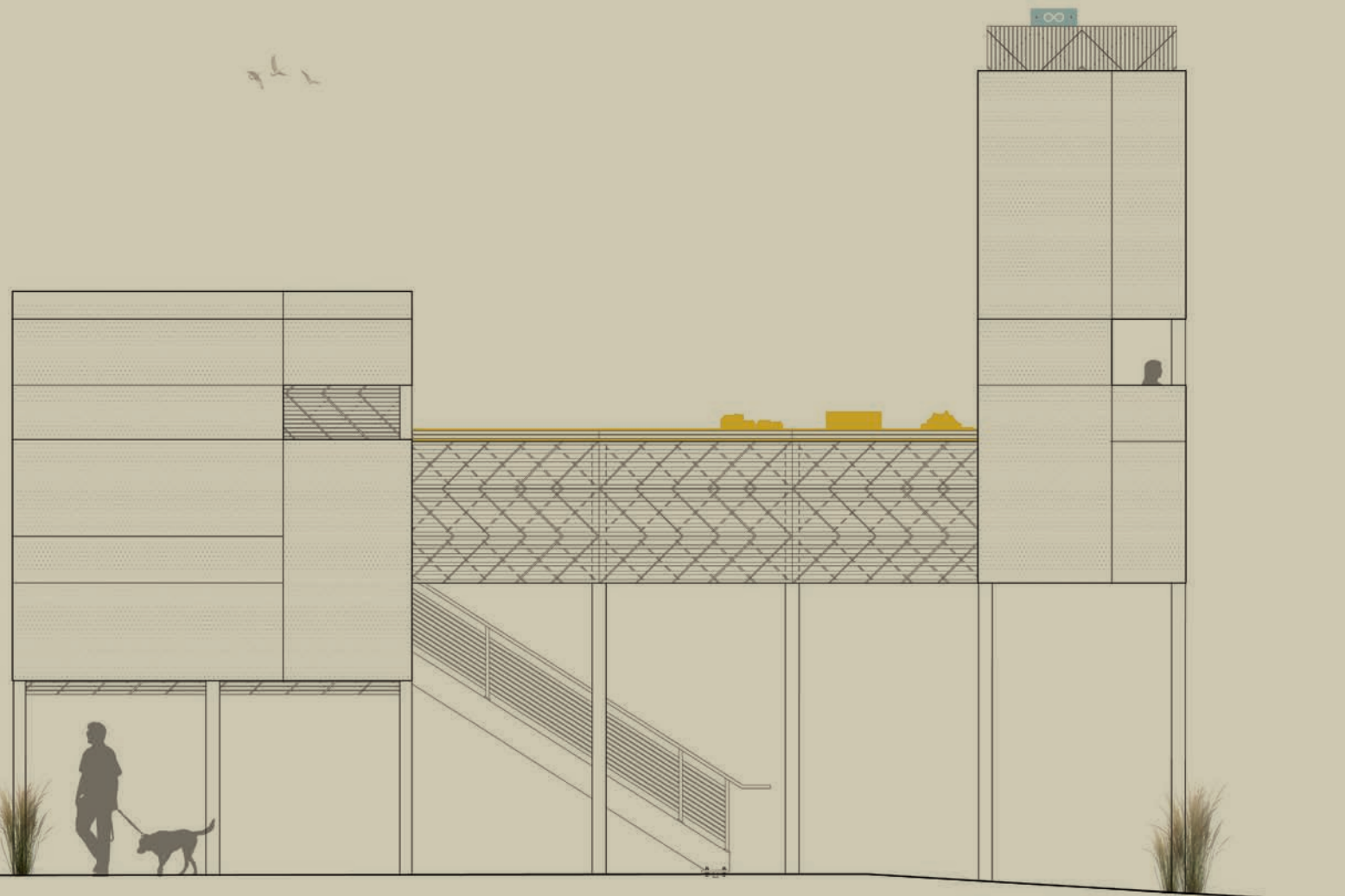


Interdisciplinary design firms Form:Media and Ekistics Planning & Design work with Canadian landscapes to construct projects rooted in history and cultural heritage

Architecture in the Elements



The observation platform at Batoche National Historic Site

BRANDING A PLACE, as we've learned (p. 28), is a monumental task deeply entrenched in history, culture and considerable expectation.

So that makes the work by sister companies Form:Media and Ekistics Planning & Design especially notable. The Nova Scotia-based firms operate out of a shared studio and boast a rare place-branding proposition—the team can do it all, from building and landscape architecture, to interpretive planning, to engineering, to way-finding, to brand and graphic design.

"We were originally truly a multidisciplinary company, with each department working within their own discipline," says John deWolf, vice-president of Form:Media. "Over the last couple of years, we've been striving to be *interdisciplinary*—to learn from the processes of each of the disciplines and apply them to our own method. It's allowed all of our work to be a little more subtle in approach."

Teaming up allowed the two firms to further explore the intersection of design and engineering, and to take on big cultural projects that naturally lend themselves to interpretation through not only design, but also the sites themselves.

Here, *Applied Arts* profiles two recent place-branding projects by Form:Media and Ekistics that bridge traditional and applied design: The revamped interpretive experience at Batoche National Historic Site (full case study follows) for Parks Canada, and the visual identity for Red Bay

Basque Whaling Station in Labrador (see sidebar on p. 41).

"One of our goals, always, is to challenge the client to think of their product and their site in a different way, and we did that with both of these projects," says deWolf. "These two jobs are great examples of an architect thinking like a designer and vice versa."

Batoche National Historic Site

When landscape informs design

OBJECTIVES

The original exhibit at the 955-hectare Batoche National Historic Site, established in 1923, needed expansion. It told the story of the May 1885 resistance between the Métis and the government of the Dominion of Canada at Batoche, Saskatchewan, but lacked interpretation of the Métis life post-1885.

A brief history: The Métis, a semi-nomadic people of indigenous and European heritage, settled in Batoche in 1872 after numbers of their main food source, the buffalo, dwindled. The site, at the confluence of three trading routes along the banks of the South Saskatchewan River, was a

"It was that moment—we were above the ground, seeing the river running north-south with the plains off to the west—when it started all coming together how important the land was to this story."

JOHN DEWOLF,
VICE-PRESIDENT OF FORM:MEDIA

plum choice for agriculture. The Métis converted their land into long, skinny, side-by-side lots that allowed each family riverside frontage.

In the early 1880s, the federal government unveiled its grid-based Dominion Land Survey, which threatened to reorganize and redistribute the river lots. The Métis formed their own provisional government to protect their land, and the federal government sent in troops to overthrow them. After the resistance, many Métis dispersed to the west and north, and the village of Batoche fell into eventual ruin.

There is, of course, a longer story to tell—and that’s what led to the redevelopment of the interpretations at the site. The project would not only meet Parks Canada’s mandate to increase parks visitation ahead of Canada’s sesquicentennial, but, more importantly, would restore cultural pride and continue to improve relations between the federal government and the Métis Nation of Saskatchewan, who jointly oversee Batoche through a council called the Shared Management Board.

The Métis who stayed in the Batoche area after the resistance have remained active in their community, and acknowledging their rich post-1885 culture was important to residents. Jackie Gaudet, a member of Batoche Métis Homeland Local #51, grew up near the historic site—her great-great grandfather’s homestead is the last one remaining from the 1800s. “We wanted to see more of these personal stories—these oral histories that are really integral to the Métis culture—be better presented here at the site,” she says. “These stories tend to have been totally omitted in the past.”

In January 2015, Parks Canada and the Shared Management Board released a RFP for the project, called



↑ Top: The interior panels in the viewing lens inform the visitor of the land dispute and illustrate the differences between the river lot system and the Dominion Land Survey’s grid system. Bottom: The observation platform helps the visitor to visualize Batoche in its heyday and gives context to the community’s activities. “By educating all Canadians—Métis or not—we help the overall sense of reconciliation and understanding between different groups,” says Adriana Bacheschi of Parks Canada. “This is our common history.”

Storyboard on the Landscape, after leading community discussions—at minimum, the site should include interpretive rest stops and a play area, along with a viewing platform. Other requirements included architectural significance, interactivity for families, and a thorough telling of the area’s history and people, before and after the resistance.

STRATEGY

Form:Media and Ekistics have a standing relationship with Parks Canada for the contracting of design and interpretation service, and they beat out several other firms vying for the project. Soon after, deWolf and Chris Crawford, director of architecture for Ekistics Planning & Design,

visited Batoche and used a cherry picker to get an overall sense of the site’s scope and to finalize placement and height for the viewing platform.

“It was that moment—we were above the ground, seeing the river running north-south with the plains off to the west—when it started all coming together how important the land was to this story,” says deWolf. “It was a key turning point for everyone.”

Quickly, the land became its own character in their plan for the site, which was not part of the original ask. The team proposed an interpretive journey to tell the story of the Métis using the length of one of the river lots—specifically Lot 47, once owned by town founder Xavier Letendre, *(continued on p. 42)*



**Red Bay
Basque
Whaling
Station**

When architecture informs brand

In 2014, Form:Media participated in creating a 200-page Visitor Experience Master Plan for the hamlet of Red Bay, Labrador, which had recently been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Some 30 years earlier, an archeological dig revealed the area had been used in the 1500s as a Basque whaling station.

In an effort to enhance Red Bay’s status as a tourist destination, the plan recommended 14 projects for the community to execute over the next few decades, including signage and brand.

With a population of 220 people, the need for outdoor signage in Red Bay isn’t as great as other destinations. “You can stand in one place and see everywhere you need to go,” says John deWolf, vice-president of Form:Media. “But because Red Bay has such a sparse landscape, it gave us opportunities to create some wonderful things.”

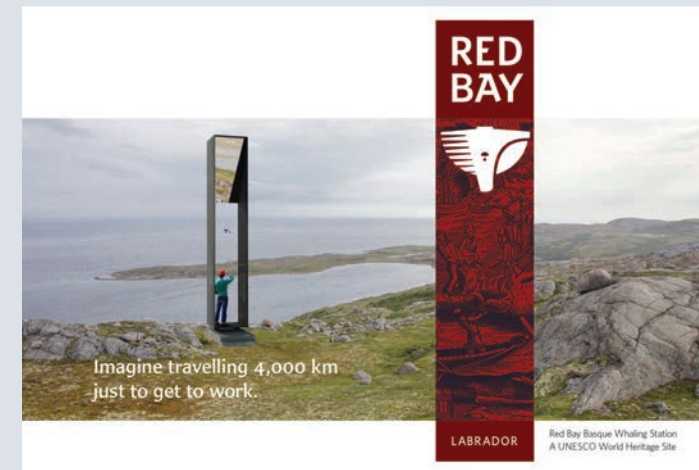
Chris Crawford, director of architecture at Ekistics, says, “One of the most challenging parts of visiting the site is that there is this incredible history of whaling, but it’s completely removed from landscape and there aren’t any remnants left to reference. Our first reaction was that when everyone gets off a cruise ship they’ll go to the museums, but no one goes into the landscape.”

Once again the architecture and environmental graphic design teams used the landscape to inform the interpretive plan, encouraging visitors to envision a 16th-century Red Bay. At the centre of their proposal is a series of large monuments in various locations acting as “lookout posts”—structures once used to signal to whalers that whales had been spotted in the sea. The monuments would each be constructed of two black columns, referencing the smoke created from refining whale fat into oil, which would have been in the air at the height of Red Bay’s industrial activity. A mirror bridging the two columns reflects back onto the land, suggesting the lookout post signals.

As the plan for the monuments came together, it began to inform the visual identity, which was already well underway. “The notion of a portal, of looking back to the past or looking to the future, came out of that collaboration,” says deWolf. The “portal” now figures as a key element of the visual identity—a Basque-red line used on tourism materials to separate photography of present-day Red Bay from the new logo, which deWolf modeled on a 16th-century woodcut of a whaling station. The lower half represents a right whale, and the entire lookout alludes to the chalupa, a boat used by Basque whalers.

The visual identity is already in use, and Basque-influenced wayfinding signs will be installed over the summer. The monument awaits funding.

“As one of three UNESCO sites in that area, Red Bay is going to get support in the decades to come,” says deWolf. “So we want to use the bare, natural, remote landscape in such a way that we can introduce some really engaging forms in there to help make the experience special.”



↑ The proposed monument at Red Bay (top) informed the graphic identity, which uses the monument’s portal shape on tourism collateral to divide the chalupa-meets-whale logo from current photography of the region

CREDITS: RED BAY PRINCIPAL, STRATEGY, GRAPHIC DESIGN John deWolf
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“It isn’t about going back to 1885 to try to rebuild or present a faux history. It’s about creating a contemporary stamp on the site.”

JOHN DEWOLF, VICE-PRESIDENT OF FORM:MEDIA

(continued from p. 40)

after whom Batoche was named. Through an interpretive “viewing lens,” an architectural platform, a playground and a picnic area, visitors to the site would get more than a history lesson—they could experience a deeper connection with the land itself.

“These landforms are unbelievably dramatic spaces to start with,” says Crawford. “Having that align with how integral and critical access to that river was to the Métis people—it was a natural fit to use the landform to tie the story together.”

The approach was well received by both Parks Canada and the Shared Management Board and, as research progressed, the design team checked in with the government’s subject matter experts to ensure both historical and cultural accuracy.

“It isn’t about going back to 1885 to try to rebuild or present a faux history,” says deWolf. “It’s about creating a contemporary stamp on the site.”

Adriana Bacheschi, visitor experience manager at Parks Canada, says much of that comes from working directly with the community. “We are always trying to find ways to respect that history and work with the Métis to make sure it’s the Métis who are telling the story,” she says. “This is a place that was key to the development of Canada as a nation to some extent, but it was also key for the Métis people in understanding who they are in this country and how this has affected them for generations.”

EXECUTION

The design and architectural teams designed a number of physical structures for the site,



↑ The sightline down Lot 47 from the viewing lens, pre-panel installation. “The scale of using the land as the driving force behind this was something that took a lot of faith from the client,” says Form:Media’s John deWolf.

along with bilingual interpretive panels to give context to the land dispute.

The first encounter is a hilltop “viewing lens,” an open wood structure at one end of the lot that provides a sightline all the way down to the river, so visitors can see how deep the lot runs. Then, by walking down a mowed path cut into the field or by taking a shuttle bus, the visitor finds the large architectural platform, consisting of two weathering-steel structures that represent the dual heritage of the Métis. A bridge connects them, offering a vantage of the East Village (the former main street of the community now consists of building foundations only) along with panels illustrating what the village would have looked like in the late 1800s. “The landscape then becomes the graphic device to support what’s on the panel,” says deWolf.

Both open-air structures on the platform invite the visitor to look up to the sky, a reference to the infinity symbol on the Métis flag. “This view on to infinity represents that the Métis are here

[in the area] and will continue to be here,” notes Crawford.

He and his team designed the wood slats in the viewing lens and platform as more than just spaces to hold up the interpretive panels. They evoke the long river plots, and are tied together with battens that hint at the pattern of L’Assomption Sash, a traditional belt worn by the Métis.

After exiting the platform, the visitor ends at the “family garden,” an interactive play and picnic area near the East Village site that, viewed from the platform, provides a graphic background. The “trade route playground” is a 3D log map that shows how goods moved through Batoche, and Saskatoon berry bushes abound, planted in long, river lot-like rows. Picnic tables topped with contemporary recipes for traditional Métis meals, set in late 1880s-style typefaces, invite visitors to bring some of what they learned home.

CHALLENGES

While Parks Canada and the Shared Management Board jointly commissioned the project,



↑ The pattern from L’Assomption Sash is echoed on both original and new infrastructure. “There’s this really subtle use of imagery [throughout the site]; we’re not being overt in any way,” says deWolf. “There is a deep level of respect for the culture by not trying to be didactic and describing it. If you were of Métis heritage, and you experience this site, I think you would understand precisely where a lot of this comes from.”

the design team was able to interact directly with only Parks Canada, which would then present to the Métis Nation via the board.

“But we worked off the strength of the concept,” says deWolf. “Our ultimate goal was to make sure a sense of cultural pride was restored. But there’s sort of a deep irony here. We’re talking about something that’s [now] on Crown land—but it’s the heart and soul of the Métis culture.”

That idea led to deWolf and his team referring to their interpretive concept “Living With the Land” while in-house, in an effort to better appreciate the spiritual relationship the Métis have with nature. Both Parks Canada and the Shared Management Board had approved “Storyboard on the

Landscape,” but the more deWolf dug in, the less he felt confident with it. “Just using the phrase ‘on the land’ felt wrong,” he says. “So we went with the idea of living ‘with’ the land.”

“The biggest challenge was due respect—to honour a culture that I didn’t know a lot about, and to do it in a respectful way,” says deWolf. “As a designer, I became aware of everything, from language to form to colour, and was reminded of how important those things are to culture.”

RESULTS

Installation of all elements completed in January 2017, and Batoche National Historic Site reopened to the public in May. As of press time, a tour for the area’s residents had not yet been

scheduled. But Jackie Gaudet, member of Batoche Métis Homeland Local #51, has seen the site and says she was delighted with the interpretation, despite initial concerns.

“I’m not from the field of architecture or engineering, and at first it was very difficult for me to understand [what the end result would be],” she says. “But I couldn’t be more pleased now that all of the panels have been installed. The structures are magnificent. Form:Media and the team really listened well to what the community wanted. It’s something that as a historic site we can be proud of, because it’s unusual and very contemporary but the inside goes right back to our history.”

Adriana Bacheschi, visitor experience manager at Parks Canada, concurs. “It’s something that we’re very happy with,” she says.

In addition to honouring the area’s history, Crawford says these large-scale planning projects find more success when they use available landscape and architectural elements in addition to traditional educational panels. “Relaying the information in a multi-layered way makes the experience more engaging for people of all ages,” he says. “It’s a much richer way of delivering these stories, and it’s why this project is successful in its goal.”

Batoche National Historic Site is free to access this year as part of Parks Canada’s Canada 150 celebration. “We’re all talking about this Canada 150 celebration, but this was an opportunity for us to think about the pre-150,” says deWolf. “I have a much deeper understanding of the Métis culture because of it. And I’m proud that it’s part of our 150, where we’re also addressing what came before.” ■

For more on these projects and full credits, visit appliedartsmag.com/features

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