

Indigenous Architecture: Architecture in the Subarctic Region

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**Ralph Erskine
Indigenous Architecture:
Architecture
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The exchange of impulses has always enriched a culture; the transcribing of forms has always debased an art and the symbols it uses. Can it be right that an office building should look like a palace, or a medical school like a temple? Should a modern building try to evoke an ancient one? Architecture can sometimes acquire a symbolic value in the mind of the observer, but such experiences can never be an adequate basis for an architectural philosophy. An office building is an office building, good or bad, and not a temple or a palace.

The individual artistic belief must always be tested against the specific functional situation. My own attempt to arrive at an architecture appropriate to the subarctic region sometimes produces forms into which critics have read 'action' or 'movement.' I have hoped that such forms result directly from climate and function, and that the doing may be accomplished with some artistry; but the act itself arises out of human and technical needs in a specific situation in place and time, and not out of formalism, and where this is not true it is a sign of weakness in my work, not of strength.

In my first buildings for the subarctic I was still involved with the forms of the current idiom—that is, with preconceived ideas. Some of them proved to be expensive and inefficient, although I still find that visually they are relatively attractive. Technical, organizational, and economic untruths had been built into the aesthetics. To find a way out of this unsatisfactory impasse I had to try to understand the specific needs of the people, the technique, the land, and the climate with which I was working.

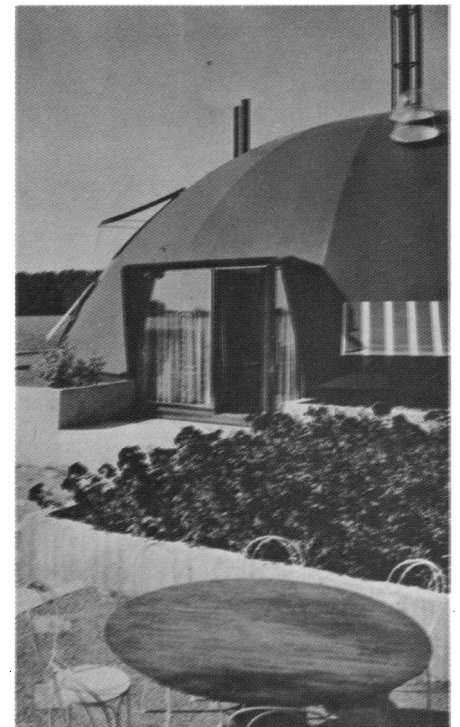
The design illustrated was my first fairly indigenous building. It is very much based on the seasonal rhythm of life in the north: the completely protected winter cell, the surrounding semiprotected spaces for spring and fall, and, beyond them, free summer life in a natural landscape.

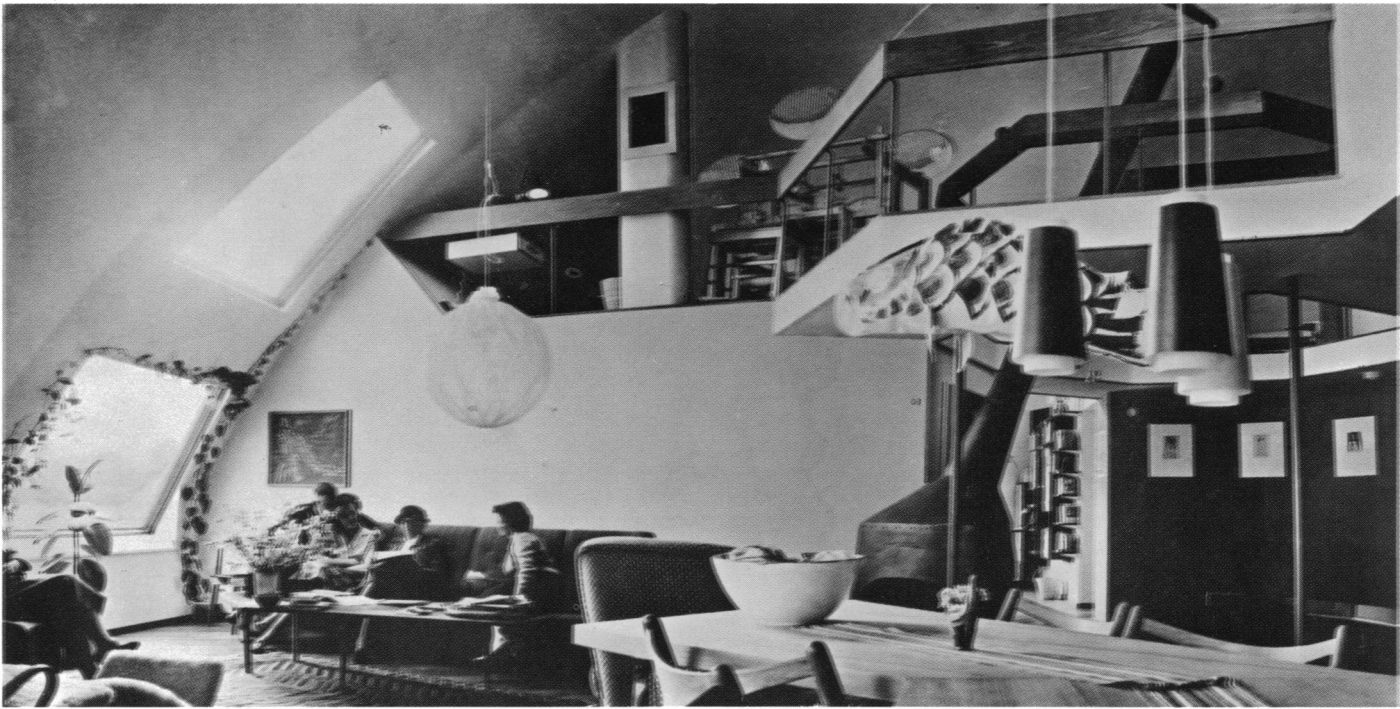
One hundred years ago the subarctic was inhabited by Lapps and Eskimos. Today it is growing rapidly in importance and attracting more and more settlers. They are moving from populous areas to small towns in an isolated land and must be given the amenities they previously enjoyed.

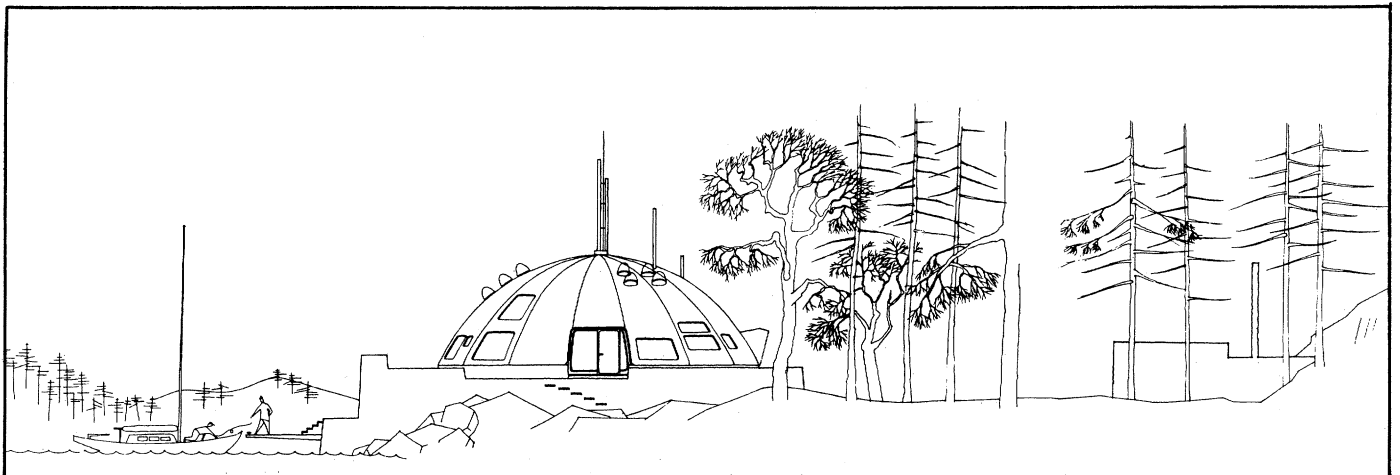
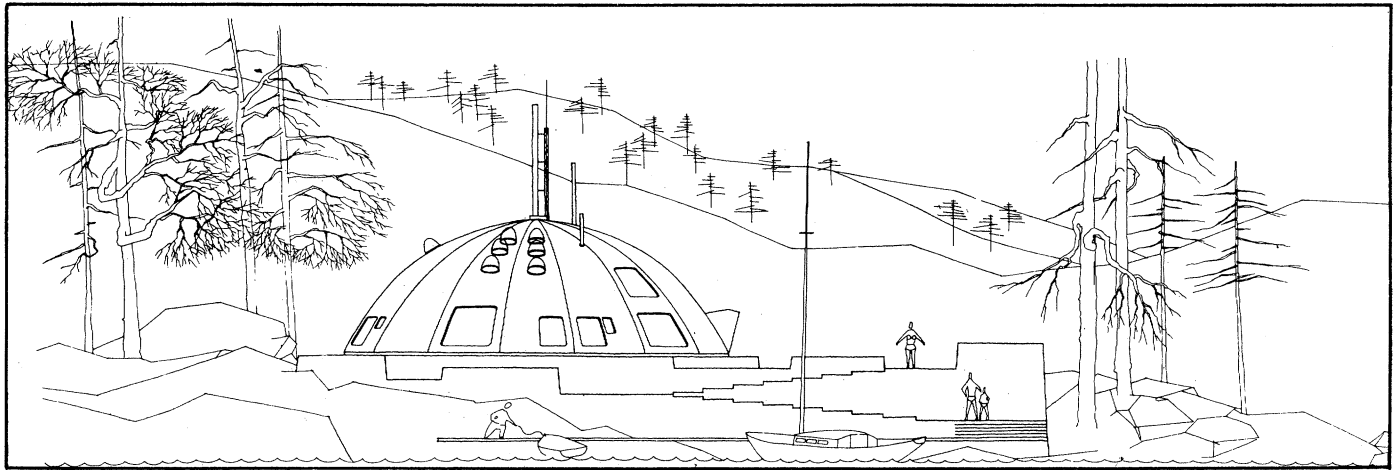
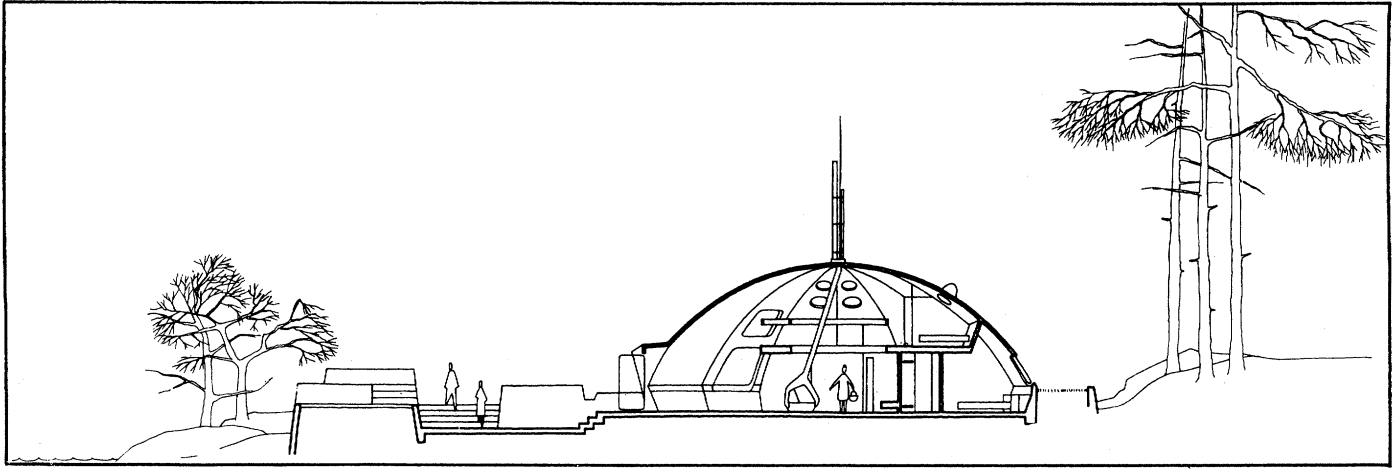
Northern towns must become free of the 'colonial' attitude and base their culture on their own way of life. Even more than other cities they need rationalization and standardization, as building costs are enormous; but in this landscape, where nature is dominant and the 'human' the exception, human choice, both rational and irrational, should be intensified and protected.

It is natural for settlers who move to a new country to attempt to recreate their old homes; but in the subarctic this can never be successful. Modern man, like the Eskimo before him, must use his resources to arrive, by analysis and synthesis, at an indigenous culture.

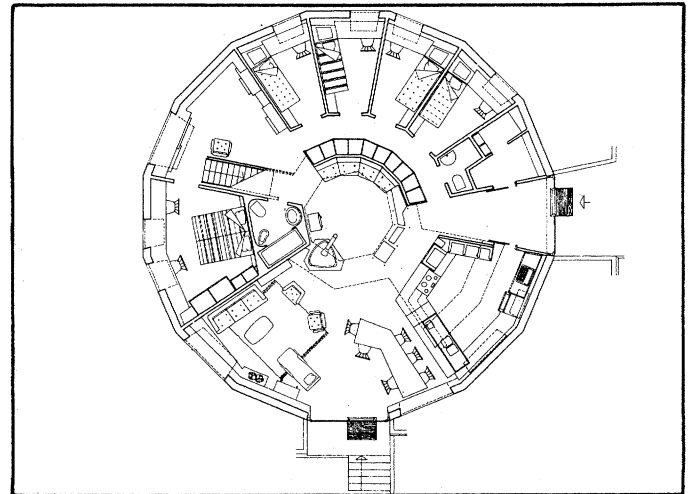
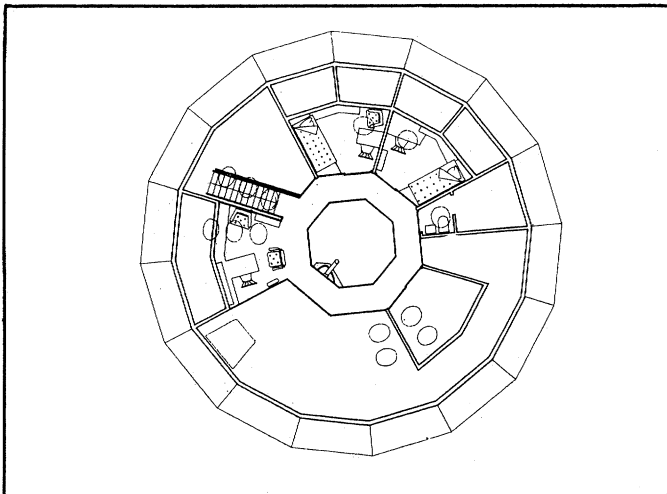
*Left: Terrace entrance, winter
Center: Terrace entrance, summer
Above right: Living room
Middle right: View from pier
Below center: View along shore
Below right: Living room from entry*

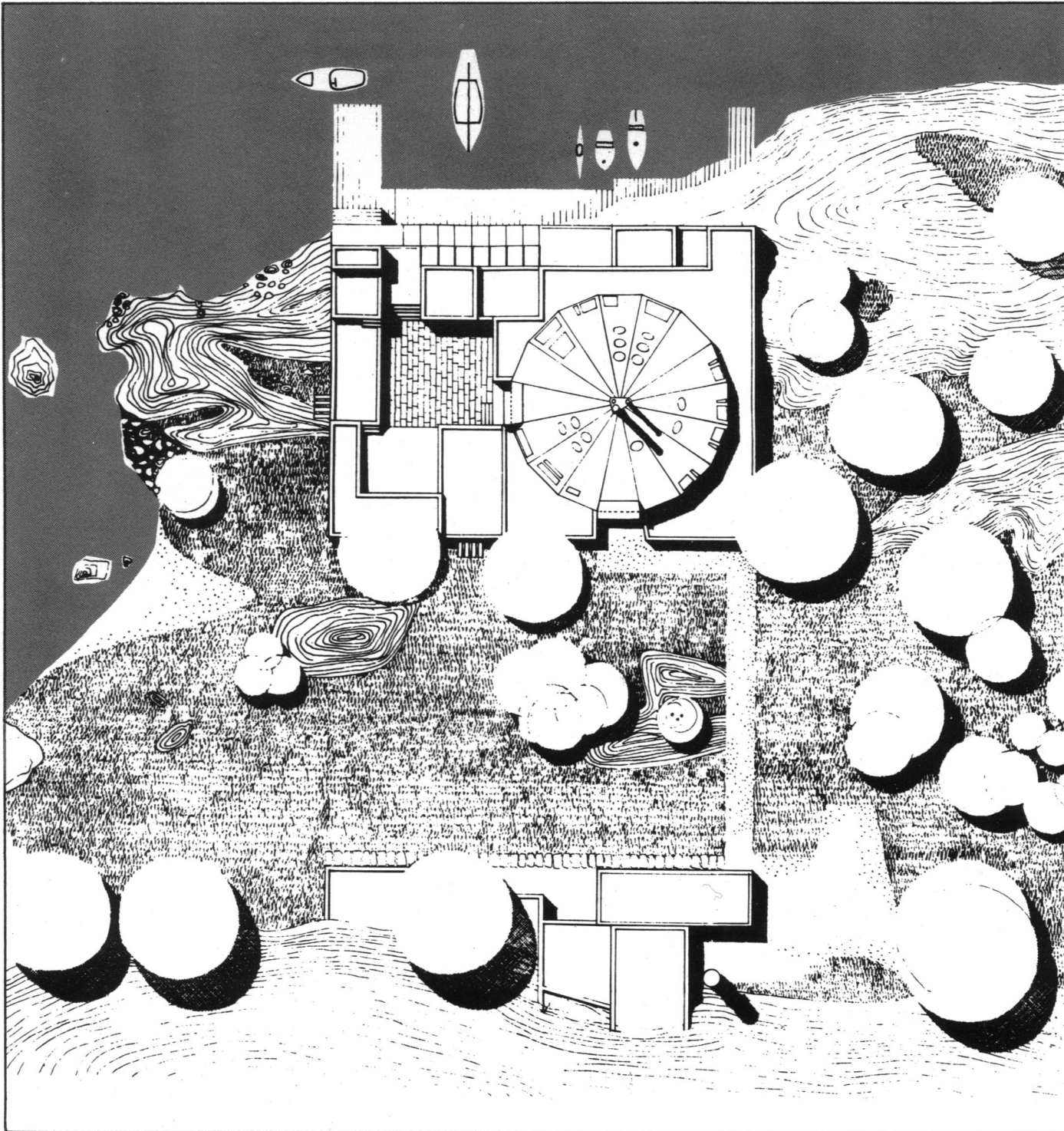






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*Above left: Section, seaside elevation and entrance elevation
Below left: Upstairs plan
Below center: Downstairs plan
Right: Plot plan*