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Matthew Farish and Whitney Lackenbauer discuss the history of high-modernist planning in the Canadian Arctic towns of Frobisher Bay (Iqaluit) and Inuvik in the 1950s and 1960s, and its consequences for local populations. High modernism meant rational engineering of all aspects of social life to improve the human conditions. The authors examined policy documents and research done by scientists and social scientists in the era to see how the government envisioned the modernization of the North through engineering and militarization.

The authors trace Arctic modernism to Prime Minister John Diefenbaker’s policy to make the North a “national responsibility” and a strategic site during the Cold War. The goal was to modernize and improve living conditions through the creation of the new urban communities of Frobisher Bay and Inuvik to turn these towns into models for “Arctic living.”

The New northern settlements were better planned than earlier fur trading, missionary, or mining communities. Due to the availability of modern amenities and opportunities, many Inuit left their camps and moved to Frobisher Bay. However, there was resentment from the Inuit because they were not consulted during the planning process. Despite the government’s attempt to highly modernize these towns, through engineering and planning, it reinforced social distinctions and inequality between the natives and white inhabitants of these towns. The urbanization process created a spatial segregation where the serviced ends of the town contained modern furnished apartments and house units for non-Inuit, while Inuit lived primarily in unserviced neighbourhoods.