

# Canada Weekly

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- Arctic housing problems lead to innovative construction, 1
- UN discrimination pact ratified, 3
- Petro-Canada budget increased, 3
- Diplomatic relations with Maldives, 3
- Norway joins SARSAT project, 3
- Consulates upgraded in U.S., 3
- Telidon projects to increase in Canada and in United States, 4
- Refugee relief for Thailand, 5
- Early historical documents displayed by Archives, 5
- Nuclear reactor sold to Jamaica, 5
- Swimmers win gold, 6
- Centre involved in hazard alert, 6
- New conference centre under construction in Montreal, 6
- Rare Indian clay jugs found, 6
- Soya sauce without the beans, 6
- News of the arts — exhibition, TV, native publishing, arts briefs, 7
- News briefs, 8

## Arctic housing problems lead to innovative construction

Once a year in late summer a boat pulling crate-laden barges arrives in the tiny western Arctic settlement of Holman Island.

For a hectic few days, another year's supply of goods from the South is unloaded on the dock. It is a scene repeated in all the Inuit villages scattered along the Arctic's vast coastline. Besides packaged dry goods, food staples, appliances, and hardware for the Hudson's Bay stores, the barges are also loaded with crates of building supplies and components. The Arctic has few indigenous construction materials, so virtually every board and nail must be imported from the South.

Since the early 1950s when the Inuit first began to live in permanent settlements, they have relied on prefabricated housing units built in the South and shipped North for re-assembly. In an earlier age they simply built small but efficient winter shelters — snowhouses — and lived in skin tents or sod houses in summer. But as the Inuit abandoned their nomadic existence for a life in fixed communities, their housing needs changed drastically.

### Crude housing

The first communities were crude shacks built of scrap materials left by the white men who had come to the North. Whole families crowded together in cramped quarters. Contagious infections and pernicious diseases such as tuberculosis were rampant.

In response to this crisis, the federal Department of Indian and Northern Affairs shipped small, one-room houses some 26-square metres to the new settlements. Later, these "matchboxes" were followed by larger one- to three-bedroom units of up to 66.8-square metres. Both the "matchboxes" and the larger bungalows were provided to the native people at low rents under the federal government's northern housing rental program.

Although better than scrapyards shacks, the buildings from this early housing program were crude dwellings by southern



*In mid-August, barges with prefabricated housing components are unloaded on the ice-rimmed shore of Holman Island.*

standards and certainly not the final answer to native housing needs.

In 1974, the Northwest Territories government, through its newly formed Northwest Territories Housing Corporation (NWTHC), took over responsibility for northern housing from the federal government. Its mandate was to "make available an adequate standard of housing to all residents of the Northwest Territories". It was a formidable task for the fledgling organization considering the harsh Arctic environment, the lack of building experience in the North, and the special needs of native peoples adapting to a foreign lifestyle.

Temperatures may plummet to an icy -30 degrees Celsius or colder during much of a winter that lasts seven months. Gale force winds howl through settlements unprotected by trees or other natural barriers. It takes a sturdy house to withstand the constant battering of fierce Arctic storms.

But by far the biggest environmental problem for designers of northern houses

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