LATERAL OFFICE
Mason White and Lola Sheppard head up their research and design studio from a Toronto office in a repurposed industrial building.

OPPOSITE
Models from recent projects take many forms.
ason White and Lola Sheppard, self-described “architectural strategists” and husband-and-wife partners in the tiny Toronto firm Lateral Office, are huddled around White’s computer monitor on a recent Monday for a Skype conference call. With them in their modest workspace—just big enough for six white IKEA desks and a couple of bookcases—are an urban designer who has been working with them and a documentary filmmaker who has just shown up for the scheduled call. Joining in on-screen are an architect in New York, a historian in California, and a landscape architect elsewhere in Toronto. Everyone is speaking for the first time as a group, kicking around ideas for a proposal they hope to submit for a competition concerning four national parks in the United States.

Not that White and Sheppard don’t have other things to do. Tacked up on their office walls are spreads for their upcoming book about the Arctic, the pages bristling with multicolored sticky notes scribbled with instructions for tweaking layouts and fact-checking data. Both partners are full-time academics: White is an associate professor of architecture at the University of Toronto, and Sheppard is an associate professor of architecture at the University of Waterloo. And the couple—he’s 41, she’s 42—also have two school-age kids to tend to.

But when the Van Alen Institute launched its National Parks Now competition, calling for proposals from multidisciplinary teams to improve the visitor experience at four lesser-known sites in the Northeast, Sheppard and White couldn’t resist.
They quickly pulled together the now-assembled group, whose first task is to meet a deadline for a Request For Qualifications. White, taking charge, quickly runs through what's needed to produce a booklet with background information on the team members. “It's all doable in a two-week push,” he says, with the confidence that comes from having entered more than two dozen competitions over the past decade. “Get your bios in!”

Lateral Office’s own story is impressive. Since founding their firm in 2003—giving it a name intended to suggest work across disciplines—White and Sheppard have developed a practice that straddles the worlds of architecture, landscape design, urbanism, and infrastructure. Lateral Office’s entry in the 2014 Venice Biennale, an exhibition about Nunavut, Canada’s northernmost territory, garnered a special mention—the first time Canada has ever been singled out in the architecture category. And although they have yet to win a major competition and see any of their designs actually built, they have been short-listed three times, and their entry submissions, along with other grant-fueled efforts, have raised their profile and allowed them to pursue projects they are passionate about. In the process, they have become admired by a younger generation.
for their outside-the-box thinking; their interest in addressing social, political, and environmental concerns in their work; and a determination to expand the role of the architect from designer of buildings on a site to conceiver of vast infrastructure systems.

The couple met as students at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, after Sheppard, a native of Montreal, got her undergraduate degree in architecture at McGill University, and White, who is from Chapel Hill, North Carolina, obtained his at Virginia Tech. They went on to jobs at architecture firms in London. But they quickly realized they didn’t want to toil away on residential renovations while inching their way up the totem pole until, finally, they’d get a shot at plum, large-scale public projects. After a day of work, they would both come home and moonlight entering design competitions.

“We had our day jobs separate from each other,” says White, “and we’d do our higher art in the evening.”
From London they secured a teaching fellowship at the Ohio State University with a proposal to research “the ephemeral qualities of glass.” But once they arrived in the land of retail corridors and highway on-ramps on the outskirts of Columbus, they became fascinated by the exurban conditions they found. Ditching the glass study, they dove into research on a 545-acre area in the vicinity of the school, investigating—and questioning—the thinking about land use that was giving rise to ever-proliferating sprawl.

The result was a 2004 exhibition titled Flatspace: Nine Networks of Infrastructural Exurbanism, which highlighted how land uses had been rigidly segregated to achieve maximum economic benefit—efficiently channeling customers to fast-food restaurants and big-box stores, for example—rather than serve other public ends. Their presentation was rather thesis-like and abstract (they examined their subject through nine different “filters”), their language, at times, stiffly formal (“there exists the potential to re-engage landscape, program, and mobility as catalysts, amplifying existing ecologies...”)...
within the site”), and their suggestions for “retooling” an already-developed region perhaps a tad unrealistic. But they raised provocative questions: Rather than, say, have patches of shrubbery on the peripheries—“like a sprinkling of parsley around a parking lot,” says White—could enough usable green space be gathered in one spot for people to actually picnic on?

If in Columbus they pulled back to see the big picture, in Memphis they zoomed in on a very particular place: the Mississippi riverfront in this Tennessee city. In response to a competition soliciting designs for the waterfront end of historic Beale Street, Sheppard, White, and a colleague proposed ramped terraces stepping down to the river—with plantings at lower levels turning progressively harder—stitching the city back to its waterfront and addressing the issue of frequent flooding of the land. Inspired by the city’s musical tradition, the architects designed a new dock that would function like an instrument itself: a barge moored to the river’s edge, rising and falling with changes in water level, it would have hollowed-steel acoustic masts with tensioned strings that visitors could pluck, generating sounds that would vary in tone depending on the dock’s elevation.
Although their Memphis proposal was ultimately passed over, by the time the project wrapped up, their interest in landscape and urbanism had crystallized and the Lateral Office MO had begun to jell. They had come to view themselves not so much as designers handing down be-all and end-all solutions but as detectives—in lectures, they compare themselves to Lester Freamon of The Wire—chasing down information, mapping scenarios, identifying issues, and, not incidentally, turning up opportunities for interesting work. By 2005 White and Sheppard were living in Toronto and teaching. On days off, sometimes with the help of graduate students or other like-minded practitioners who have joined Lateral Office for varying periods, they were applying themselves to projects that allowed them to explore things that, Sheppard says, “are overlooked in design.”

For a 2005 installation called Soil Horizon, orchestrated for the International Garden Festival in Grand-M étis, Quebec, they bored down into the ground and captured soil samples, then displayed the cubed layers of stratified dirt in custom-made terrariums. It was a fascinating, temporary aboveground landscape featuring what’s typically hidden beneath the earth’s surface.

Increasingly, however, they sought to tackle territory on a much larger scale, even if it meant venturing into areas about which they know little, and with no competition or client in sight. “There are two kinds of architect,” White has said. “Those who wait for the phone to ring and those who go out and reveal a need.”
Lateral Office’s first “self-generated” project began after the partners speculated that “it would be interesting to think about water,” Sheppard recalls. Their research led them to the American Southwest and, ultimately, to a 350-square-mile body of water in California called the Salton Sea, created when the Colorado River flooded in the early 20th century and since then fed by agricultural runoff. Once a thriving tourist destination and now a crucial resting and feeding place for migrating birds, the shallow lake has been drying up and, in the process, becoming increasingly saline and toxic. Massive multibillion-dollar engineering solutions have been put forward, including covering the whole thing up.

Lateral Office offered a softer infrastructure approach, one that could respond to changes in the shifting environment. Its 2009 proposal envisioned a system of self-contained pools that could be phased in incrementally and moved around the lake or be moored, depending on the prevailing needs and conditions. The itinerant sites could be used for any number of activities, from salt harvesting to swimming.
In recent investigations, Lateral Office has focused on colder climes. For a competition revolving around a decommissioned airport in Reykjavik, Iceland, White and Sheppard advocated converting the old runways to greenways programmed for parks, recreation, and the production of food and energy. For a Montreal competition they came up with a design for an all-season park atop a highway, with the movement of vehicles on the roadway generating energy for the landscaped corridor. For Winnipeg, Manitoba, they designed warming huts for skaters inspired by snow fence construction.

The 800,000-square-mile Nunavut territory of Canada, which is still sparsely populated but is rich in resources and undergoing rapid development, has captured their attention of late. An ongoing project called the Arctic Food Network has focused on the Baffin Island area of Nunavut. Here, the native Inuit once fished and hunted for their supper but today spend a disproportionate part of their income on food imported from the south—much of it unhealthy—and increasingly
suffer from heart disease and diabetes. To encourage locals to turn back to the land for their sustenance, Lateral Office proposed a system of farms, freezers, and food-gathering cabins sprinkled along existing snowmobile trails. A hunting and fishing cabin, for instance, might be outfitted with bunk beds for overnight stays and have a fire pit for smoking meat, a rack for drying fish, and perhaps even Wi-Fi. The modular structures in this network could be lashed together with rope in the same way that traditional Inuit sleds are built; each would originate as a kit of parts that could be transported by sled and erected on site by a handful of people in a couple of days.

Lateral Office’s appealing Arctic Food Network designs made the cover of *Architect* magazine in 2013—a framed copy is propped on a shelf in their office, in a repurposed 1920s industrial building in Toronto’s Koreatown neighborhood. But during an interview on the day of the National Parks Now conference call, the couple said they preferred not to focus on architectural form, explaining that they were less interested in pretty buildings in the landscape than they are in the idea of the landscape itself as an agent of change.

“Our design projects are a first pass,” says Sheppard, acknowledging that, should the Arctic Food Network take off, their designs would likely undergo changes as a result of consultation with stakeholders. Still, the partners feel there is merit in maintaining some distance from the local scene at the outset of a project.

“Sometimes when you listen to everyone’s voice, it’s hard to make a move,” Sheppard explains. “You’re biased by what others think is important. Instead, we do all the research, then take a rough
A Lateral Office design for multifamily housing was part of the firm's Biennale entry, titled *Arctic Adaptations: Nunavut at 15*. The exhibition, organized with the architect Matthew Spremulli and a team of researchers, designers, and model makers, and now touring Canada, profiles 25 far-flung communities in Nunavut and explores the role architecture has played in the region so far and might play in the future. It features soapstone carvings of iconic buildings by local artisans. Peekaboo boxes provide glimpses of photographs of the landscape taken by Nunavut residents. There are models for proposed facilities including an educational campus and health centers in addition to Lateral Office's multifamily housing, which is designed with a high edge that would serve as a windbreak, creating a more sheltered common area for residents and neighbors on the opposite side of the structure.
INUIT NAVIGATION AND TRAILS
BAFFIN ISLAND, NUNAVUT

BUILDING A DURABLE ICE ROAD
The ice road is built on the tundra, which is a high-thermal conductivity soil layer. The ice road is made by using equipment to compress the snow and create a solid surface that can support the weight of vehicles. The ice road is then maintained throughout the season by regular maintenance, including adding more snow or ice when necessary. The ice road is equipped with signs and markers to guide drivers through the navigation system.

SEASONAL ICE ROAD CALENDAR
The ice road is operational from early autumn to late spring, depending on the weather conditions. The seasonality of the ice road is affected by the changing of the snow and ice conditions. During the warm season, the ice road is prone to melt and become unsafe for use. During the cold season, the ice road may become too hard and difficult to maintain.

ICING DIMENSIONS
The ice road is designed to accommodate the size and weight of the vehicles that use it. The dimensions of the ice road are determined by the size of the vehicles and the weather conditions. The ice road is designed to be wide enough to accommodate the traffic and to avoid any accidents.

ICING PATROL OPERATIONS
The ice patrol is responsible for the maintenance of the ice road and ensuring its safety. The ice patrol is equipped with the necessary equipment to maintain the ice road and to provide assistance to the drivers. The ice patrol is responsible for monitoring the weather conditions and the ice conditions on the ice road.

THE SHAPE OF SNOW
Snow has a varied shape and size, which is affected by the weather conditions and the location. The shape of snow can be flat, rounded, or irregular. The shape of snow is important for the construction of the ice road, as it affects the stability and the safety of the road.

FOUNDATION/LAND STABILITY
The foundation of the ice road is designed to support the weight of the vehicles and to avoid any accidents. The foundation is made of the tundra soil, which is a high-thermal conductivity soil layer. The foundation is designed to be strong enough to support the weight of the vehicles and to avoid any accidents.

ASHLEY CAPP
LATERAL OFFICE
Their upcoming book, titled *Many Norths: Spatial Practices in a Shifting Territory* and scheduled to be published in May by Actar D, offers no designs. Rather, this 450-page compendium presents a feast of information on just about anything and everything that has some physical expression in northern Canada—from building an ice road to harvesting mussels under the ice of a frozen lake—revealing the authors’ fascination with technological, mechanical, and scientific processes. The igloos and skin tents of the Inuit, a semi-nomadic people until recently, are examined. A chapter on resources veers from bowhead whale hunting to diamond mining.

And, the authors say, it’s not just information for information’s sake.

“If you want to build a plaza in New York or Toronto, you know it needs lighting and nice stone and a place for people to gather,” White notes. “But up north there are no rules of design.” He and Sheppard hope that their documentation of spatial practices, along with cues taken from the landscape itself, will inform the design and construction of buildings, and the spaces outside and between them, in the future.

And actually building is something the partners hope they themselves will do one day (aside from a successful gut renovation of their brick Victorian row house, a 10-minute walk from their office). Although their unbridled research has taken them in fascinating directions, their design work, so far, has not moved beyond the realm of writing, drawings, and exhibitions. For many academics, of course, what they’ve accomplished is more than sufficient. But Sheppard, for one, makes no bones about the desire to see some of their ideas materialize: “Our ambition is to build,” she says firmly. “It just may take us some time.”

Jane Margolies is a writer in New York who often writes about design, preservation, and urban development.