

AZURE



Métis Crossing: A Gathering Place in Smoky Lake, Alberta

Decades in the making by Reimagine Architects – and centuries in the imaginations of its Indigenous community – Métis Crossing takes wondrous shape.

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Métis Crossing is a cultural space, a savvy piece of regional development and a beautiful architectural intervention in the land. Its assemblage of wood buildings, old and new, stretches along a bend in the North Saskatchewan River. As you approach the complex in Smoky Lake, Alberta, a campground of contemporary trappers cabins gives way to a collection of 19th-century farm buildings, repurposed now as interpretive spaces. Just a little further downstream is the Gathering Centre, the complex's main structure. Its sloping roofline stretches toward the river, seeming almost to encompass it. Via a covered walkway, the centre connects to the two-storey Lodge, which twists slightly away from the water in a gentle jumble of posts and lattices, providing an overlook to a veteran's memorial. Another 150 metres down, a field of geodesic sky-watching domes, illuminated at night, resemble some kind of moonscape spaceport.

The complex seems to traverse two or three centuries as it meanders along the river. According to Juanita Marois, Métis Crossing’s chief executive officer, that’s about how long it has taken to realize this centre of Indigenous culture. The Métis first settled in this area in the early 1800s, when they were key players in its trade network. Marois, like most of the folks involved in the Métis Crossing, is a member of the Métis Nation of Alberta (MNA), which was formed in 1932 to alleviate poverty in the community and create a secure land base for its people. In 1999, former MNA president Audrey Poitras led the “Métis Millennium Voyage,” a journey across the province that identified 63 significant sites and assessed them as potential locations for a social and political gathering place for the Métis.



A view of the Gathering Centre’s expressive side massing.

The chosen site, 120 kilometres northeast of Edmonton along the northernmost bank of the North Saskatchewan River, was for at least 6,000 years the natural starting point for land routes across to the Athabasca River watershed. When the Hudson’s Bay Company moved into the region in the late 18th century, it made this bend in the river — known today as the Victoria Trail — a link in the Carlton Trail between the Red River Settlement (near what is now Winnipeg) and Fort Edmonton. One reason for choosing this location was this historical significance; the other was its proximity to Edmonton and that city’s international

airport. Savvy entrepreneurship is just as much a mainstay of the Métis economy now as it ever was.

In 2004, after securing funds, the nation engaged Edmonton’s Reimagine Architects (at that time, Manasc Isaac Architecture) to develop a master plan. By that point, Reimagine had spent four decades working with Indigenous communities, which had had a profound influence on the practice. “It was from the work with First Nations that we really got into collaborative integrated design, which led us to sustainable design,” explains Vivian Manasc, the founding principal who led this project. She implemented an integrated design process (IDP), which brought the architect, client, engineers and other consultants in the room together as the plan developed into a resource-minimal and cost-effective project. (A founding member of the Canada Green Building Council, Manasc has written two books on designing in the North, including *Old Stories, New Ways: Conversations about an Architecture Inspired by Indigenous Ways of Knowing.*)



The first new building created at Métis Crossing, the Gathering Centre accommodates the nation’s annual general assembly as well as year-round cultural activities.

The master plan and architecture represent a dual answer to what Manasc describes as the non-negotiable questions of any project: “Where is the sun? Where is the wind?”

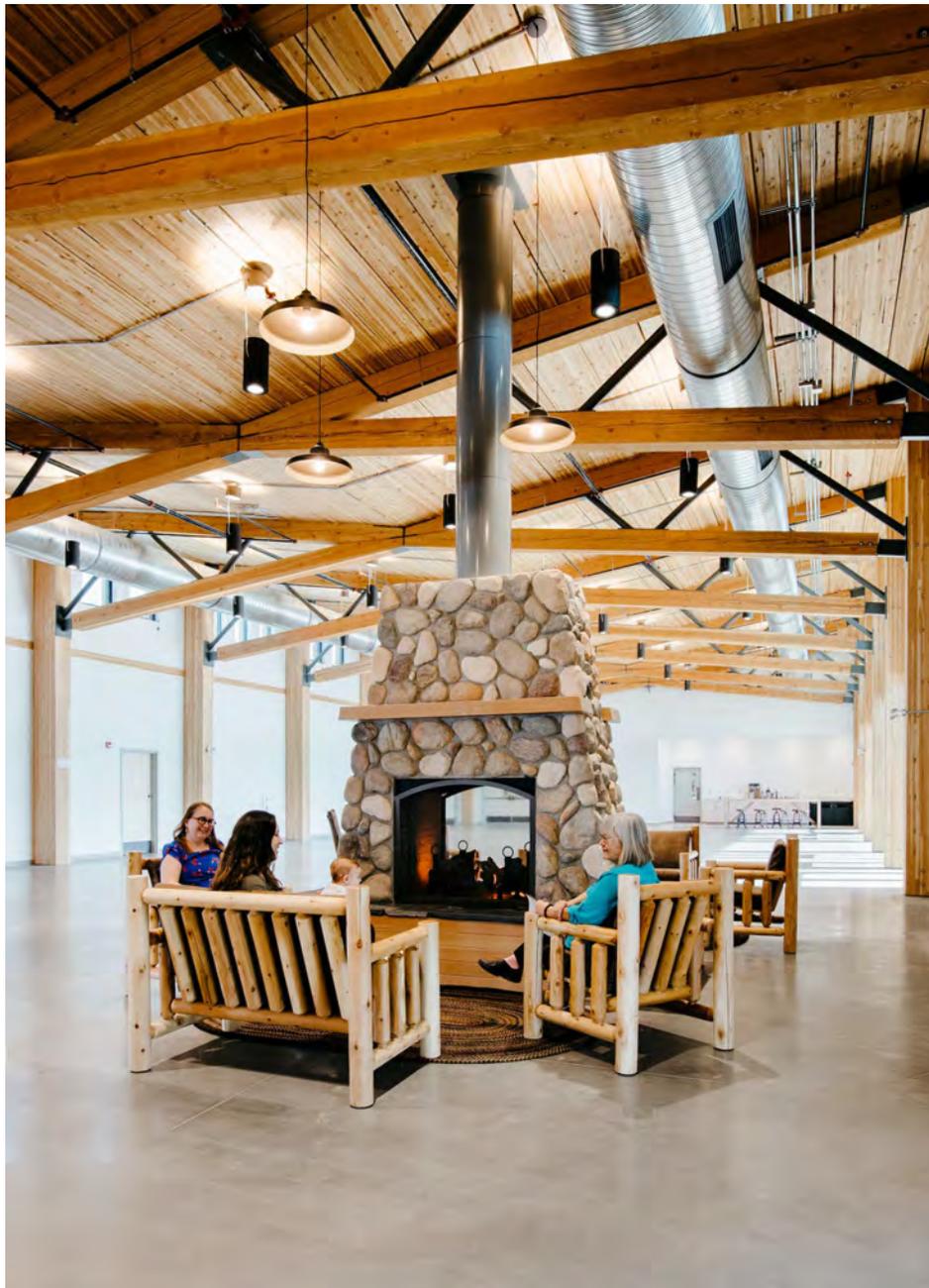
Where is the river?” She goes on to explain, “If we open up to the south and we orientate our buildings east–west, we optimize solar orientation, reduce the demand for cooling, optimize natural ventilation, and we shade on the south.” These basic rules of sustainable design also align with the fundamentals of Indigenous cosmologies. The sun and water are our sources of life; we need to turn toward them. So the complex aligns with the east–west path of the sun as it stretches along the Victoria Trail and the North Saskatchewan River. This layout also acknowledges the status of this trail as a national historic site and accommodates the local rural structure plan, which limits all new buildings to two storeys, insists on pitched roofs and calls for orientation toward the trail.



On the upper tier, the Gathering Centre’s sloped roof provides an expansive river overlook beneath Accoya rafters

One of Reimagine’s nearly 100 employees, [Tiffany Shaw](#) is a member of the Métis Nation who traces her roots back to Fort McMurray via Fort McKay, from the Red River. In her own life, she followed a similarly wandering path: coming to architecture via art, studying first at NSCAD and then at SCI-Arc. Based on the firm’s master plan, Shaw eventually shepherded the design process at Métis Crossing, beginning in 2017. Her design for the Gathering Centre literally flips the pitched roof; its ridge sits at the bottom of a valley, supported by a scissor-like truss of timber and steel spanning a wide meeting hall. The literal “crossing” of

this truss suggests the infinity symbol of the Métis people, but this is only one way that this building might be seen as a “Métis space.” One upper cord of the truss springs beyond the south wall of the building to shelter an immense double-height space facing the river, providing the overlook characteristic of Métis homesteads. But this southern “front porch” serves multiple other purposes: It shades the building from solar gain, facilitates cross- and stack-effect ventilation and provides an overflow space for the main hall with specific social nuances.



Inspired by the Métis one-room home, the inside of the Centre is capacious and warm, anchored by crisscrossing ceiling beams. It also features a stone fireplace, and finishes of fir, maple and birch.

Completed in 2019, the Gathering Centre answered the MNA’s key programmatic requirement: to accommodate its annual general assembly (which can host up to 1,200 people over the course of several days) and then serve smaller-scale functions for the general public and tourist groups the rest of the year. The gathering hall’s fluid relationship to the vast deck deftly accomplishes both goals. The two spaces can be separated completely when necessary, or combined as one huge realm. Perhaps most remarkably, thanks to the expansive overlook toward the river, the hall and deck can feel part of the infinitely larger landscape — and of the Métis history embedded in it.

Shaw connects this fluidity with the resilience and flexibility baked into Métis culture. “Sherry Farrell Racette talks about Métis ‘kitchen table methodology’: how the kitchen table changes over time and time again,” Shaw explains. “You do your beading on the table and you remove it, and then you do cooking on the table and you remove it, and you have your family dinners and politics. And so everything we do is multi-use.”

Shaw sees this openness to change in the Métis house as a whole. Fellow architects David Fortin and Jason Surkan have researched how the open spaces and loose hierarchies of the Métis settlement translate into the interiors of the one-room cabin. These are partitionless spaces that transform between uses: living, dining, gathering, dancing — all the activities of life. That disposition plays out, too, in ephemera like smoke shacks, meat-drying racks, boats — and trappers cabins, which Shaw, who is a multidisciplinary artist and curator as well as an architect, has explored in her Trap Line Cabins (2011, 2017). She referenced Fortin and Surkan’s methodologies both in designing the Gathering Centre as a grander evocation of the one-room home and in organizing all of the structures on the land in a Métis way.



A view of the capacious angle of the Lodge.

In fact, the entire Métis Crossing complex evinces fluidity: It was conceived from the beginning as a political space, but also as a commercial hub serving regional economic development. What Shaw describes as the “durational” activities integral to Métis life — harvesting, craftwork, food-making, hide preparation — all take place here for both Métis and tourists to engage in. These traditional activities are all in sync with the seasons of the year, and they inspire the centre’s engagement with time. The three herds of bison on the adjacent wildlife park — wood bison, plains bison and a unique type of white bison — are another aspect of the site’s sustainable planning. With the upcoming purchase of more land, their rotational grazing will mimic the historic movement of the bison across the plains, when hunting was the basis of the Métis trade in pemmican. As Marois explains, even today the principles and mechanisms developed to ensure an effective hunt inform the governance of Métis institutions. As the second and third Laws of the Buffalo Hunt say: “No party [is] to fork off, lag behind, or go before, without permission. No person or party [is] to run buffalo before the general order.” They are a team.



The Lodge, a boutique hotel completed in 2022, expresses both the site’s immediate success and its architectural ambitions.

The Gathering Centre was followed in 2022 by the construction of the Lodge. As with its predecessor, soaring stone fireplaces and massive masonry chimneys figure prominently, welcoming visitors. Both buildings show a sensitivity to materials, and there’s

considerable play with connections and joints, whether traditional, inventive or both. Throughout the site, visitors can find recreations of the corner dovetail joints typical of old farmhouses. The steel plate details connecting the Gathering Hall truss to its glulam columns are contemporary but, Shaw explains, obliquely reference 19th century French steel architecture (specifically, Henri Labrouste’s Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève). For her, this mixing of traditional and innovative materialities is one aspect of Métis culture. The future is here too, in the sky-viewing pods scattered across the “Solar Field” east of the Lodge and a capsule-like microgreen farming module nearby. The main buildings are clad in Accoya, a softwood transformed into hardwood through an acetylation process to achieve a very long lifespan; the interiors are lined in fir, maple and birch.



Tactility and warmth were key goals of the interior design of the Lodge (shown here) and the Gathering Centre.

Shaw makes the case that the sensual engagement of materiality — and even the desire for playful connection — are also characteristically Métis. Referring to her design for the Lodge staircase, which ties massive wooden steps to slender steel rods, she adds: “I tried to make these details sexy.” Indeed, throughout the centre, arrays of posts, beams, joists, purlins, baffles and screens activate space and surface to create an atmosphere appealing to the body through the ingenious play of both time-honoured and contemporary techniques.

But Shaw underlines that there is more at work here: The materials and the way they sit together are meant to create a sense of calm and reassurance. This is intended to be a “trauma-informed” design. Métis Crossing’s tranquil beauty has been hard-won. The complex forms a kind of loop of time, engaging (as Shaw puts it) “history and the present and the future” in an amalgam of architecture and site, tradition and innovation. To leave the last word to Marois: “There is a lot of heart in this place. There is a lot of spirit and history. It’s not just a pretty development on the river; it shares the resilience and spirit of the Métis.”



The veteran’s monument — made of concrete, aluminum, glass and paver stones with landscaping — commemorates the Métis soldiers who fought for the rights of their own people and, in our own time, for Canada and its allies.