

## ANALYZING INDIGENEITY IN ACADEMIC AND ARCHITECTURAL FRAMEWORKS

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### Abstract

While the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada fosters agency for Indigenous Canadians, this mandate like others, attempts to Indigenize an existing colonial system. The acknowledgement of the Indigenous experience within academic institutions must begin with a deconstruction of educational frameworks that are enforced by pre-existing neo-colonial policies and agendas. The colonial worldview on institutional frameworks is rooted in systemic understandings of property, ownership and hierarchy that are supported by patriarchal policies. These pedagogies do not reflect Indigenous beliefs or teachings, resulting in an assimilation or dissociation of Indigenous members into Western-centric educational systems. Addressing this disconnect through Indigenizing existing institutional frameworks within state control favours a system that re-affirms settler-societies. The tokenization and lack of Indigenous participation in the decision-making process reinforces misinformed action towards reconciliation. decentralized. The case studies explored emphasize the rediscovery of an authentic culture-specific vernacular, facilitation of customs through programme, and the fundamental differences between Indigenous and colonial worldviews. The critical analysis of these emerging academic typologies may continue to inform future architectural projects while fostering greater responsibility for architects and positions of authority to return sovereignty to Indigenous communities and incorporate design approaches that embody Indigenous values. This paper will propose the decolonization of academic frameworks to reconstruct postcolonial methodologies of educational architecture that serve Indigenous knowledge and agency.

*Keywords: Indigenous, decolonization, architectural design, indigenizing education.*

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### 1. Introduction

Canada's colonial history must be contextualized before making the case for decolonizing its academic institutions. Described as settler colonialism, Canada's formation and occupation is "a unique form of imperialism that re-settled large populations of European settlers onto Indigenous territories to help facilitate the dispossession of Indigenous lands and waterways [for] the financial wealth of natural resource extraction" (Manuel & Derrickson, 2016). As a result of Western land occupation, Indigenous people were stripped of their cultures, ideologies, and livelihoods through reservation land parcelization and the assimilative policy of the Indian Act (1876). Its lasting effects contribute to the intergenerational and cultural genocide inflicted on these communities. Settlers understand land as property to be acquired, whereas the Indigenous vision finds common roots in a relationship to the land as sacred living ancestors or as places of origin that cannot be owned by an individual. Indigenous ways of knowing extends to both the natural and built environment as settings of generational lived experiences which is central to understand what they learn and how they approach education (Chakasim, 2010). Therefore, decolonizing academic institutions, frameworks, and environments must include a decentralized approach rooted in action-based, and post-colonial methodologies to better serve the education of Indigenous communities. For this transition to occur, there must be given an opportunity for self-determination either through leveraging Indigenous knowledge and/or by centering local community participation and agency in the conception of the architecture in their communities.

## 2. Decolonizing academic institutions

For Indigenous peoples, culture is an element retained “despite interaction with the West” and therefore, is a form of resistance and self-identity (Castagno & McKinley, 2008). Assimilation into western-centric educational systems proves to be detrimental due to the intrinsic desire to retain the ontologies that separate Indigenous peoples from the rest of the population (Castagno & McKinley, 2008). Furthermore, academic institutions have assimilated generational Indigenous teachings with deep ancestral roots and ideologies that subsequently remove Indigenous education from historical teachings and therefore reinforce paternalistic authority and creates boundaries in education (George, 2019). With lack of resources, participation, funding, and academic preparation, many generations of Indigenous academics have been failed by a system that in its origin is constructed in neo-colonialist beliefs (Frawley, Larkin, & Smith, 2017). However, academic institutions within state control lend themselves to favor indigenization of this existing framework, rather than demolishing the neo-colonial, settler-society reaffirming system rather than rebuilding a system that values Indigenous people’s land and rights (George, 2019). It is also crucial for community members to be given prominent roles of involvement within academia, and to be viewed as equals in the development of the curricula. By utilizing chief and parental input, educational institutions can tailor and refine systems to become more relevant and appropriate for the cultural groups.

These systemic changes would involve addressing the increase of diversity in educational avenues and increase participation of elders and community members in school activities. Furthermore, responsive schooling facilities must cater towards the physical and cultural environment in which they are situated (Castagno & McKinley, 2008). The Indigenization of academia plays into systemic roots of traumatic and oppressive policies. This is identified as a form of “tokenization” within many Canadian institutions in which professors or students of Indigenous heritage are recruited to meet quota and indigenize the academic population. This contributes to a sense paternalism of neo-colonialism with a multi-cultural agenda that benefits the institution (George, 2019). Although these educational policies attempt to integrate Indigenous awareness, they do not validate the need for Indigenous teaching and the protection of Indigenous academics, teachings, and land. A notable hesitation for Indigenous academics is this dependence on state. As most Collegiate institutions are heavily state controlled, they maintain a generational affirmation of oppression and control towards Indigenous people (George, 2019). To bring about an intergenerational healing of these injustices within a Canadian framework, policy driven academic institutions must revert to decolonization before indigenizing through qualitative and action based postcolonial policies separate from political agenda (George, 2019). The design of academic spaces that reconstruct educational frameworks utilizing community collaboration addresses the reinstatement of Indigenous autonomy.

## 3. Leveraging indigenous knowledge

Indigenous society believes knowledge is intrinsic to the being who is born complete; as a descendant and ancestor within their own lineage, each individual holds knowledge of “the past, present, and future” (Cardinal, 2012). Inversely, Douglas Cardinal (2012) observes that the hierarchical worldview positions knowledge as separate from the being who seeks it and is validated by those revered as more knowledgeable within institutional frameworks. These contradicting worldviews and their conceptualizations of one’s relationship to knowledge result in differences in architecture’s engagement with education and how the built environment facilitates learning. Reverence for knowledge, from an Indigenous worldview, guided Cardinal’s approach for the Oujé-Bougoumou Village in Northern Quebec’s James Bay region (Cardinal, 2012), ensuring the embodiment of Indigenous knowledge into the governing principles of the village’s buildings (Figure 3).

Douglas Cardinal (2012) emphasized that his technical expertise and Indigenous knowledge from his Blackfoot Métis heritage did not qualify him to dictate the needs of the Oujé-Bougoumou community at the onset of this project. To prevent the colonial impact caused by determination through an outsider’s perspective, Cardinal involved the community’s ideas, way of life, and vision into the ideation of the project through a comprehensive consultation process (Williams, 2013). This gave rise to two main objectives, upholding prominent facets of the “life, world-view, values and rituals of the Cree” and following the long-established precedent of a Cree village layout with building expressions of traditional Oujé-Bougoumou homes (2013). For first objective, the heating method emphasized fundamental values of a cyclical economy by incorporating a large waste-product-fueled furnace that would burn by-products from nearby sawmills and distribute warmth through a network of below-grade pipes (Stevens & Reid Acland, 1999, p. 8). This innovative approach demonstrates sensitivity towards the environment through waste reduction and ensured longevity by attempting to preserve the wellness of the environment for

future generations. Each building in the community was thus a product of clear articulation of the community's desires, ensuring self-determination not only through formal built expression, function, and use. By thoroughly consulting all residents, regardless of their age and role in the community, the belief of each individual's capability and intrinsic knowledge applicable to the formation of their lived environment was observed.

The masterplan significantly valued the relationships buildings would have to one another and to their physical site. Such is the case with the Waapihitiwewan school, which intentionally inhabits the spiritual interstitial space amid "home and the world" to gesture towards the future of its students who may pursue higher education and professional careers (Williams, 2013). Within the school, shoe storage by the entrance promotes the wearing of traditional moccasins while indoors because of the sandy site, which went a long way towards ensuring the continuation of the cultural practice of removing outdoor shoes before entering buildings (Stevens & Reid Acland, 1999). Additionally, the proposed design provided a view of Lake Opemiska to every building on the site which, through its continual visualisation, established its central relationship to the village (Williams, 2013). These considerations, at different scales of design and planning, demonstrate a commitment to the embodiment of Indigenous knowledge in how this village would serve the community as well as the natural environment, strengthening the presence of site in the community's daily experience. The aligning of cultural practices and views with the ways in which the built form facilitates daily life significantly facilitated autonomy in determining how community needs would be addressed while preserving and reflecting their world views.

#### **4. Incorporating indigenous community participation and agency**

The Seabird Island School was designed by John and Patricia Patkau in 1988, located on the North end of the Fraser Valley in Agassiz, British Columbia (Figure 2). Its significance derives from the school's remote context and culture, environmental forces, and building technology (Frampton, 1997). The leading principle behind the design was to provide an educational space for the community where cross-cultural and intergenerational relationships can be fostered to resist the loss of tradition and language. Moreover, Patkau valued Indigenous knowledge to inform and project how the building may accommodate for multiple generations to follow (The Canadian Architect, 1993). Its architecture prioritized the ownership and agency of the Coast Salish Community which compelled the rediscovery of an authentic culture-specific vernacular to bring Indigenous identity to the forefront of the project (Chakasim, 2010). Formally, it looked to architectural elements such as the roof, columns, and walls for implied cultural meaning rather than representation through mimetic expressions and/or pastiche (Gruft, 1992).

The interactive consultative process fostering a co-designing relationship between Patkau Architects and the client became integral to the success of the school. The facility was funded by the federal government, however members of the Seabird Island School Band echoed concerns regarding the characteristics of educational facilities. Students in the area described how the organization and material language of schools resonated with their negative experiences associated with the residential school system (Patkau, 2018). In an effort to break away from the typical form of educational facilities, the laminated timber frame and cedar shingles drew from a deep respect for the manual construction, and totemic elements associated with the Pacific Northwest vernacular (Chakasim, 2010). Notably, the school is the largest edifice on the reserve thus its spatial planning was designed to accommodate community events while the educational spaces integrated farming gardens to pass on agricultural skills to the next generation. Formally, the design responds to the site by using large sculptural volumes on the North side to mediate environmental factors such as harsh winds by diverting it away from the front of the building (The Architectural Review, 1992).

The construction of the school was significant as it provided a skills-learning opportunity for members of the Band; it placed the trust and responsibility on the community to build the school on their own. Its tectonics expressed the capabilities of modern technology coupled with Indigenous traditions of construction as a cooperative approach. The construction was informed by traditional Salish ways of building in heavy logs although it was hybridized to suit its complex formal gestures (The Canadian Architect, 1993). Patkau was committed to developing a framing model and repetitive structural system that aligned with the technical capacity of the community. Due to the project's complex geometry and the limitations of 2D drawings, the community frequently referred to a physical framing model to understand, scale and cut the structural members on site (Patkau, 2018). Although this is unconventionally practiced in Western construction, the project "reveals an Aboriginal world view through a type of hand-crafted construction exercise prompting a cultural response," (Chakasim, 2010). The Seabird Island School is also referenced as a catalyst for new construction of schools in the region being built by and for Indigenous communities (Canty, 1992).

## 5. Retaining indigeneity and authenticity

Although the previous projects aim to engage and design Indigenous spaces, the final case study is challenged by decentralized techniques within the framework of urban contexts, technical circumstances, and city-enforced building laws. The Centre for Native Child and Family Services intends to “create a place that would reconnect urban aboriginals with nature in the heart of the city and project a bold visual presence for the First Nations community” (Archdaily, 2011) (Figure 3). However, the building’s location in Toronto’s downtown core limits design possibilities and encourages more regular typologies based off zoning and code requirements. This questions whether Indigenous architectural design should integrate within the existing structure or if city planning systems should be decentralized. These discussions do not only criticize the Centre for Native Child and Family Services from a designer’s perspective, but they also question the flexibility of Toronto’s urban context. Programmatically, there are very few features that point to the Indigenous practices that the building intends to represent. Rather, the spatial organizations are more reminiscent of typical state-influenced building standards. Neglecting to create a design dialog with the natural and urban contexts, the building reverts to tokenizing various stereotypically Indigenous elements. This is exemplified in interior, where a rounded ‘longhouse’ room marks the only deviation from a typical floor plan and glazing features animal etchings. The roof, which serves as the primary natural space, it incorporates an igloo-like dome and fire pit, both of which alludes to mimetic forms of Indigeneity.

Failing to address the colonized aspects of design can enforce existing traumas and hesitations for Indigenous communities that will further enforce social barriers in urban contexts (Frawley, Larkin, & Smith, 2017). Hirini Matunga suggests Indigenous architecture should be one unique architectural typology, rather than an adoption of Westernized building ideologies (Matunga, 2018). He emphasizes an awareness towards the evolution of Indigenous architecture and its correlation to modern design due to the impacts of colonization (2018). The design of the Seabird Island School presents a more successful design which in its sensitivity to Indigenous ideologies and most significantly, inclusion of community while the Oujé-Bougoumou Village emphasizes the linkage of residents to their living environment through visual and functional means (The Canadian Architect, 1993; Stevens & Reid Acland, 1999). Despite these three precedents sharing the opportunity to create space for Indigenous communities, which is of value and necessity, not all have a profound understanding of Indigenous architectural typology and community demand. Most importantly, there is a reverence for the cultural and sacred history of their colonized land.

## 6. Conclusion

Along with more socially and circular-driven issues that Indigenous communities face in education, the lack of Indigenous culture and reverence present in architectural practice and the conception of space acts as a barrier to reconciliation and decolonization of land. To support facilities and overall education more adequately for Indigenous students, state-enforced-institutions within architectural practice must commit to decolonizing existing frameworks that reinforce existing trauma and obstruct pathways for rectification (George, 2019). Ultimately, existing academic facilities and architectural spaces exist on land that holds Indigenous value and meaning (George, 2019). The active analysis of these emerging typologies may continue to inform future projects and instigate a deeper understanding of the architect’s responsibility towards returning sovereignty to these communities.

### *Acknowledgments*

Although providing opinions on this subject, none of the authors of this paper belong to the cultural and racial groups discussed. Rather, our paper proposes an open discourse on the issues and themes educational architecture faces with respect to addressing indigeneity through evidence and precedent. We will discuss how designers (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) have addressed the needs of these populations through their work, and the implications of such precedents. We would like to thank Kenneth J. (Jake) Chakasim for his thoughtful insights into the Indigenous perspectives on institutional architectures

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