

INDIGENEITY ON GLOBAL GROUNDS: Native American Cultural Centers on University Campuses in the PNW

BABITA JOY

University of Washington, Seattle

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Coast Salish tribes of the PNW are known for their distinct communal and ceremonial built spaces. Many educational campuses in the US stand on lands historically occupied by Indigenous people, who over time have been displaced, stolen from, and erased from the physical environment. This paper traces the origins and growth of the now commonly seen Native American cultural centers on university campuses in the US.

This research examines the materiality of the Centers as places of making visible the marginalized Native diaspora and it emphasizes the design voices involved in the making. This paper focuses its attention on three Indigenous cultural centers in the PNW: The Intellectual House at the University of Washington, Seattle campus; The House of Welcome, the first purpose-built Native Center on a public university campus in the US on the Evergreen State College campus in Olympia, Washington; and the Many Nations Longhouse on the University of Oregon campus in Eugene, Oregon. All three centers were designed by Johnpaul Jones of the firm Jones and Jones. A Native American (Choctaw/Cherokee) and a 2013 recipient of the National Humanities Medal, Jones designed each of these centers with a strong indigenous materiality focus.

The Native Centers stand as a statement of resistance, becoming the locators and indicators of the dynamics between cultural identities, political powers, and settler-colonial dominant forces surrounding them. This paper argues that while historiography of indigeneity often suggests the ephemeral, i.e., stories, songs, folklore, etc., these centers underscore a contemporary architectural history for indigeneity reflecting the often marginalized native worlds. This research focuses on how materiality-focused designs embody indigenous identity, support a space for belonging in competitive and global university campuses, and enable a cultural reparative agenda for a people relegated to the edges of physical environments or are most often made invisible.

INTRODUCTION:

Coast Salish architecture of the PNW lands of the US and Canada is steeped in rich tangible and intangible cultural traditions. Coast Salish communities are commonly seen in parts of Washington, British Columbia, and Oregon. While they form a group of many nations, they are bound by some form of Salish language and are known for their distinct communal and ceremonial built spaces. Many educational campuses in the US stand on lands historically occupied by Indigenous people, who over time have been erased from the physical environment. Coast Salish architecture is historically tied to social and ritual settings. This paper traces the now commonly seen Native American cultural centers on university campuses in the PNW. It examines how materiality-focused designs embody indigenous identity, support spaces for belonging in competitive and global university campuses, and enable cultural reparation.

COAST SALISH ARCHITECTURE:

Longhouses were one of the traditional dwellings of the Coast Salish communities (Fig. 1).¹ While seasonal in nature, the longhouses served their nomadic lifestyle. Longhouses were adopted during the hunting and fishing seasons as dwellings away from the regular permanent dwellings, exhibiting structures that were practical and aligned to the environment. These were communal structures that housed many people mostly bound by familial connections. They were made of Cedar logs and planks with other supporting natural materials as well. Formed to be a collective living space, the longhouses were long and rectangular in plan and had a central hearth or multiple hearths for cooking and keeping warm. These sites became places for ceremonies and storytelling as much as they became communal sites that reinforced their collective identity. Traditionally, longhouses were most often seasonal, and plank house dwellings made with Cedar planks or pit houses were the more permanent structures that formed homes for families.²

Cedar, a durable material, is extremely significant within Coast Salish architecture. It has several uses both with the construction of built spaces and in the everyday life objects of the Native community in the region, thereby continuing to remain one of the most versatile physical and cultural materials. Its



Figure 1. Duwamish canoe with longhouse at the rear. UW Libraries, Special Collection.

significant uses are because it is plentifully available and it is a sustainable resource. Cedar is often carved with symbols showing animals, family heritage, and aesthetic belief systems, but it also serves to educate and identify cultural identities and histories.³ These representations emphasize the important connection that the communities have with the natural world. The use of Cedar is sacred and spiritual as much as it is a practical material. The aesthetics of the Native people of this region are seen in art, architecture, fashion, and literature, and their presence persists even when social dynamics attempt to force them out.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLE OF THE PNW:

Historiography of indigeneity points to historical accounts that portray Native populations being inferior or even primitive, coming from a Eurocentric colonial bias. Native Americans of the PNW distinguished their unique cultural traditions and relationships with the land by their reliance on natural resources such as salmon, Cedar, and other plants, which allowed sophisticated fishing technologies and social structures. They constructed Cedar longhouses, canoes, and totem poles, and incorporated this material into everyday life objects such as baskets, clothing, bags, utensils, and footwear, showing their ingenuity and skill. The society was organized by ties to kith and kin and solidified by potlatch ceremonies that involved singing, dancing, feasting, gift-giving, and wealth redistribution.⁴

In the late 18th century, European explorers came to the PNW in search of valuable resources such as sea otter pelts, which were in high demand in the early modern global fur trade. Coast Salish communities became an integral part of trade involving some of these most important resources. While trade from these regions certainly increased their wealth and their presence in the early global economy, the regions and the people were affected by severe population-decimating diseases like smallpox and measles brought in by European contact.⁵

Over the 19th century, conflicts between the Natives and the settlers intensified. While some had peaceful coexistence with the settlers, most Indigenous tribes were exploited and/or marginalized and severely clashed in religious and cultural practices. From the 1870s to the 1920s, different tribes moved informally and formally causing severe changes in the tribal culture.⁶ This is also the time that treaties between governments and Native nations were made, albeit through coercion, cheating, deception, and mistreatment. For example, the Treaty of Point Elliott signed in 1855 between tribal chiefs and the US government created reservations for tribes in what is now Washington state (in the Puget Sound region).⁷ While such treaties were to help protect the rights of the Indigenous tribes to traditional activities such as fishing and hunting on ancestral lands, these reservations were in undesirable lands away from their intended place of being. This severely contributed to generational poverty and hardship as Indigenous nations struggled to survive in displaced locations, directly affecting communal tribal life.

Further, in the twentieth century, settlers realized that changing the Native mindset could help control the populations. The settlers shrouded Christian proselytizing and assimilating Indigenous populations into a Euro-American frame of mind as a way of civilizing. This led to the establishment of Indian residential schools. Religious organizations and the government made these schools centers of suppression of Native language, culture, and traditions.⁸ Through the loss of language and cultural legacies, the trauma from generation to generation had lasting effects through the centuries. However, even with these difficulties, Native communities persevered and revitalized their culture. More recent efforts of advocacy, activism, education, and the formation of the American Indian Movement (AIM) played a crucial role in bringing awareness to historical injustices and the struggles of the Native communities. Further, legal victories on fishing rights and tribal sovereignty have reaffirmed the Native people's rights and their lives.⁹



Figure 2. Rendering of the Intellectual House. Jones&Jones Architects.

Currently, Natives of the PNW continue to face generational ills. However, revitalizing indigeneity is undertaken by bringing back Native languages, traditions, and practices. Involvement is seen in universities, where a substantial impact can be made. Cultural centers on campuses are sites of tangible experience of Native concerns, life, and traditions, thus striving to foster mutual respect and cultural recognition.

ARCHITECTURAL TECTONICS AND MATERIALITY:

Architectural tectonics is considered the art and science of building assemblage. It involves the structural systems, the construction methods, and the expressive potential of architectural elements. Architectural materiality involves, along with physical material expressions, the experience of the materials as built in the space. Architectural tectonics and materiality are crucial in spatial designs. While tectonics focuses on how building elements can be expressed to convey meaning, it delves further into the detailing of joints and the articulation of material that brings out the aesthetic and cultural expression of the building. Architectural tectonics involves the mastery of traditional and contemporary construction methods to innovate in the assemblage and influence of visual and tactile building qualities. Since structural systems play a significant role in construction, the choice of the systems used in buildings also contributes to the overall tectonic idea of a building.

Materiality as a concept along with tectonics highlights the selection and use of materials by designers through

understanding the characteristics and potential of materials and by knowing how they contribute to the sensory spatial experience. Physical building aspects of materials are considered in terms of the suitability of a material for a particular function in the building. Texture, color, surface finishes, etc., are also taken into consideration as aesthetic aspects of materiality. Further, materiality considers the cultural and contextual lens through which the building is made. The historical, cultural, regional, and local climatic conditions add another layer to materiality. Tactile and sensory experiences of the materials as experienced within the space are important to understand how they affect the experience of space. Environmental impacts and sustainability in terms of the building footprint and its impact on the environment have also been considered with a stronger emphasis in recent decades.

While tectonics and materiality are often understood from aesthetic and experiential perspectives, this study analyzes materiality as a means of reparation. It focuses on understanding how purpose-built Native centers use tectonics and materiality in creating a space that provides healing and restoration not only to its users but also collectively to its culture. Tectonics and materiality collectively and holistically contribute to the making and experiencing of spaces and the overall idea of cultural reparation. While reparation is often understood as the exchange of monetary help or the restorative act through the judicial system or social fabric, this research underscores the importance of architecture becoming reparative.

Gottfried Semper and Kenneth Frampton are pivotal contributors to the discourse on tectonics and materiality in architecture. Their contributions to the understanding of tectonics and its relationship to culture are unique. Semper's tectonic ideas were rooted in his belief that architectural origins are traced to the way primitive dwellings were made. His emphasis was on architectural evolution from "textiles, ceramics, wood, and others."¹⁰ Semper believed that tectonic elements formed the basic shelter for human protection. Additionally, these elements were symbolic in nature and carry cultural meaning.

Semper's writings which focus on the hearth, the roof, the enclosure, and the mound, highlight the cultural significance and illustrate human life and the symbolism of living spaces.¹¹ This was later developed in his writing *Der Stil*. He believed that material manipulation and assemblage were crucial to the expression of cultural values. The materials used were not to be arbitrary but were to be tied to cultural traditions and symbolic meaning.¹² Frampton, on the other hand, grounds architecture in its cultural and geographical context. Regional identity and its expressions were critical to Frampton's ideas of tectonics.¹³ His emphasis also underscores how architecture, structure, and construction methods were to be responsive



Figure 3. *Intellectual House, Seattle.* Author.

regarding local climate, availability/sourcing of materials, and innovative building methods.

Frampton in his work *Tectonic Culture* acknowledges the technological advancements in architecture but simultaneously advocates for a balanced approach, one that incorporates modern technology with respect for traditional construction techniques. His approach was that well-integrated technology should enhance rather than erase cultural identity. The essential tectonic components for Frampton were the detailing, the assemblage, and the craftsmanship in construction.¹⁴ This, he believed, contributed to the overall cultural expression of the building.

While the effects of globalization can be seen during Frampton's time, he critiques the homogenizing effects of globalization on architecture. His argument focuses on how tectonics rooted in regionality resists generic, homogenous, and universal architecture, which is more prevalent in contemporary globalized contexts. While Semper and Frampton contributed to and made the connection between tectonics and culture, Semper's ideas focused on architecture's primitive origins and the influence and symbolism of tectonic elements on materials, cultures, and construction. Frampton, on the other hand, emphasizes tectonics in its regional context,

expressing cultural identity in a quickly globalizing world. Both perspectives challenge and enable an understanding of how architecture engages with culture through tectonics and materiality.

CASE STUDIES:

All three case studies considered were designed by architect Johnpaul Jones of the Seattle-based architecture firm Jones and Jones. A Native American, Jones's work focuses on the many ways by which Native architecture can be a testament to the land and its people. Using the concept of four worlds, Jones' work aligns building designs with complementing the natural world, the animal world, the spirit world, and the human world.¹⁵ While this contrasts with what we see with Semper and Frampton who in many ways represent a Eurocentric and Western lens in conceptualizing spatial design, Jones' work doesn't contrast the land and its ecology, the people, and their culture. With each, the natural world designs are to work with the natural land and ecology that exists rather than against it. While each place and each thing has a spirit according to Native beliefs, turning that into a design approach to honor and celebrate the life and spaces of Native Americans is important to Jones.



Figure 4. Many Nations Longhouse, Eugene. Wikimedia Commons.

CASE STUDY 1: INTELLECTUAL HOUSE, UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON, SEATTLE, WA

The Intellectual House (IH) in Seattle is a Native American, purpose-built center on the University of Washington (UW), Seattle campus (Fig. 2). While Seattle is a vibrant PNW site known for its technological influences, the IH stands as a testament to an Indigenous identity shaped through education and community engagement. The IH on the University of Washington's Seattle campus is symbolic of the dedication to preserving Indigenous knowledge and making Indigenous presence solidified on a global campus.

As a sign of resilience, the IH's physical presence has been located ironically between two buildings named after colonizers.¹⁶ While there was a choice of two other sites, one of which would have been closer to Lake Washington, which is significant to the Coast Salish community, this site selection became a statement of resistance that symbolically manifests that 'We are still here.' While these communities have lived in these regions for thousands of years, with traditions and built spaces that richly celebrated community life, assimilation, epidemics, and colonization forced the wiping out of many tribes. This research on the presence of this architecture on university campuses signifies first, their presence, their sustained strivings, and their thriving amidst generational trauma and difficulty.

The IH was officially opened at UW in 2015 (Fig. 3). This facility is designed as a space where Native life could be celebrated and shared with non-Natives as well as down through the generations. Unassuming as it seems like a structure in the middle of all the older Collegiate- Gothic-styled towering campus buildings, and between some of the most newly built, sleek health and tech studies glass and steel buildings on campus, the IH stands with a unique symbolic and functional significance. It serves as a symbol of cultural resurgence and as a safe place to belong to the broader Native communities of the region. Designed to reflect Indigenous traditions and designed with Native materials such as Cedar planks and pillars, it collectively holds the aspirations, history, struggles, journey, and current place of being in its physical manifestation. The longhouse-styled facility offers spaces for collective gatherings of up to five hundred people along with a kitchen for traditional cooking and an open outdoor circular gathering space. It is landscaped with Native plants and incorporates rainwater harvesting systems.

The IH becomes central to revitalizing and sustaining Indigenous cultures on the campus. Its space is often used for Indigenous-related gatherings which include traditional songs and arts and crafts, which need to be preserved and provide economic opportunities for Indigenous artists. The UW plays a vital role in advancing knowledge, and the IH provides a unique setting for research and education focused on Indigenous-related issues. This fosters a broader and deeper

understanding of contemporary Native concerns and helps in attempts to mitigate them. With a keen focus on maintaining a structure that is aligned with the natural setting it sits in, the design of the building features sustainable building technologies and emphasizes energy efficiency. While financial constraints dampened some of the original design intent, the designers in conjunction with the stakeholders were able to bring about a center that primarily embodies various aspects of the culture. It serves as a bridge between Indigenous knowledge and non-Native scholarship. Furthermore, efforts were made to rename the street that the IH sits on with a Native name, which was successfully done in 2021.¹⁷ The second phase of the project is being financed now for an extension of the facility. The tectonic nature and the materiality-rich structure help Indigenous community members feel at home on a campus that could be alienating.

CASE STUDY 2: HOUSE OF WELCOME, EVERGREEN

STATE COLLEGE, OLYMPIA, WA

Set in the landscaped PNW is the Evergreen State College in Washington state. Within this haven is the Native cultural center - a gabled-style longhouse facility - The House of Welcome (Fig. 5). Native studies at the Evergreen State College began in 1972, which also called for a Native-styled facility on campus to engage scholars in understanding Indigenous history, life, and concerns within an academic setting. The House of Welcome opened in 1995, the first of its kind on a public university campus in the US. As an active center that hosts artists and events to advance the Northwest tribes and nations, the physical structure continues to shape the continuing contemporary interactions symbolically and functionally among Natives, but also non-Natives in the region, nationally, and internationally.¹⁸ The Cedar walls and pillars signify the traditional building styles of the region and represent the historical building traditions of the Coast Salish communities. The Quinault Indian Nation donated the wood that was used for this structure, and the Burke Museum is also said to have donated some of the original wooden posts used in the building called the Sea Monster House, which was a model longhouse exhibited during the 1962 World's Fair hosted by Seattle.¹⁹ Other tribes and nations contributed financially, culturally, and spiritually to the making of this structure. Again, designed by Johnpaul Jones, it reflects the care taken to balance the natural world with the built world.

The physical elements and plan of the House of Welcome reveal the functional and cultural intentions of sustaining the indigenous identity of the region and its role in shaping the ambiance of Evergreen State College. The House of Welcome's purpose extends beyond the Cedar walls. Its essence inspires others as it serves as a center for scholarly engagement, a platform for cultural learning, or a sanctuary for fostering connections. Aptly called the House of Welcome, it hosts students regionally, nationally, and internationally from Canada and

New Zealand too, expressing their shared Native experiences within this built environment and enriching the narrative of the Native diaspora in the region.

CASE STUDY 3: HOUSE OF MANY NATIONS, UNIVERSITY OF OREGON, EUGENE, OR

The Many Nations Longhouse on the University of Oregon (UO) campus was also designed by Johnpaul Jones. In the 1970s, Native students met together, and the Native American Students Union was formed. They met at a World War II barrack. Over the years, as this building deteriorated, a new structure was sought. Jones was approached to design a Kalapuya longhouse-styled facility to represent historically the ancestors who lived in the very same location many generations ago as First Nation people. The nine federally recognized tribes of Oregon contributed cash, material, and cultural leadership toward the formation of the structure.²⁰ A 3,500 sq. ft. structure, the longhouse features a rooftop garden with many of Oregon's Native plants, closely aligning with the sustainable UO practices and with the stewardship of land by Native Americans.

The longhouse opened in 2005 (Fig. 4), and it is said to have several material connections that make it a home to the Indigenous community. All the logs used are wood – “not sawn and polished and painted.”²¹ Maple hardwood flooring, a fire inside representing the grandmother, entry facing East toward the rising sun, and Cedar from tribal lands add to the specificity of recreating home, even though home meant different things for individual native users.

CONCLUSION:

1. TECTONICS AND MATERIALITY

In many ways, all three case studies show a coherence of ideas of hosting mainly members of the university Indigenous community, but also welcoming non-Native people to share in events, much like the historical function of the longhouse where members of multiple families used the longhouse as a space of gathering. The three case studies highlighted have an unassuming architectural demeanor. What could pass off as simple lean-to sheds, in reality, embody complex tectonics and materiality. All three underscore the strong regional architectural influences that are seen in the Cedar planks, paneling, columns, and beams.

In terms of their connections with Semper and Frampton, the three centers seem to align their structural concepts with some form of basket weaving, which was also an important art of Native Americans of this region. While not the same, basket weaving can be compared to the external walls of the longhouse, horizontal cedar planks are joined to vertical poles almost in a plaiting manner, one of the basket-weaving techniques.^{22,23} The structural expressions of these three built works, while elegant, are less articulated on the exterior,

but exhibit almost uniform cedar planks. They are starkly contrasted with other contemporary Indigenous structures. For example, the Aanischaukamikw Cree Cultural Institute



Figure 5. House of Welcome, Olympia. www.evergreen.edu/longhouse

by Ar. Douglas Cardinal and Rubin Rotman Architects or in the Seabird Island School designed by Patkau Architects, have a stronger structural expression.^{24,25}

Furthermore, we see a connection between tectonics and the materiality of these longhouses with Semper's and Frampton's concepts. Semper's theory of *The Four Elements of Architecture* points to architecture evolving mainly from textile forms where long fibers were threaded, twisted, and knotted together to initial wall coverings.²⁶ Similarly, in Frampton's idea of tectonics, the poetics of construction and expressive structure come together. Frampton goes on to distinguish between light and heavy material production for enclosures, where the light refers to wood construction with a strong tensile quality that aligns closer to a flexible material like textile and basket making.²⁷ Thus, we see how these longhouses compare with each other and Semper's and Frampton's concepts of tectonic quality and materiality.

2. CULTURAL REPARATION AND DIASPORIC IDENTITY THROUGH MATERIALITY

Longhouses on university campuses in the PNW have a deep cultural significance to Native life. They are symbolic of community, unity, and continuity of traditions. Within university campuses, they are the presence of a cultural identity. They serve as physical reminders of continued Native presence as a representation of 'We are still here,' and provide a space for

26. Semper, Gottfried, 'Preliminary Remarks on Polychrome Architecture and Sculpture in Antiquity' [1834], in *The Four Elements of Architecture and Other Writings*, trans. H. F. Mallgrave and W. Herrmann. Cambridge University Press, 1989.
27. Frampton, Kenneth., and John. Cava. *Studies in Tectonic Culture: The Poetics of Construction in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Architecture*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1995, 4-6.
28. Interview with Johnpaul Jones, Author. January 2023.