



THE OPEN AND BRIGHT GATHERING ROOM IS A REMINDER OF WHAT THE BUILDING ONCE WAS

and they ate in the gathering room and other areas around the school. I ended up talking to a group of students over lunch and asking them how they liked their building. Most of the students I talked to said that they liked the building and thought that it had a strong identity. They said that they felt like themselves at the school and that it seemed like home. They said that they liked having a bit of both worlds. The students enjoyed the geometries of the classrooms and the irregularity of the hallways. Most of them didn't mind the location of the school. The list of favourite rooms included drama (nursing), art, industrial arts, and home economics. Their preferences mostly depended on which subject each student was passionate about. The biggest issue the students had was how little outdoor space the building had to offer, especially in the winter months when they stayed indoors all of the time. The school recently obtained a fitness room in one of the unused English classrooms, however lunch was short and only athletic students used the equipment. In the warmer months the balcony would become very well used by both staff and students, however in the winter it was completely closed off. The berm area to the north side of the school was barely used year-round. The entire building was drawn more to the South side where the lobby and the road were located. While the South side of the building was primarily for physical access, the North side was only accessed visually. The secondary stairs to the North of the building were used only as a short cut to class for a handful of students. For security reasons, all of the doors to the back area could not be entered from the exterior. I learned this the hard way when my curiosity brought me outside and I found myself locked out until some teachers in the staff room saw me and let me back in.

### A TASTE OF CREE CULTURE

During my time at the school, I had the opportunity to witness different aboriginal traditions. I visited a class in the native studies room where students were doing art work under the supervision of one of the elders. Some students were doing acrylic painting while others were doing different forms of bead work. Many recently completed paintings were already proudly hanging on the walls in the hallway. All of the paintings related in some way to important symbols of the aboriginal culture. I recognized many circular forms, eagles, four arrows, and colours often of yellow, red, black, and white. The colours signified the importance of the sun and the earth

to the Cree people. A painting that really caught my eye was one that portrayed the silhouette of a tee pee against a red-orange sky next to the silhouette of a skyline. Despite the contrasts of the two forms, there seemed to be harmony in the image as a whole. The elders-in-residence were always around the school and did many different activities with the students. They organized traditional dances and sweet grass ceremonies that were often held in the gathering room, and they took students on excursions outside of the city. The elders spent so much time at the school that they had a little room of their own. It was very small but had enough space for a kitchenette and a small couch and table. There was usually at least one elder present in the school most days of the week. Another really beautiful space in the school was the sweat lodge. Although it was not in working order and the students went off site for their real outdoors sweats, it was still used as a meeting place by staff and students alike. I had the opportunity to just sit there for a few minutes in silence and really enjoyed the atmosphere of the space. The room was round and made out of cedar. A simple bench with rugs and pillows ran around the perimeter of the circle and faced in towards the hot stones in the center. Curved wood beams made the space more intimate and from them hung a few herbs and spices that were put there to dry. It felt like a very spiritual place and I felt that I could sit there dreaming for hours.

### DISCOVERIES

Although I spent several days in the life of Amiskwaciy, I know I will never be able to live it like the students and staff at Amiskwaciy do everyday. As an onlooker however, I was able to see and experience the school at a more profound level. I learned about the Cree culture, about how the school is adapting and changing to the needs of its occupants, and about how the students and staff perceive their long-term home. Aboriginal people are moving more and more into the urban environment and becoming involved in contemporary society. Amiskwaciy academy was an answer to the call of students who were not adjusting well in other high schools in the city of Edmonton. It was also an answer to the question of how to hold on to the traditions and history of a changing culture. To describe the school with one word I would say that Amiskwaciy Academy is all about balance. There is balance between the old and the new, past and future, the natural environment and the urban environment, heavy and light, the balance of an eagle in flight, or of a plane taking off. Amiskwaciy Academy has accomplished what most institutions have not - a unity between opposites. The airport terminal has served well as a home for this school and will hopefully be able to continue to do so well into the future.



THE BERMS SERVE AS A PHYSICAL AND VISUAL BUFFER BETWEEN THE SCHOOL AND THE AIRSTRIP



# Amiskwaciy Academy: A day in the life



THE SIGN AND THE RED RAILING ARE THE FIRST RECOGNIZABLE FEATURES OF THE SCHOOL BUILDING

### AMISKWACIY ACADEMY

The first observation I made when I arrived at Amiskwaciy was noticing the extent of motivational posters and post-secondary brochures that were readily available in racks about the lobby. A stranger waiting in an unknown environment, I occupied myself by reaching for random pieces of reading material. It struck me how little I used these resources in high school, and yet how important that knowledge really was. Now a young architecture student with many glowing aspirations, I no doubt developed a high critique of what was once my high school building. Howbeit, when I was a high school student I lacked a strong opinion about the quality of my second home. I was rather indifferent to my environment and had no tangible connection to it. Working short term as an intern at Manasc Isaac Architects, I was interested to learn I would be spending a few days at a school that they had designed almost nine years ago. It was an Aboriginal school called Amiskwaciy Academy, a school designed for a specific purpose and that required a specific building to fill its needs. Usually I pride myself in my ability to picture a space in my mind; however, when I was told that this school resided in a renovated airport terminal, I did not know what to expect. I could not imagine what it was like, probably because of the very different, and very specific role for which an airport terminal is designed. All I could think of was the extent of airstrip that must encompass the building. I had never before visited an aboriginal school and was not sure what to expect from the staff and the students. Residing most of my life in southern Ontario, I had not seen or learned much of the aboriginal heritage. Now was my time to learn.

### THE BEGINNINGS

The Edmonton Public Schools system is one of the most progressive and notably successful education systems in Canada. Allowing students to attend their school of choice, individual schools are then given the leverage to develop an identity for themselves thereby meeting specific needs in the community. Amiskwaciy Academy began in 1999 as an idea brought to life by educators who wished to see more opportunities for Aboriginal students. According to statistics, a large percentage of urban aboriginal students were dropping out of high school and very few were continuing their education. It was the hope that this school would aid students in understanding and appreciating their past, while preparing for their future. It would be the first urban aboriginal institution that taught 21st century skills while at the same time incorporating traditional native values as part of its core philosophy. The name Amiskwaciy is the shortened Cree word for Beaver Hills, the original name elders gave to the Edmonton area. Such a specialized school was in need of a very distinct place to call home. Early in the planning process it was decided that renovating and leasing an old vacant building would be the most dynamic and affordable solution. After investigating several prospective buildings in and around downtown, they eventually came across the building that they felt would be a good fit. The airport terminal at the municipal airport just north of downtown was constructed in the 1970's and was used in its former role as a terminal until it closed in 1996 and sat vacant for half a decade. Elders, educators, and other members from the aboriginal community wanted to have a renovation that would maintain a strong identifying image for the academy. Using strategies such as pattern, colour, and movement, the goal was to create a strong sense of openness in the building with an abundance of natural light. The school wanted to portray in the building an image of strength and a connection with the main principles of the aboriginal tradition - principles that educators hoped would encourage a life of learning for their students.



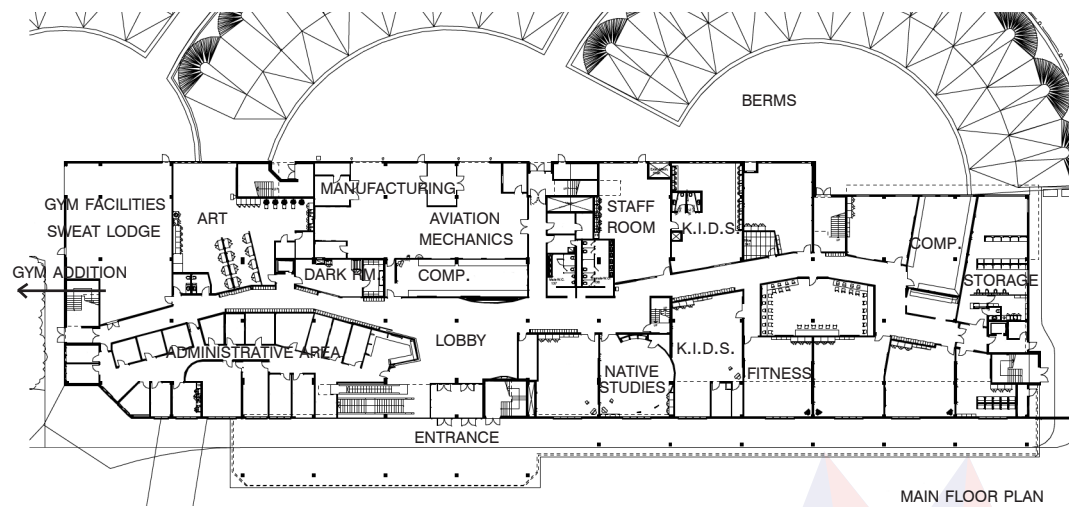
A COLOURFUL, PATTERNED LOBBY SPACE WELCOMES ALL STUDENTS, STAFF, AND VISITORS TO THE SCHOOL

## THE DESIGN

Many challenges arose in the process of transforming an airport terminal into a school. It was not an easy task to create a space of lightness, pattern, and engagement in a building so heavy and cumbersome. The designers found that the building was too wide to hold a regular classroom layout. The solution to this problem was found in the slight shifting of the hallways, which also proved successful allowing abundant natural light into the classrooms while at the same time bringing pattern and engagement into each space. Many of the significant rooms in the school were arranged according to the facilities and remaining infrastructure of the terminal. For example, the terminal baggage handling area which had two big garage doors and a high ceiling, became the location for the industrial arts space. It gave the room character, and also had enough space for machinery. The restaurant was transformed into the home economics room because of the existing kitchen facilities and the open and bright atmosphere of the space. Other facilities such



IRREGULAR HALLWAYS BECOME EVEN MORE ALIVE WITH ARTWORK THAT COVERS THE WALLS



as stairs and washrooms, as well as all of the mechanical and ventilation systems also remained in use. Manasc Isaac was familiar with the building because they had performed the latest renovations on it when it still served as a terminal. The last major design challenge was the creation of outdoor spaces. Airport noise was a major concern in and around the building, and overall outdoor space was scarce. In response to these issues, landscaped berms were placed in fans around the North side of the building. They were designed to serve as sound barriers, act as visual buffers between the building and the tarmac, and provide protected outdoor space for students.

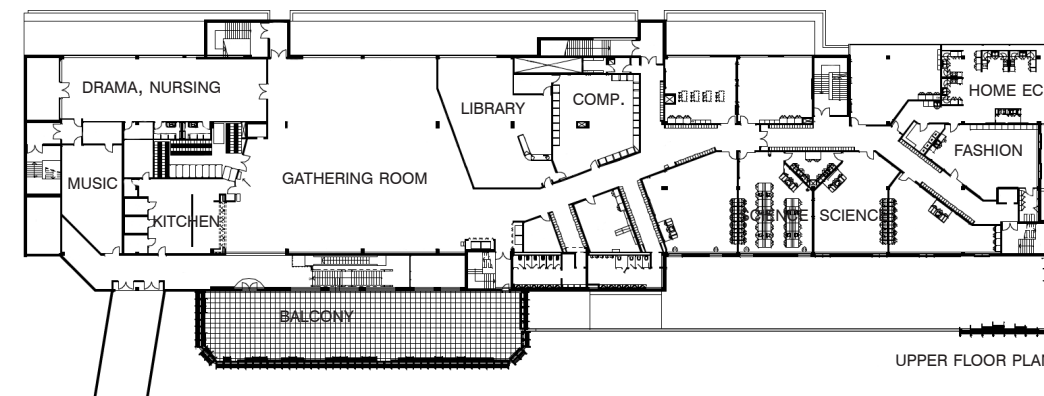
## FIRST IMPRESSIONS

I took public transit to travel to the school. I experienced difficulty finding the building as it sat back from the road and was hidden by the large vacant parking garage that used to serve the terminal. The first thing to catch my eye was the sign for the school and then the large balcony overhang with an artistic red railing that accentuated the dark brown brick. On the exterior the building did not appear to be much like a school and still maintained the presence of a terminal. I entered through the main doors into a large lobby area and discovered quite a different atmosphere inside. Contrasting the

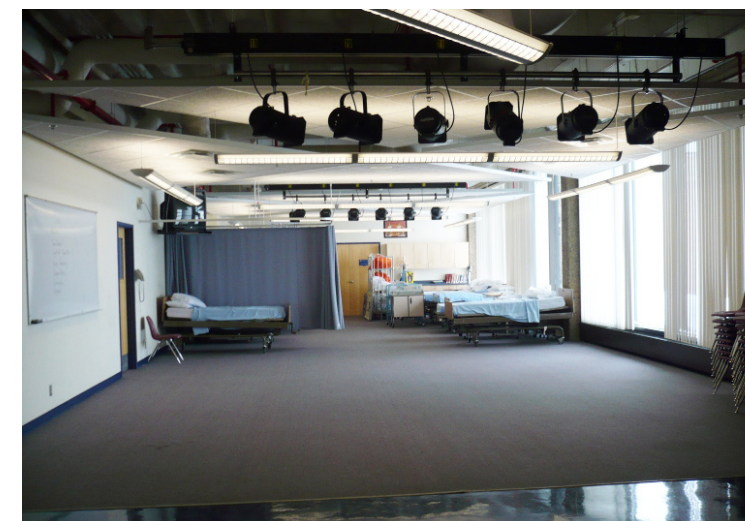
strength and presence of the building, I could immediately perceive a lightness to the interior. The atmosphere of the space was warm and my visual and audio senses were triggered by colours, geometries, and the sound of students arriving to school and heading to their lockers. The foyer was a large, open space that served as the connection between most of the areas in the school. A large receptionist desk reached into the space from the administrative hallway to the left, and a large stair that was once the escalator ascended to the gathering room. The suspended ceiling panels of various geometric shapes, along with the brightly coloured linoleum flooring added a special flavour to the space. I arrived just in time for the morning song. All of the students and staff of the academy were gathering together in the foyer and facing the brightly coloured mural on the main wall. 'New Life' as it was appropriately named had become an important symbol to the school community. It portrayed the founding elders, and the images and colours represented the sharing of knowledge and the significance of the seasons and the four cardinal axis. The song was chanted in words I did not understand, but it sounded beautiful and was accompanied by drumming. I learned that the song was a prayer that was used to begin the day in a good way.

## CLASS TIME

After announcements had been made, the students headed to class. During class time I spent most of my time wandering the hallways, doing sketches, and talking to the occasional student or teacher who happened to pass by. I sat in the foyer for a time and watched how the students and staff interacted. All of the students, teachers, and elders knew each other, and there was a positive connection between them. Some students approached and began talking to me because they thought I was a visiting teacher. In the foyer and the administration hallway, there was an abundance of artwork and crafts to enjoy. My favourite piece was a brightly coloured dream catcher that hung in the corner of the foyer. Wherever I went in the school, there was always reference to the strange world outside of the building. The surrounding airstrip had a continuous affect on the life of the school. From many of the classrooms planes could be seen taking off and landing every few minutes. The older mechanical system often made strange noises, and occasionally there was a smell of fuel in parts of the building. These occurrences though to me new and interesting had become the normal background of life at the academy. Walking through the school during class time I noticed quickly how void many areas of the school appeared. A building designed to house six hundred students was only filled to a third of its capacity. Although the building was designed to have classrooms that served a diverse selection of classes such as cosmetology, music, drama, and fashion, due to the smaller number of students it was not always possible to use these rooms. The school did not receive enough funding to hire teachers to take on classes of only a handful of students.



THE SWEAT LODGE IS A GREAT PLACE FOR REFLECTION



WHAT WAS ONCE THE LONG DRAMA ROOM NOW SERVES A NURSING COURSE

## ROOMS WITH NEW ROLES

Talking to some of the staff around the school, I discovered more about the changes and developments that were taking place at the school. One major change that affected the staff and students was the sublease of several unused spaces in the building. The music room was subleased to an African 'acappella' group called the Kockapelli choir. They used the room in the evenings and often sung and performed for the student body which brought a different form of music into the school. The staff workroom, the social studies room, and three administrative offices were being subleased to a child development organization called K.I.D.S., which used this location as their preparation and administrative offices. The gymnasium was used in the evenings for events and community sports activities. Separate entrances allowed the other patrons to enter their rooms in the evening without disturbing the rest of the school building. The school was also preparing to be involved with a new program called 'Skills Centre' that would begin full swing in the fall. In collaboration with NAIT, the school would host students from three or four different high schools in the area, to participate in various post-secondary focused classes. Already the drama room was transformed into a nursing room and ten beds along with curtains occupied the room. Nine students from Amiskwaciy took the course for the first time last September and thoroughly enjoyed it. Other courses offered would be manufacturing and aviation mechanics in the industrial arts space, and culinary arts in the kitchen area. The teachers were very excited about this program as they thought it would help students in finding a subject that they would enjoy pursuing beyond the high school level. The students

had mixed feelings about the changes in the school. They were excited for the greater variety of courses, but were not so eager to have to share their building with strangers from other schools.

## STUDENT SPACES

At lunch time and into the afternoon I spent most of my time in the gathering room. I ate lunch up there and also did some rough sketching. The gathering room was one of my favourite spaces in the building because it reminded me most of what the building once was. I liked the gridded concrete ceiling although it probably contributed to the bad acoustics of the room. Some wonderfully coloured banners hung from a section of the ceiling and served to lighten up the space. The view out of the tall north windows was stunning, and the room was very open in comparison with the rest of the building. The students received a hot lunch from the kitchen