Unknown Ground: The Case For Ambiguity in Indigenous Design

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Architecture, it could be said, is the built expression of a culture. It serves as a living record of how a group of people has grown and developed within a geographic, social, and political climate. How a population occupies a space reveals much about how they see the world, and their place within it. In many ways, architecture is also the most easily identifiable icon of a culture. When most people think of France and the French, the first image that comes to mind is that of the Eiffel Tower, while Italy conjures visions of the Colosseum. The same is found to be true for the many Indigenous groups of North America. The Tipi has long been a symbol of the vast interior plains and the people who called it home, while the foggy isles of the Pacific Northwest stir images of massive cedar longhouses, looming in the mist. These images are powerful; they are reminders of the strength and resourcefulness of the people who created them. Indeed, in recent years, representations of these Indigenous designs have become icons of resistance; rallying points for Indigenous groups seeking to rediscover lost roots, and reassert rights that were stripped away. Today, many First Nations choose to erect buildings that echo traditional forms in order to say both to the world and to themselves, “This is who we are.” However, these forms can also be dangerous, because a culture is so much more than a built form. Distilling the ephemeral wisdom, memories, traditions, lore, and so much more that constitutes the living, breathing essence of a culture into a single form or collection of artifacts reduces it to a caricature of itself. Worse, it invites others to define a culture that is not theirs, instilling a dangerous sense of misplaced ownership.

The tension between iconic forms as symbols of both power and oppression is perhaps most evident in a relatively new indigenous building: the Cultural Centre. As explicit expressions of Indigenous cultural heritage, the cultural centre is an attempt to foster the many dialogues playing out in Indigenous communities across North America. Questions concerning “the commodification of identity politics, forms of social continuity, intercultural negotiation, and embodied experiences of place,”¹ fuel the desire to create buildings that speak to the values of the Indigenous communities they represent. In this sense, cultural centres fill a very ambiguous role: Part museum, part community centre, part commercial enterprise. At times introverted, while at others extroverted, their ultimate function is nebulous, shifting to suit the needs imparted upon them.

It is for these reasons that ambiguity is so important to Indigenous architecture.

Defined as, “a type of uncertainty of meaning in which several interpretations are possible,” something that is ambiguous defies easy explanation. In many cases, it confounds explanation altogether. It is complex and often contradictory, shifting with time and circumstance to reveal hidden truths and deeper questions. By its very nature something which is ambiguous must be carefully considered, laboured over, and debated. When confronted with an ambiguous object we are forced to take an active interest in it, to see something rather than just look at it. This implied active relationship between ambiguity and audience is particularly important for Indigenous design because, if nothing else, Indigenous culture is an incredibly ambiguous thing.

To say nothing of the fact that the term ‘Indigenous’ refers to a vast array of cultures, each with diverse social, political, and geographic backgrounds (Fig. 1). If you were to zoom in on any one of these cultures, it would become a microcosm unto itself, full of subtlety, nuance, and contradiction. Indeed, according to Thomas King, “there has never been a good collective noun [for Indigenous People] because there never was a collective to begin with.” By their very nature, indigenous cultures defy easy explanation. While it may be possible to catalogue parts of their culture such as where they live, what they eat, what their houses look like, or what words they use, this only tells part of the story. It elevates the specifics at the expense of the experience, which is what it truly means to be part of a culture. Similar to “the Observer Effect” in quantum physics, whereby the outcome of an experiment is altered simply by measuring the phenomena being observed, by trying to pin down indigenous culture, we end up losing the intangible essence of what it means to be indigenous.

This paper seeks to highlight the importance of ambiguity in Indigenous culture, and through it, Indigenous architecture. By contrasting the history of ambiguity in European and Indigenous culture, and exploring a series of existing Indigenous cultural centres, it is hoped that a case can be made for the importance of accepting ambiguity in the design process of Indigenous architecture.

When the first European settlers arrived on the shores of the New World, they carried more than just the physical implements of colonization with them. Arguably, the first export to North America was a mindset; a world order characterized by the European adoption of

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Christianity centuries earlier. To the Christian settler, life was a series of absolutes, governed by a system of hierarchies created and administered by an all-powerful, omniscient creator (Fig. 2). In the mind of the early settler, existence was ruled by a series of binary opposites. As Thomas King described them:

“Armed with the divine imperative to subdue the earth, they were, no doubt, annoyed that the virgin lands they had imagined, the empty wildernesses they had been promised, were occupied, and, gazing through the lens that seventeenth-century Christianity had provided, most were only able to see the basic dichotomy that framed their world, a world that was either light or dark, good or evil, civilized or savage. A world in which you were a Cowboy or an Indian.”

This notion of black/white, good/evil, was further reinforced by the development of Classical Rationalism and Cartesian thought, which divided the concepts of knowledge and wisdom into separate scientific specialties, and championed the principles of reductionist thought. Suddenly, there was a place for everything, and everything had a place. According to Professor David Pearson, in the modern Western pedagogy, “the head rules over the body and spirit leaving traditional wisdom, intuition and our sensory perceptions devalued or ignored.” This mantra of distillation and classification became a prevailing attitude in many facets of modern Western culture, and architecture was no exception. Even today, buildings are relentlessly sorted and catalogued; they are ascribed to specific artistic movements based on visual cues which codify them by date, location, and style. In many ways, things that defy easy explanation, and resist classification are regarded with suspicion and distrust. In other words, if something is ambiguous, it is either incomplete, or not worth knowing.

The early settlers aversion to ambiguity must have seemed perplexing to the Indigenous communities that greeted them, because in a myriad of ways, Indigenous culture is steeped in ambiguity. Where European eyes see a world created by a single omnipotent God who rules

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objects that fit into neat categories, Indigenous people see numerous deities of “limited power and persuasion,” who shared acts of creation and “found themselves lost from time to time and in need of advice (Fig. 3).” To Indigenous people, these deities are neither purely good nor bad, human nor animal. Depending on the story, their motivations can be selfish or altruistic, and at any time they may shift from animal to man and back again, moving between worlds that can be touched, and worlds that cannot, but are no less real. Even the way this world is recorded and communicated is more ambiguous than its European counterpart. Where modern Western society places great weight on books and the written word, which is fixed and immovable, many Indigenous cultures prefer the oral transmission of lore, “something which has sound but no physical form…that exists only in the imagination of the storyteller…cultural ephemera that is always at the whim of memory.” Furthermore, the Indigenous sense of place remained just as ephemeral, eschewing the permanence of a sedentary lifestyle in a fixed place, marking the land with fences and monuments constructed to last for an eternity, preferring instead to live lightly on the land, drifting with the seasons in dwellings that were designed to last only as long as they were needed - whether an evening or a season - out of materials that would readily return to the earth, leaving little to no trace. All of this is not to say that the Indigenous world is uncomfortable with the ideas of Modern Western science and philosophy, but rather that they do not share the Euro-American compulsion towards specificity and absolutism. As Indigenous philosopher and activist Vine Deloria Jr. said:

“There is no philosophy of American Indians apart from the concrete actions of people in a well defined physical setting… All knowledge must begin with experience and…all conclusions must be verified easily in the empirical physical world.”

This more phenomenological world view has often clashed with the ethos of the Euro-American majority culture of North America, exacerbating an already troubled relationship. However such societal friction is

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unfortunately common in majority/minority cultural dynamics, where it is common for majority cultures to exert pressure on minority cultures in order to either assimilate or eradicate them. In North America, this sub-subsummation of Indigenous culture has taken many forms, from the overt acts of oppression characterized by violence, forced relocation, institutional racism and suppression of language and rituals, to the more subtle acts of indifference, apathy, and willful ignorance. Such issues are of extreme importance and are certainly relevant to the dialogue of modern Indigenous design. However, of particular concern to this paper is the question of cultural ownership and authenticity, and the deliberate removal of ambiguity from Indigenous culture by the Euro-American majority.

There is a very noticeable paradox contained within this paper: In an essay about the importance of acknowledging and embracing the ambiguity inherent in the many varied cultures found in North America, why have these cultures been lumped together and homogenized under the singular title of Indigenous Culture? The use of the term Indigenous culture was a conscious choice, intended to highlight the underlying danger in ignoring ambiguity. A danger that has been openly embraced by European culture since the very earliest days of contact.

As stated earlier, when the first settlers arrived in the New World, they were confounded by the peoples they found already inhabiting the land. Fortunately, the tools of Science and Christianity were up to the task, and soon enough they began reducing Indigenous cultures to their most basic elements. To some, Indigenous people became “instruments of divine punishment,” while to others they were “noble savages.” Initially, this reduction served a simple purpose: Understanding something as complex and frustrating as Indigenous culture was very difficult. However, once ‘the problem of Indigenous culture’ was suitably defined, it could be mentally stored away, requiring no further serious and often uncomfortable thought. In an essay on René Magritte’s, The Treachery of Images (Ceci n’est pas une pipe) (1928) (Fig. 4), a painting which highlights the ambiguity found between a real, physical object, and a representation of the same object, Michelle Foucault wrote, “there is a long-standing habit in Western interpretation of suspending further thought when faced with a figure that resembles another object or figure.” By creating a simplified facsimile of Indigenous people that ignored the confusing and often frustrating aspects of subtlety, nuance and variation found within the many Indigenous groups encountered in North America, European settlers could ignore the reality that Indigenous people were, in fact, people. They simply became another ‘thing’ to be managed. In this way, Indigenous people, and through them, Indigenous culture, became the self-proclaimed property of the European majority culture.


This simplification has propagated through history, largely aided by mass media and contemporary Euro-American popular culture. With the aid of television and print media, a new figure began to emerge, what Thomas King refers to as, “the Dead Indian (Fig. 5).” According to King, the Dead Indian is a composite, created by cobbling together the “cultural debris” from various Indigenous groups into a single simulacrum, or “something that represents something that never existed….in other words, the only truth of the thing is the lie itself.”

The creation of an Indigenous Golem by Euro-American culture has lead to the perversion of Indigenous authenticity. By defining what Indigenous culture is, and basing that definition on a fictional amalgamation of disparate cultural signifiers, Euro-American culture has made it impossible for anyone to be authentically ‘Indian’ anymore. In a cruel twist, by defining Indigeneity, they have - at least in their eyes - eliminated Indigenous culture.

The desire to define Indigenous people by easily recognizable clichés, both authentic and constructed, can also be found in Indigenous architecture. As stated in the introduction, in many Indigenous cultures, the most recognizable symbol of that culture can be found in their built environment. Plains Teepees, Northwest Coast Longhouses, and East Coast Wigwams have all found modern analogues constructed out of concrete, glass, and steel (Fig. 6). But is this truly Indigenous? On the surface it certainly looks Indigenous, but do these echoes of ‘traditional’ architecture truly reflect the current reality of the community they are designing for? By mimicking the ancestral forms of a time long past, are designers - Euro-American designers in particular - taking the easy way out; choosing not to deal with the confusing, difficult, and often painful reality of modern Indigenous culture in favour of a shortcut which says, “this looks Indian, so close enough.”? What would René Magritte have to say about such buildings?

It is very important to note, that this architectural tension is by no means a binary issue; there is certainly no right or wrong approach to the use of traditional forms as described in this paper. It also does not mean that the use of these forms suggests a willful act of ignorance or cultural subjugation. In fact, in many cases these forms are specifically requested by the community itself. As stated earlier, traditional forms, like traditional rituals, still play a crucial role in many Indigenous communities. They have become cultural touchstones, serving as waypoints as these communities move forward. For example, the Musqueam people of the Lower Mainland of British Columbia have prepared a document of design principles intended to educate designers about best practices for working with them on the design of a Musqueam Cultural Centre. The document describes a number of traditional practices such as weaving,

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art, and architecture, and how they may be integrated into the design. Furthermore, Nisga’a architect Patrick Stewart has completed a number of projects that are strongly rooted in traditional forms and practices, such as the Xá:ytem Longhouse Interpretive Centre for the Stó:lo People in Mission, British Columbia (Fig. 7). These examples speak to the positive role these forms have played, and continue to play in the many communities they inhabit.

The power these forms contain, both positive and negative, needs to be acknowledged, while also acknowledging that the use of such traditional forms does not preclude innovation. As Peter Nabokov and Robert Easton state in their book, *Native American Architecture*, “to understand the factors that form Indian architecture, one must look for what environment and culture made possible, not inevitable.” In this sense, the inclusion of ambiguity alongside traditional forms could significantly strengthen the aims of both. Where traditional forms strengthen ties to the past, and reinforce cultural identity, ambiguity negates the simplification and distillation of Indigenous cultures by outside forces. It engages participants and forces them to contemplate not only the meaning behind the immediate built work, but also the culture that it represents, thereby making it much harder to dismiss. This appreciation of balance between traditional forms and ambiguity can be found in the evaluation criteria of the Centre for American Indian Research and Native Studies. When appraising projects that provide services to Indigenous communities, CAIRNS evaluates them based on four criteria: spatial, social, spiritual, and experiential. Such criteria implies projects that are tied to their communities heritage (social, spiritual), but also leave room for experimentation and improvisation (spatial, experiential).

Based on the criteria of CAIRNS, the work of Chipewyan architect Alfred Waugh would score very high. Waugh has designed a number of buildings along the West Coast of British Columbia, and while the buildings certainly reference the areas and cultures, they are not prescriptive in form. For example, in his design for the Lil’wat Cultural Centre in Whistler, British Columbia, Waugh subtly blends the massive, single sloped forms of traditional Squamish longhouses through the use of heavy timber construction, and long, unbroken glass facades, with the heavier grounding of interior Lil’wat pit houses (Fig. 8). Waugh further describes the subtlety found in the project:

“Typically, it would just be a rectangular building, but it has that slight curve. The radius of that curve is actually generated from the topography of the hillside. Even the pit house structure evolved from an outcropping. We wanted to use the whole base

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of the building and the pit house structure as a plinth that anchors the rest of the building, and gives it some grounding and response to the hill. And then the post and beam longhouse would be sitting lightly on top of all of that. So that there is that sort of dialogue, plus the entrance is still on the east entrance plaza….throughout the building you are going to be reminded of nature. Rather than being a typical cultural museum, where it is all enclosed and you have these interactive displays, here the building is an element that makes you aware of where you are and how you are sited in that landscape.”

One of the great successes of the Lil’wat cultural centre is the active relationship it fosters with visitors. The blending of references to interior Lil’wat and coastal Squamish forms creates a structure that is expressive of both cultures, but is not immediately recognizable as either. It creates a dialogue between the visitor, the building, and the surrounding site. It makes them keenly aware of their cultural and geographic location. The ambiguity found in the form of the building invites a deeper contemplation on the cultures represented within, and their connection to the surrounding landscape.

Another example of how successful ambiguous forms can be is found in the work of Oneida architect Chris Cornelius. Similar to Alfred Waugh, Cornelius uses his buildings as a way to blur the line between tradition and innovation, and to ask deeper questions about Indigenous culture. Instead of mimicking ingrained Oneida iconography, the forms found in buildings such as the Oneida Visitors Centre and the Oneida Cultural Centre are derived through the more intangible elements of Oneida culture such as stories, methods, and techniques (Fig. 9). What is meant by methods and techniques is that, rather that simply mirror the material end-products created using traditional techniques - i.e. a building that looks like a woven basket - Cornelius abstracts how these techniques are used, and why. Such explorations have led to forms that many have a hard time recognizing as Oneida, which invites further dialogue. As Cornelius says in a discussion about the Indian Community School of Milwaukee, a project he collaborated with Antione Predock on:

“The thing we tried to do here was to think about what the cultural values are and translate them into architecture. Not to represent them or to make an icon. Some people have a bit of a hard time when they look at this building; they ask why it is really Indian, until you start to talk about it. Our intention here is

to make stuff that is experiential, because ultimately it does not have any resonance with the culture unless it is experiential.”

The emphasis placed on the complete experience of the project, as opposed to relying on easily identifiable visual cues speaks not only to the validity of the values put forward by CAIRNS, but also the potential for ambiguity to invite dialogue into Indigenous architecture.

However, ambiguity means more than just different formal expressions. It can also refer to the role the architect plays in the design process. This also speaks to the larger question of who is ‘allowed’ to design Indigenous projects. To many, if a project is not designed by an Indigenous person, it is not an Indigenous project. However, if the relationship between the designer and Indigenous community is more fluid and moves away from the traditional model of brief consultation, after which the designer retreats behind the curtains to manipulate a series of tools and software before returning to hand down a finished design, then there is more room for a group to insert themselves into the design process, and the issue of who is the architect becomes irrelevant. Rather than acting as an omnipotent creator, if the architect were to “share the act of creation,” and allow themselves to “become lost and in need of advice,” there would be more room for the Indigenous community to have a hand in the process, and more directly imprint their culture into the design. Because the community shared the pen with the architect, and designed large parts of the project themselves, there is more upfront ownership, which ultimately makes for a more socially sustainable project.

A particularly successful example of this approach is the Payson Project, named after the town of Payson, Arizona, where an Apache community had been forced to relocate several times. Eventually, several members left the final mandated reservation and established their own community within the nearby Tonto National Forest, building homes from found materials such as sawmill off-cuts, cardboard, and corrugated metal scraps. Worried about health and safety risks, a representative of Indian Health Services consulted with University Of Arizona anthropologist Dr. Bunny Fontana, who referred them to architecture professor Charles Albanese. Albanese, along with graduate student George Esber Jr. spent nine years working with the Tonto Apaches, consulting on ways to improve the quality of the living conditions. Eventually, the community received congressional funding to provide permanent housing for the community. Rather than simply parachuting in standardized homes, Albanese and Esber Jr. asked the Tonto Apaches to teach them about Apache conceptions of space. Albanese created simple model kits, which he asked members of the community to use to describe the cultural requirements they needed in

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their homes (Fig. 10). The project was extremely successful. By asking the community to show them what they required, and engaging them in the design process, Albanese and Esber Jr. subverted the traditional architect/client relationship, and created spaces that acknowledged the particular rhythms of Apache life, rather than forcing them to adapt to a model that had no bearing on their culture.

The projects and methods discussed in this paper highlight how the inclusion of ambiguity in Indigenous architecture - in form, program and process - is an important part of creating a deeper dialogue about Indigenous culture. The ambiguity found in these projects invites exploration, and encourages us to look past surface level clichés to find a deeper understanding of the people behind these buildings. As the most literal expression of an Indigenous culture, it is hoped that the incorporation of ambiguity into the design of Indigenous cultural centres will lead to rich, experiential centres that resonate with their communities, and remind everyone of the wisdom, power and resilience found within.

Fig. 1: Indigenous Map of North America

Fig. 2 : God the Geometer
Fig. 4: Rene Magritte - The Treachery of Images (ceci n’est pas une pipe)
Fig. 6: The Haida Heritage Centre at Kaay Llna’gaay
Fig. 7: Xa:ytem Pothouse and Longhouse - Patrick Stewart Architect
Fig. 8: Squamish Lil’wat Cultural Centre
Fig. 9: Christopher Cornelius - Onedia Visitors Centre
Fig. 10 : Payson, Arizona - Apache Housing