

ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

The Inuit cultural matrix reloaded

Calgary academics make a 3-D virtual-reality replica of a traditional hut, offering elders a new way to pass on their fading heritage

BY DAWN WALTON CALGARY

Donald Uluadluak ducks as the life-size images of ancient Inuit huts and a whale skeleton, which was once used as building material in the North, seem to float around him.

The 75-year-old artist and elder adviser from Nunavut says he wants to reach out and touch the lifelike three-dimensional objects as he sits wearing special glasses in this darkened virtual-reality room at the University of Calgary.

"It feels like we're shamans or magicians," Mr. Uluadluak, speaking in Inuktitut, said yesterday. "It brought us back to who we were."

Mr. Uluadluak, three other Inuit elders and a translator have travelled from Arviat (population 2,060) on the western shore of Hudson Bay, to explore their past as created by a pair of Alberta researchers. Now the elders – as well as the academics – hope this high-tech world could play a key role in preserving Inuit heritage for the future.

"It's a tough challenge because we have to keep our language and our culture and a lot of the younger generation don't seem to be too interested in taking on the culture that we lived," said Mark Kalluak, 65, who is an adviser to the territorial government's Education Department.



Inuit elders Louis Angalik, Mark Kalluak and Donald Uluadluak wear 3-D glasses after a virtual tour at the University of Calgary yesterday. LARRY MACDOUGAL FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

The signs of vanishing indigenous cultures are everywhere.

Statistics Canada recently reported that nearly all of this country's native languages are disappearing as elders die off and young people grow up understanding either English or French. In 2006, just 21.5 per cent of aboriginals said they spoke their ancestral language fluently, a dip from 29 per cent a decade earlier.

In Arviat, Inuktitut is still strong. Children speak it as well as English, the elders explained, but it is the knowledge of their past that is at risk of becoming extinct with the

creep of southern comforts and the march of time.

While this virtual-reality room, known as the CAVE, cannot be moved north, the professors who put the project together – archaeologist Peter Dawson and Richard Levy, an architect and urban planner – are hoping the images (although not in 3-D) can be shared with northern children either online or on CD-ROM.

“It’s an interesting way to resurrect history and I think it’s a great way to get children more involved in their culture,” said Prof. Levy, who has

exhibited at the Canadian Museum of Civilization.

But it took almost 14 years to design the whalebone house that amazed the elders yesterday. In 1994, Prof. Dawson and a team visited the Thule native site on Bathurst Island in Nunavut, where they mapped out 23 whalebone houses that were constructed an estimated 600 to 800 years ago out of the remains of baleen whales, known as bowheads. But because the building material was so unusual, they employed laser scanning technology to capture 3-D pictures of

a North Atlantic right whale skeleton that was on display at a Boston museum. They had to reconstruct a building from a pile of bones found buried underground. Using structural analysis techniques, they reverse-engineered the dwelling.

When standing inside the CAVE, it feels as though you have walked through the mouth of a whale and into its belly, which happens to mimic an Inuit legend about a man living inside a whale.

“I was trying to imagine how it would have been to have been inside a real whalebone

house,” Mr. Kalluak said after emerging from the display. “Things I’ve never experienced personally.”

Indeed, nobody had seen a whalebone house in centuries. They were abandoned when the climate cooled, restricting the range of the bowhead whales and driving people south to hunt smaller animals.

“The CAVE is a time machine,” Prof. Dawson said.

“We’re creating a virtual past, but it’s a past ... I like to think it’s the next best thing to actually being there in the high Arctic 700 years ago.”