World Highway wends its way over 65 miles of unglaciated landscape to the border with Alaska. Unlike the Yukon Territory's typical highways, which track the river valleys, Top of the World runs along a ridgeline. For hundreds of miles in all directions, travelers look out over forested valleys, subalpine meadows, distant mountain ranges, and spectacular vistas that comprise the traditional lands of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in people.

Long before Top of the World was graded and graveled and designated a territorial highway, Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in walked this path on seasonal journeys between the river and the mountains—hunting caribou, harvesting berries and wild rhubarb, gathering for celebrations, telling stories. When gold prospectors began arriving in the late 1890s, the leader of Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in, Chief Isaac, growing concerned for the heritage



ALASKA—UNITED STATES
YUKON—CANADA

LITTLE GOLD, YUKON



GRAPHICS: NVISION INSIGHT GROUP; PHOTO: HEMIS/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

INTERPRETIVE LOCATIONS
 FULL-SERVICE PULL-OUT AREAS
 SPECIAL PLACES
 POINTS OF INTEREST
 HIGHWAY INFORMATION



LEFT
A collaborative process rooted in the local community's history with the land.

ABOVE
Wild rhubarb is an important traditional food, high in vitamin C.

OPPOSITE
The lemon-yellow taproot of *Pedicularis lanata* can be eaten raw or cooked and its stem boiled as a potherb.



NAOMIRATTE, TOP LEFT;
WENDY SHEARER, ASLA, TOP RIGHT

NAOMIRATTE

of his people, entrusted their songs, dances, and *gānhāk* (dancing stick, a symbol of their culture) to a related branch of the larger Hän nation. Top of the World is the route along which this treasure was taken into the mountains for safekeeping.

More than 3,400 miles to the southeast, the traditional lands of the Saugeen First Nation form part of Ontario's Mixedwood Plains Ecozone, once temperate deciduous forest, and now the most populous and commercially and industrially productive region in Canada. A three-hour drive from Toronto, at the base of the Bruce Peninsula (where a popular national park protects the re-

gion's last unbroken stand of forest), the Saugeen River flows into the eastern edge of Lake Huron. Upstream of the river mouth, in a 100-acre park on Saugeen First Nation's reserve, a stone amphitheater and 20 acres of terraced gardens overlook the wide river valley. Built in the 1970s with nearly a million tons of locally quarried limestone, the project, known as the Creator's Garden, was created as a place to foster understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. As a setting for gatherings, ceremonies, music, and theater, the site welcomes thousands of visitors a year. But over the decades, it has fallen into disrepair.

These two landscape interventions—Top of the World and the Creator's Garden—at different scales and in different bioregions, are each the subject of recent, landscape architect-guided master plans. Through both their substance and processes, these plans illustrate the potential for the profession to help heal the injustice and strife that stem from the colonial history of North America.

Developed in collaboration with local Indigenous communities, the Top of the World Highway Interpretive Plan, by NVision Insight Group with the cultural heritage specialist Wendy Shearer, ASLA, and the Saugeen First Nation Creator's Garden and Amphitheatre Restoration Master Plan, by Brook McIlroy—both winners, in 2020 and 2021, respectively, of the Canadian Society of Landscape Architects' Award of



RIGHT
From left to right: Wendy Shearer, ASLA, Chris Grosset, and Naomi Ratte beside existing signage that will be overhauled with the new plan.

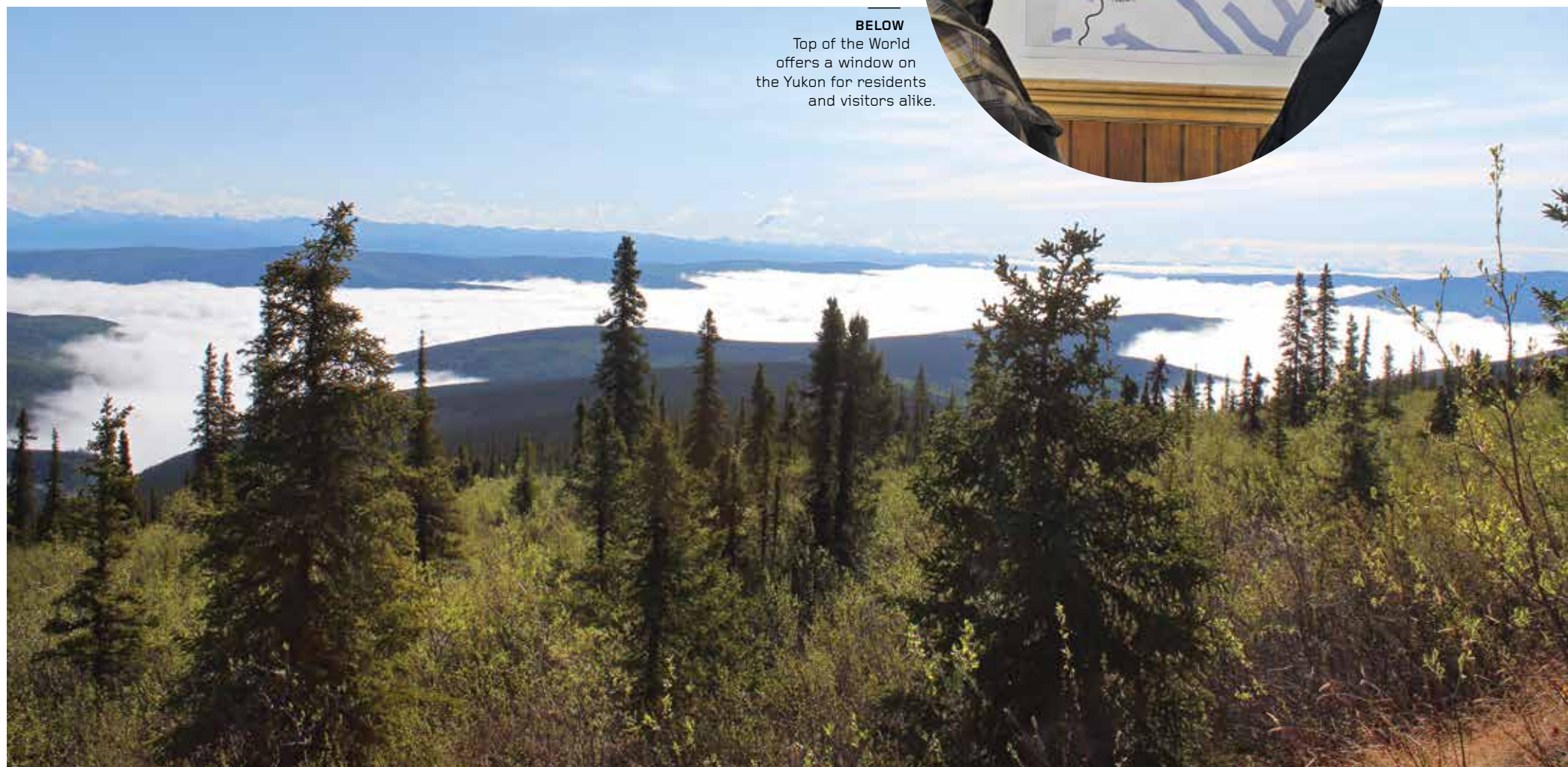
Excellence—have created frameworks for sharing the stories and meanings that imbue their landscapes. In doing so, they exemplify a form of reconciliation in action.

Reconciliation refers to the process of establishing and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples, according to the 2015 report of Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The commission was set up in 2008 to document the effects of government-sponsored, church-run residential schools. Operating between the 1880s and 1996 with the aim of educating, converting, and assimilating Aboriginal youth, the schools severed more than 150,000 children from their families, language, and culture. Compounding this psychological and spiritual trauma, the children were often physically and sexually abused—it’s estimated that more than 6,000 died—with impacts ricocheting down through the generations. The discovery this year of the remains of more than 1,000 children in unmarked graves at

the sites of former residential schools has been described as Canada’s George Floyd moment, bringing renewed urgency to calls for change.

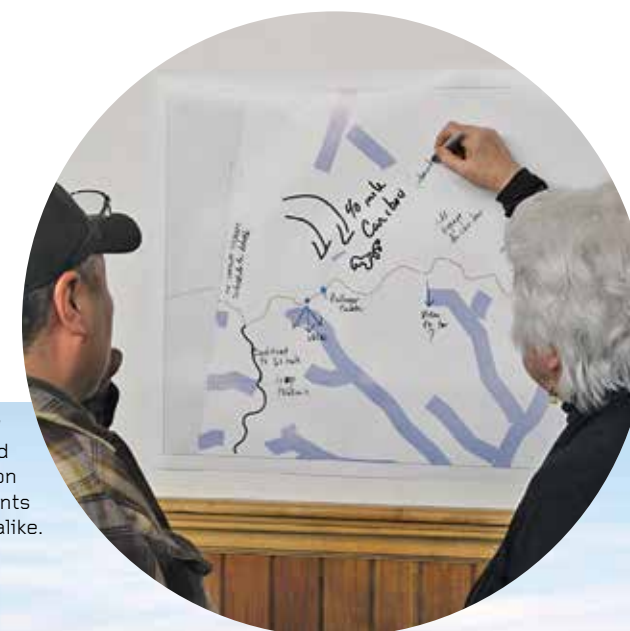
For reconciliation to occur, says the 2015 report, there has to be awareness of the past, acknowledgment of the harm that has been inflicted, atonement for the causes, and action to change behavior. The report’s 94 calls to action identify some of the ways governments, faith groups, universities, media, and businesses can participate.

“Reconciliation from a non-Indigenous perspective is not, I believe, to make you feel guilty,” says the landscape architect Chris Grosset, a non-Indigenous partner with NVision, a majority Indigenous-owned consulting firm that’s based both in Canada’s capital, Ottawa, and in the northern city of Iqaluit (see “In the Hunt,” *LAM*, January 2019). “It’s to invite you to go on a journey of learning, and to do some self-reflection. The process is not to knock you down; it’s to lift us all up. But you have to be open to that.”



WENDY SHEARER, ASLA

NAOMI RATTE



RIGHT
The interpretive framework seeks to recognize and celebrate a shared heritage.

BELOW
Top of the World offers a window on the Yukon for residents and visitors alike.

The Top of the World Highway Interpretive Plan that NVision developed for the Government of Yukon (YG) aims to enrich local and visiting travelers’ experiences. The hope is that fostering awareness and understanding of this spectacular drive and the landscape it traverses will provide a boost to the economic and cultural sectors of the region. The plan provides a framework for stories and messages,

interpretive media, design, and phased implementation.

In terms of reconciliation, a turning point arose early on, at the initial meeting with Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in leaders, when NVision introduced the YG’s template for highway interpretive plans. The template entailed identifying a series of themes and sub-themes and introducing them at points

“RECONCILIATION FROM A NON-INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVE IS NOT TO MAKE YOU FEEL GUILTY. IT’S TO INVITE YOU TO GO ON A JOURNEY OF LEARNING.”

—CHRIS GROSSET

SAUGEEN
CREATOR’S GARDEN



along the route; First Nations’ history and presence on the land would typically be one such theme. But it quickly became apparent that the template wouldn’t fit this unique landscape and culture. “They said very clearly, “That’s not how Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in tell their stories,” Grosset says. “That’s not our narrative.”

In response, NVision recommended rebuilding the project’s terms of reference. “You need to give a place for the First Nation to find their voice in the design, and to do it in their own time and their own way,” Grosset says. And while not every client has the flexibility to make such a

shift once a contract is in place, with the advisory board including representation from Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in, the Klondike Visitors Association, and the YG Department of Tourism and Culture, “they were right on board with it,” Grosset says. “They recognized that this is what reconciliation in action looks like.”

The project team—including Wendy Shearer and Indigenous MLA student Naomi Ratte (University of Manitoba), in addition to Grosset—drove the highway 10 times in three days in the company of Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in elders. Stopping at points along the way, the elders shared stories about

TOP Located in the heart of Saugeen territory, the Creator’s Garden is intended as a locus of cultural and economic renewal.

ABOVE Overlooking the Saugeen River Valley from the amphitheater site.

BROOK MCILROY

the land and the animals, the river and the mountains, the journeys along the route, and the cycles of the year. “It takes time and patience for how we want to tell our story,” says Debbie Nagano, the heritage director with the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in government, “but the consultants were eager to understand. They knew that we are the holders of that information, and they listened to us in a respectful way.”

The resulting interpretive plan provides for a program that is narrative based. It starts with a story or quote (in the first person

whenever possible) that provides cultural, historical, contemporary, or legendary context for a location or region. Evidence pertaining to each story—rock formations, geology, glacial history, or other landscape aspects that interpretive programs would typically start with—provides more detail. For example, a panel about a distinctive tor might begin with a story about its use as a navigational marker for the people who constantly walked the land and then supply information about its geology. “Much more than an interpretive plan for a highway, it’s really rooted in a recognition of the local



1 NATURE TRAIL ACCESS

2 CULTURAL GATHERING PLACE:
ANCESTRAL TEACHING AND
CEREMONIAL FIREPIT

3 MEDICINE PLANTING:
NATIVE ONTARIO SPECIES

4 MEDICINE PATH:
INTERPRETIVE SIGNAGE WITH
PLANT IDENTIFICATION AND
CHILDREN'S STORYBOOK TRAIL

5 BRIDGE OVER RAIN GARDEN

7 RAINWATER FEATURE WITH
REFLECTING POND

8 RESTORED
SPRING-FED WELL

6 ACCESSIBLE DRY STONE RAMP
AND VIEWING PLATFORM

11 STONE
AMPHITHEATER

12 PERFORMANCE STAGE/
PLATFORM

EXISTING
CHURCH

WEDDING
PAVILION

CULTURAL
CENTER
DRY STONE
AND TIMBER
BUILDING

VISITOR
CENTER

SEED COLLECTION/
STORAGE

9 MONUMENT TO MISSING AND
MURDERED INDIGENOUS
WOMEN AND GIRLS

10 CHILDREN'S
NATURE PLAY SPACE

13 THE CLEARING:
OUTDOOR WEDDING VENUE,
WINTER SKATING OVAL

DRY STONE SIGN
(EXISTING)

15 COMMUNITY GATHERING
CIRCLE WITH FIREPLACE
(EXISTING)

14 ENTRANCE GARDENS:
NATIVE MEADOW PLANTING
AND TREES

BROOK MCLROY

RIGHT
The Creator's Garden master plan provides for incremental transformation within a holistic, ecological framework.

BELOW
Interpretive signage along the Medicine Path will inform visitors about Indigenous knowledge of plants.



BELOW
The Indigenous plant expert Joseph Pitawanakwat advised on opportunities for using traditional medicine plants in the landscape.



community's history and involvement with the landscape," Shearer says.

In the end, many of the Indigenous influences on the plan—the elder-led research process, the story-first paradigm, even the inspiration for the program's color palettes in the landscape and in Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in beading work—may not actually be legible to visitors. But Grosset's okay with that. "There's a tendency to think that reconcili-

ation has to be a tangible response in our work," he says, "but perhaps the most tangible thing is to empower the voice of the people and to respect what they say."

A multistranded theme of empowerment also runs through the Saugeen project. The amphitheater and garden revitalization aims to support and celebrate the community's cultural heritage while expanding the opportunities for economic

BROOK MCLROY, THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE



growth. Extensive community engagement has resulted in a plan for a series of connected, accessible gardens for teaching and gathering and for new facilities, including a visitor center, wedding pavilion, and a seed repository. The amphitheater restoration and new stone walls are being executed by community members who have trained and certified as skilled drystone masons.

Landscape architects at Brook McIlroy's Toronto office worked closely with the firm's four-member, Winnipeg-based Indigenous Design Studio, which led the community engagement and concept design. "As a landscape architect who has been working for some time," says Andrea Mantin, a senior associate at the firm, "it's been wonderful to be learning something so different, and approaching landscape architecture through this new lens."

The project's cultural adviser, the Saugeen elder Duke Redbird, describes the resulting master plan as integrating traditional and contemporary concepts to model ecological and design excellence. Based on a hierarchy of creation in which the Earth, rather than humanity, is primary, the Creator's Garden will restore Indigenous plant knowledge and demonstrate heritage teachings. For example, Redbird says, "older trees grew high and protected other plants—maple, walnut, beechnut. In that canopy was wisdom. The second canopy, fruit trees, are fragile in many cases, and yet they always bring in a harvest, which shows courage." The different types of berry bush all grow together in a metaphor for respect. Abundant, nourishing food is seen as transparency and honesty. From the benign and poisonous plants of the forest carpet, "we learned about truth: how to separate fact from fiction and good from bad,"

ABOVE

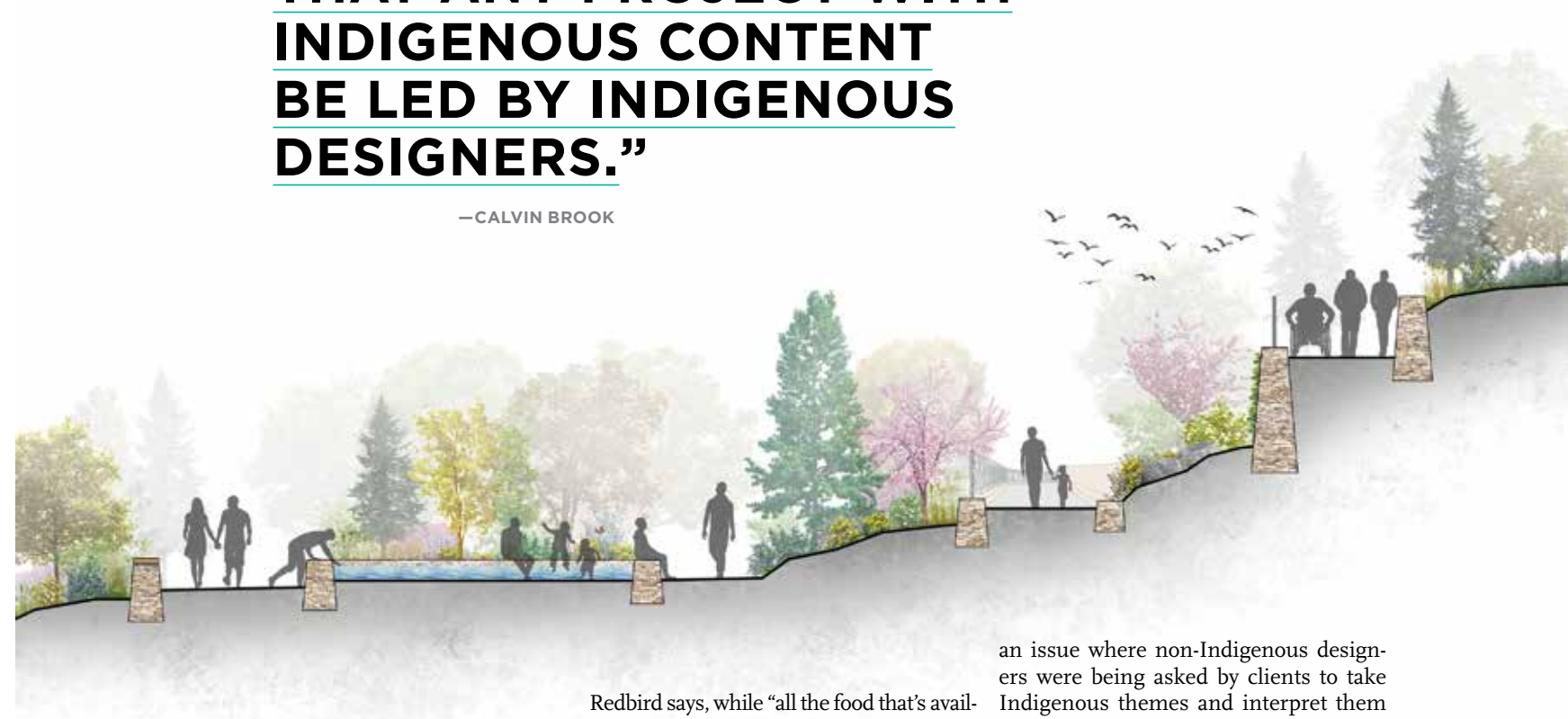
A series of gathering places will interpret heritage teachings and accommodate celebrations.

OPPOSITE

Stone retaining walls throughout the steep site will be built by the First Nation's certified masons.

"FOR US IT WAS IMPORTANT THAT ANY PROJECT WITH INDIGENOUS CONTENT BE LED BY INDIGENOUS DESIGNERS."

—CALVIN BROOK



Redbird says, while "all the food that's available when we dig down to the earth to find roots and tubers teaches us humility. And when we see the vines and the ferns that run through the forest and embrace the other plants, that's where we learn about love." These ideas offer the potential for improved environmental decision making and the emergence of innovative, distinctive, and beneficent approaches to design, he says: "The project represents the best of Indigenous ways of being, brought together with modern technology and techniques. It's a blend that offers a new way of looking at the 21st century."

The Indigenous Design Studio, led by the Indigenous architect Ryan Gorrie, is part of Brook McIlroy's response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's calls to action. The firm is also the first design office to certify, at the Gold level, under the Progressive Aboriginal Relations (PAR) program of the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business. "We recognized

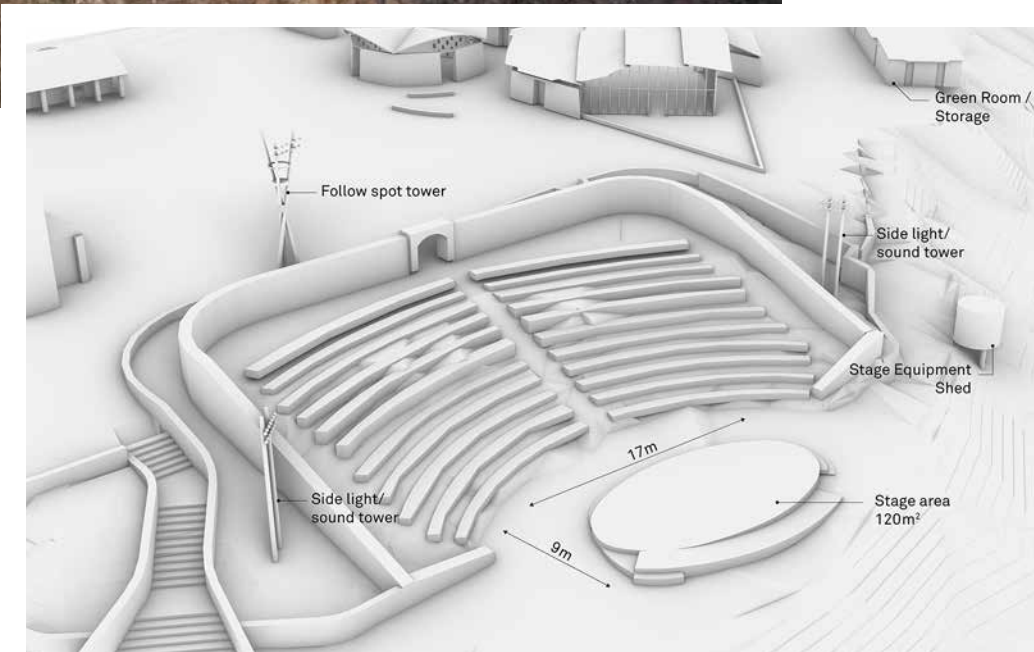
an issue where non-Indigenous designers were being asked by clients to take Indigenous themes and interpret them through design," says Calvin Brook, the firm's cofounding principal. "This often led to tokenism, cultural appropriation, and a pan-Indigenous approach which overlooked the diversity of Indigenous cultures and worldviews. For us it was important that any project with Indigenous content be led by Indigenous designers."

For those designers, Gorrie says, "it's incredibly rewarding to design with communities who have shared history, culture, and languages. We are able to dive in more directly and begin in a place that is beyond the introductory." This common foundation fosters trust and pride on both sides, he says. The design process provides a way for Indigenous designers to meaningfully connect with elders and knowledge keepers; to research and rediscover traditional cultures, placemaking practices, and worldviews; to redefine design processes; and to play a significant role in restoring Indigenous presence in the fabric of communities.



LEFT AND BELOW
Work to complete the amphitheater and surrounding drystone walls is under way.

OPPOSITE
When restored, stone steps and paths will link native plant demonstration and teaching gardens.



Brook McIlroy has considered the legitimacy of a non-Indigenous company integrating an Indigenous practice, and the question of whether only Indigenous-owned firms can truly empower Indigenous designers. Such firms in Canada are generally smaller practices and are estimated to number fewer than a dozen. “What we’re doing offers young Indigenous professionals an opportunity to work at a full range of scopes and scales within a larger multidisciplinary practice, without having to take on the risks and liabilities of owning a company—which is a substantial commitment, especially if you want to raise a family,” Brook says. Thinking seriously about how Indigenous and non-Indigenous professionals can collaborate in the same practice has been transformational, he says: “It means the practice has to be redesigned; the corporation has to be rethought. And that’s what the PAR certification process has helped us to do. Thinking about reconciliation, we want to work together so all of us receive the benefits.”

The Saugeen Creator’s Garden and amphitheater restoration and the Top of the World Highway interpretive program are now seeking funding to implement their master plans. For Saugeen, Redbird says, implementation “would carry us into the 21st century in a good way.” For Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in, “it would mean that we’ve told our story and they’ve heard,” Nagano says. Elders have told Grosset the project could be one of the signs that it’s safe for their songs to return along that ancient path and reinhabit the land. ●

KATHARINE LOGAN IS AN ARCHITECTURALLY TRAINED WRITER ON DESIGN, SUSTAINABILITY, AND WELL-BEING BASED ON CANADA’S WEST COAST.



BROOK MCLROY, THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE