

THE NATIVE VOICE AS IT SPEAKS THROUGH THE ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN OF
THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN

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Abstract:

In museums, the Native Voice speaks in exhibitions most obviously through the objects on exhibit and the interpretive labels. On a more subtle level, the Native Voice can also speak through the built environment: not only in the physical galleries, but also in the building architecture. Before the design of the National Museum of the American Indian started, museum staff and the museum's architectural consultants held a series of consultations with Native people from both North and South America, asking them to speak about how the building and its exhibitions should reflect their cultures. The result was a document called "The Way of the People," which guided the design of the museum's buildings. Ultimately, the architectural design held to the principles in this document, so that the completed buildings embody indigenous cultural values and Native world views in their overall form, structure, materials, textures, layout, and architectural details. This presentation will review this consultative process and give an overview of the cultural symbolism embedded in the built environment of the National Museum of the American Indian.

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The subject of Native Voice in Museums is inherent to the foundational underpinnings of the National Museum of the American Indian. Native Voice, and specifically, the voice of Native cultural authority, is what guides our scholarship, our exhibitions, and our public programs. At the National Museum of the American Indian, Native Voice expresses—in both the written and the spoken word—the philosophies and stories that give rich meaning to the objects in our exhibitions.

But “Native Voice” is not just a presentational style in museums. It is not just an approach to exhibition development which may happen to be in vogue. And it is certainly not just a narrow subject of academic interest confined to the scholars on this program.

Native Voice implies that someone is listening to that voice—that, for any intimate exchange between the Native speaker and the museum visitor, both speaker and listener develop the sensitivity to relate to each other beyond a simple exchange of information, the skills to help convey and hear subtle nuances, the fluency to speak expressively and understand on many levels—at the vocal and auditory level, at the semantic level, at the tonal level—even at the unspoken level.

For the Native Voice to speak with eloquence in museums, it must, convey, in not only didactic but more importantly in intuitive fashion —feelings and colorations in meaning overlaid by the speaker’s views of the world, of reality, of history, and of cosmological contexts.

The National Museum of the American Indian had its first experience with Native voice back in 1990, when, in starting the architectural planning for its new buildings, staff held a series of approximately 2 dozen consultations with Native peoples in which we asked them, “How do you want this new museum to represent your culture? What stories do you want this new museum to tell visitors about your tribal history and people?” We were inviting the Native voice to speak, and speak with authority, which frankly was somewhat of a paradigm shift in the museum world 15 years ago.

This exercise was complicated by the sheer numbers of communities to be represented by one, single building. There are 562 federally recognized tribes in the US, plus many non-recognized tribes, plus 619 First Nations communities in Canada and 800 culture groups in Latin America. And each is speaking with its own Native voice. Here is a sampling of the diversity of comments offered at those consultations:

- “The National Museum of the American Indian should be a living museum, not formal and quiet. Noise and confusion are OK. You should hear the dogs barking.”
- “Have horses.”
- “Put in a circular dirt floor for dancing.”

- “Don’t design the entrance with monumental stairs, or make it neo-classical. Rather, one should go down to enter, like entering a kiva.”
- “Incorporate humor in the building.”
- “The Copper River people of Alaska build houses with a place for smoke in the middle, and a big steam bath right behind.”
- “The entrance should face east (which, by the way, is what the majority of tribes told us).
- But in Vancouver, the North West coast tribes said, “Our doors always face the beach.”
- “[For the Apache] there are always 4 of things: 4 sacred colors corresponding to the 4 directions, 4 sacred trees, 4 bridges. Things always go clockwise. Everything we do is round.”
- Many participants (but not all) commented that the circle is important. For example, “For the Pueblo and Hopi tribes, it is the shape of kivas, and for almost everyone else, the shape of ceremonial spaces.”¹
- And during our consultations with Latin American Native leaders, they said, “Our ancient structures were built of stone according to the structure of the heavens.”

It would have been easy for the National Museum of the American Indian to take the superficial approach to solving this problem by creating an architectural amalgam of cultural symbolism, by sprinkling within and without a neutral architectural form, a sampling of references to carefully

¹ Smithsonian Institution, Office of Design and Construction, *The Way of the People* (Washington DC, 1991), pp. 16-22.

selected tribes and communities. But the museum, realizing the necessity to go deeply into the meaning behind all these voices clamoring for a presence in our building, directed its architects to incorporate broader values generally held in common by Native peoples. The museum also consciously placed importance on the *tone* of the voice speaking in our museum, so that the listener, the visitor entering the museum, might sense intuitively what was being said, without relying on explicit and didactic written explanations. These values and tonal messages took on the form of design guidelines codified in one of the first founding documents of the museum, “The Way of the People.” This document eventually became legally incorporated into the design architect’s contract with the Smithsonian, so that the architect² was bound to honor these “soft,” non-engineering requirements.

What were some of these values? Because of the breadth of Native communities that this museum would have to represent, we were finding ourselves approaching the spiritual, cosmological, and metaphysical bedrock upon which almost all Native peoples of the hemisphere rested. Although there could be many such values identified, the ones probably having the strongest influence on building form and function were: (1) Native views of living in the universe; (2) importance of balance and harmony; (3) notion of preparation; and (4) extension of welcome.

Native views of living in the universe

² The architectural concept was developed by Douglas Cardinal, a Native architect, working under subcontract to GBQC Architects. The architect of record is a joint venture between Smith Group and Polshek & Partners. In both cases, the members of the Native American Design Collaborative were subcontractors.

It is evident from several of the above comments made by Native participants in our early museum consultations, and from many others that are transcribed in “The Way of the People,” that Native people find this to be a good universe. Vine Deloria says, “There may be, and often are, evil spirits in it, but on the whole it is a pleasant place and it is a place that demands our involvement, appreciation, and respect.”³ On the other hand, he says, “Christianity proclaims a good creation...but within a very short time the universe has crashed into evil because of the disobedience of one of the minor, and not too intelligent species. Nature becomes evil and hostile towards our species.”⁴

Furthermore, Native peoples see the universe as alive. Deloria continues, “Tribal peoples almost unanimously declare that [the universe] is a living thing. The universe is a fabric, a symphony, a tapestry; everything is connected to everything else and everything is alive and responsible to its relationships in every way.”

During the consultations, Native participants almost without exception expressed this embracing of our universe by requesting that the building incorporate overt references to the physical world we live in. And so to express an anchoring to the earth, the architectural form was designed to evoke rock formations sculpted by natural forces such as wind and water. There is flowing water and there is still water, examples of the two sides of the dualistic structure of the Quechua universe. The National Mall for the most part reflects a certain symmetrical formality and decorum symbolizing the serious governmental functions seated there. But at the museum entrance this formality is replaced by a seemingly wild and unmanicured wetland like the one

³ Vine Deloria, *For This Land: Writings on Religion in America* (New York: Routledge, 1999) “Christianity and Indigenous Religion,” p. 147.

⁴ Deloria, p. 147

that existed before the arrival of Europeans. Horticultural specimens on the museum landscape are 100 percent indigenous, representing the northern woodlands, the meadow, the swamp, and the crops most important to Native tribes of North America: corn, beans, squash, and tobacco. The museum floor plan is laid out with direct references to the four cardinal directions throughout the building. Starting with the east-facing entrance, these are intrinsically related to the paths of the heavenly bodies, all of which anchor and orient us to the earth we live on. The earth and heavenly bodies continue to be represented throughout the building and exhibition galleries in numerous ways. The planetary paths around the North Star, Polaris, are etched in the museum's entrance plaza in the exact configuration that they took during the birthday of the museum—the date its founding legislation was signed. Lunar references include the spiral petroglyph in Chaco Canyon that symbolizes the 18.5 year cycle of the lunar standstill, reproduced on the south plaza of the museum, as well as light sconces in the main theater representing the phases of the moon. Solstitial and equinoxial lines of sunrise and sunset are inscribed in the floors in subtle ways; slit windows that may seem randomly placed to some actually mark these astronomic events. This building is definitely not the neoclassical museum-temple where the visitor ascends via monumental stairs away from the earth to the Muses, the daughters of heavenly Zeus. In fact, to enter the National Museum of the American Indian, one goes down into the earth, as was requested during the consultations.

Importance of balance and harmony

The request on the part of consultation participants for references to astronomical cycles, the daily and seasonal life cycles in the buildings of the National Museum of

the American Indian⁵ also allude to the broader value of balance and harmony within the Native ethos. In his chapter, “Christianity and Indigenous Religion,” Vine Deloria says that Native people believe that “All persons are subject to certain cosmic rhythms and strive to complete their duties within this context...Human life must move must move in a cosmic rhythm with the rest of nature and this trip must be acted out in basic ceremonial form. The majority of tribal religions ...look at religion as a healing and balancing process...the balancing that must be done is that of ensuring that every living thing finds and continues on the path of individual growth and expression.... the concern with directions and colors, and special circles and medicine wheels all seek wholeness and completion...”⁶

The circle as a referent to balance and harmony, to completion (as in “coming full circle”), is evident in numerous places within the National Museum of the American Indian. The most obvious is the central gathering space, the Potomac (an Algonquian word which means, “place where goods are brought”). Above the Potomac is a circular dome, stepped rather than smooth in design (an explicit deference to the stepped articulation of Meso-American and Incan ancient architecture as opposed to the smooth domes of the Roman Empire). The main theater is a perfect circle, specifically designed to evoke the feeling of being in a circular clearing in the woods on a starry night—the ideal setting for story-telling.

⁵ The National Museum of the American Indian has three buildings: the George Gustav Heye Center in New York, the Cultural Resources Center in Suitland, Maryland, and the museum on the National Mall in Washington, DC.

⁶ Deloria, p. 147

By no means is the circle a universal symbol of such cultural importance in all Native architecture; witness the rectilinear wood structures of the Northwest Pacific Coast tribes and the magnificent stone structures of the ancient Incan and Meso-American civilizations. The museum, and specifically its director, Rick West, had to make a conscious decision to honor the circle at the risk of excluding the other Native communities. In describing the views of one particular North American tribe, Paul Radin writes, “The Oglala believe the circle to be sacred because the Great Spirit caused everything to be round except stone. ... The sun and the sky, the earth and the moon are round like a shield, though the sky is deep like a bowl. Everything that breathes is round like the stem of a plant. It is also the symbol of the circle that makes the edge of the world and therefore of the four winds that travel there. Consequently it is also the symbol of the year. The day, the night, and the moon go in a circle above the sky. Therefore, the circle is a symbol of these divisions of time and hence the symbol of all time.”⁷ In these ways, the circle symbolizes the harmonic integration of universal phenomena honored by many indigenous cultures, even those for whom the circle is not such a dominant symbol.

Harmony and balance continued to be integrated in museum operations on a day-to-day basis. Blessings were conducted during important construction milestones. Now within various gathering and ceremonial spaces of the museums three buildings, the museum invites Native peoples to conduct blessings during the equinoxes, the solstices, or at other times for the spiritual health of the collections and peoples housed within. In this way, Native spiritual practices, and specifically the voice of

⁷ Paul Radin, *Primitive Man as a Philosopher* (New York, 1957), p. 227.

Native prayer, literally continue to speak in the museum. For Native peoples, although the world we live in is not evil, it is not neutral either. It is an active force that demands our participation.⁸ Participation in ceremonial blessings brings balance back into the physical environment of the museum and into the lives of the people who work there.

Notion of preparation

Anticipating that visitors arriving from the neighboring museums—the National Air and Space Museum being our closest neighbor—could arrive at this rather different place quite suddenly, with no warning or chance for transition from more technological busy environments, the National Museum of the American Indian specifically introduced into the sequence of visitor experiences a “calming down” transition time—specifically, the five-minute walk from the entrance of the site, along falling and flowing water on one side and a dense plantings of wooded landscaping on the other, leading to the main entrance. Once having entered the museum, rather than being thrust suddenly into the Potomac the visitor continues this transition by tracing a downward, clockwise path, screened by a copper wall of oversized basket-weave texture, until finally entering the heart of the museum. Denise Scott Brown, the museum’s architectural planning consultant, likened the experience to making ones way across stepping stones in a Japanese garden, requiring a deliberate refocusing of one’s attention as part of the arrival process. This preparation sequence is consistent with the North American Native custom of preparing the mind prior to the act of seeking, such as a ceremonial practice or entry into non-ordinary worlds. Tedlock says, “The body or mind must be purified or emptied...In this

⁸ Deloria, p. 147.

emptying of the everyday mind, the seeker humbles himself.”⁹ In the words of Black Elk, he must see himself as “lower than even the smallest ant,”¹⁰ meaning he must let go of the self, which belongs to the calculative world of ego and object.

In this way preparation is related to respect: respect for the experience one is about to enter into. And so in the National Museum of the American Indian, the preparation experience is supported with spaces specifically designed to encourage not only a calming, but also respect for this Native Place on the National Mall. These spaces, such as the Lelawi Theater and the Group Orientation Room, are round spaces where the museum, both technologically and personally, can introduce newly arriving visitors to the museum with the same tones of humility and respect prior to their “act of seeking” of Native culture.

Extension of welcome

If in the conversation between the Native speaker and the museum visitor protocol calls for respect, the Native Voice also speaks with tones of warmth and welcome. Welcome is extended explicitly by the museum’s slogan, “Welcome to a Native Place.” But as preparation is related to respect, so is welcome, for in any culture welcome is extended to a guest under the expectation of respect for the host’s home.

The extension of welcome comes not just from the voices of the limited number of museum staff, but from the larger, multi-generational Native community, a community which extends to

⁹ Tedlock, Dennis and Barbara, ed., *Teachings from the American Earth: Indian Religion and Philosophy* (New York: Liveright, 1975), p. xv.

¹⁰ *Black Elk Speaks*, p.30

even seemingly inanimate members Native universe. And so whose voice first extends the welcome? How about the voice of rocks? At the entrances to the museum site are about 40 large boulders the museum calls, “Grandfather Rocks,” who traveled from Canada under the blessing of the Montagnais First Nations in Quebec. The rocks welcome visitors to the site, while symbolizing the ancient and enduring Native cultures and their connections to the land.

Welcome is evident in the architectural form of the building. During the consultations when Native people saw pictures of the East Wing of the National Gallery of Art on the sister site to ours across the National Mall, they told us that it was very masculine building. Our Native architectural consultants without a second thought developed a scheme for a feminine building, and one that would still fit appropriately on the National Mall, among all the other male buildings. So the National Museum of the American Indian exudes warmth with its golden-toned Kasota limestone specified for cladding, invites with a concave entry that shelters visitors from the elements, presents itself in soft, rounded forms—all contributing to an architecture that speaks with undeniable tones of welcome.¹¹ And lest the intuitively-impaired miss this message of welcome, the very first media experience is a 10-meter curved wall upon which are projected in sequence dozens of Native people saying “welcome” in their own languages.

Conclusion:

For the Native Voice to participate in a heartfelt conversation with the museum visitor, both require an awareness of the each others’ culture, history, and world views. Meaningful discourse between two persons can take place only with full awareness of each others’ *ethos*—the tone,

¹¹ Rare among North American Native tribes, hewn stone is another referent to Incan and Meso-American ancient architecture.

character, and quality of our respective lives—and about each others’ *worldviews*—our respective concepts of nature, self, and society.

Introducing Native Voice in the museum experience requires going deeply into how Native Voice can speak on these many levels to the museum visitor, even in the subtleties of the built environment. The built environment, lacking explicit textual labels, directs focus away from didactically *analyzing* the tones and nuances of conversation towards intuitively *creating* them. The museum has consciously minimized the presence of such labels that explain the built environment, recognizing that there is risk in slipping into an unbalanced reliance on an overly explicit description. Beeman Logan, a Seneca medicine man, tells us, we underestimate our own potential as human beings to intuit what is being said. He says, “You have to learn to use your eyes. You have to learn to see with your *eyes shut*.”¹²

¹² Tedlockp. xxi.