



The construction site for Design Build Utah's latest project. Photo courtesy of Hiroko Yamamoto

How Indigenous Architects, Artists, and Activists Are Using Design to Restore Tribal Sovereignty

“We are not subjects, we’re citizens”

By Abigail Glasgow

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 SAVE

Many non-natives have been conditioned to accept the notion that Indigenous people and their culture are extinct. This collective erasure means that Indigenous folks, with 574 recognized tribes in the United States alone, and their access to quality housing, infrastructure, and education are severely impacted. These things are either taken from them or ignored by our history books and our government—who to date have not properly honored land treaties with tribes made centuries ago.

According to the Navajo Housing Authority, more than half of the reservations’ structures are either dilapidated or require serious repairs, and 39% of the housing is overcrowded. Twenty percent of these homes are not connected to a public electric utility, while 30% are reportedly without access to a public water supply. For the few Indigenous households that do have access to water, their proximity to tailings and contaminants from a history of land extraction impacts water quality, ultimately informing major public health disparities.



Chipping away at the machinery of the United States’ colonial history and its impact on tribal sovereignty requires greater actions beyond changing Columbus Day to

Indigenous People's Day, or adding Native American Heritage Month to the calendar—and, thankfully, there are Indigenous architects and artists that have already been working on it.



Cornelius's Indian Community School in Franklin, Wisconsin, seeks to combat a history where "education was used as a tool of colonization and assimilation." Photo: Timothy Hursley

For Studio:indigenous founder Chris Cornelius, educating others about Indigenous presence reveals itself through his architecture. Having grown up in housing provided by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, also referred to as HUD Houses, Cornelius knows firsthand how Indigenous input was left out of solutions for reservation living, sharing that the HUD house model seems to have been copy-and-pasted across North America.

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This homogeneous planning lacks both an understanding of how tribal climates vary and how to leverage input from the community—there has been no sense, he says, of how Indigenous families might use their space for ceremony, for government, or for commerce. “When we leave out design, we’re leaving out culture and environmental responsibility,” Cornelius adds. This is what informed his architectural practice, which emphasizes indigenous ways of life and principles.

Cornelius says that honoring how housing developments are deployed combats the historical lack of care given to HUD houses on reservations. In a prototype he conceptualized this year called Not My HUD House, the architect explores the features that are staples of indigenous lifestyle that his home failed to include, from a porch and a place for a fire to a view of the sky.

Cornelius has also taken this approach directly to the education system. In fact, his first big project was the Indian Community School in Franklin, Wisconsin, which created a space for learning that seeks to combat a history where “education was used as a tool of colonization and assimilation.” Reflecting on the United States’ forcing of Indigenous students to go to boarding schools, cut their hair, change their names, and replace their religion and language, the school—which he built with Antoine Predock over 20 years ago—prioritizes indigenous principles down to the way spaces are named. “We removed all institutional names,” Cornelius explains. “It’s not a cafeteria, it’s Feast; it’s not called a lobby, it’s called Community; instead of a theater, it’s Drum.”

With his work, Cornelius reclaims space through design that validates and centers on indigenous life. It proves that what the colonizers took away—a highly functional political and economic system, plentiful land stewardship, and a culture that values relationship and community—is here to stay.

What is here to stay is also a people that are not a monolith: The United States’ aforementioned 574 tribes each have their own set of customs, languages, and systems of government. According to Tammy Eagle Bull, the first Native American in the U.S. to become a licensed architect, conflating the needs of Indigenous peoples is “the mistake many architects make when trying to work with tribes, often coming to a tribe with *their* interpretation.”

A group photo of Design Build Utah's current cohort. Photo courtesy of Hiroko Yamamoto

For this reason, the students at Design Build Utah in Bluff are incredibly intentional about how they work with local clients. This year's cohort, before committing to a 24-week program that focuses on conceptualizing and building an affordable home for a Navajo Nation resident, spent a year taking courses that focused on public interest design and how to reject a history of white savior-ism when it comes to housing solutions on reservations. After spending 12 weeks designing a prototype this past summer with the help of locals providing feedback in interviews, the eight students involved set out to build a home for their client without "any preconceived notions or tropes about Native culture," as student Tom McKean puts it.

The result, entitled Still Point, seeks to create a sense of stillness for a client who has lived away from her family for 50 years in multiple homes. Its features include an entryway that doubles as a greenhouse, a patio roof, an outdoor kitchen, concrete flooring that stores solar energy as heat, and a foundation that comprises affordable materials that non-architects can learn to work with more easily. They've even worked with the client so she can expand upon her home in the future, should she want or need. What's more, once they wrap the project in December, the cohort will publish what they call a building journal that details materials used, construction drawings,

expansion plans—basically an open book to the project—so others (local residents, organizations, or firms) can mimic it for their own reservation solutions.

One of the climate lounges at Talk to Me About Water. Photo courtesy of Amelia Winger-Bearskin

Making blueprints widely accessible and creating frameworks that can be iterated across reservations is not only necessary but urgent when it comes to presenting Indigenous communities with equitable opportunity. According to Preston Sanchez, a Senior Indigenous Justice Attorney at the ACLU of New Mexico, this means legal frameworks. To combat the infamous white supremacist phrase “kill the Indian, save the man” and the devastating impact of assimilation on Indigenous students, Sanchez is currently working to pass The Tribal Remedy Framework. “It’s the community’s response to the failures by the state of New Mexico and the system to educate students adequately while meeting their needs in an equitable manner,” he says.

To bridge the glaring gap in resources between students who live on reservations and their counterparts, the legislation calls for state investment in community hubs and tribal libraries with access to resources like tutoring, high speed internet, and quality technology. Without this, Indigenous students are relegated to long commutes for resources or schools that do not serve their needs. According to Tammy Eagle Bull,

“Most tribal communities may get a new school once every 60 years or so—they are way past their design life.”

Victor Lopez-Carmen, an MD Candidate at Harvard whose resume touts employers like the White House and UN Global Indigenous Youth Caucus, emphasizes how health care is a critical component in order for native communities to thrive. “The Indian Health Service is funded less than any other government-run health care program,” he explains. “For 15 out of the 16 leading causes of death in the United States, Natives have the highest rates out of any other race.” This dates back to Indigenous tribes being forced out of their own land and onto land that was thought to have less fertile soil so they couldn’t cultivate food as they had been, alongside colonizers’ mass slaughtering of their main food source, buffalo. So from Lopez-Carmen’s perspective, the solution for disenfranchisement both lies in reinvigorating community gardens and bringing more Indigenous folks into the medical field.

The artist Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds’s *Old Indian Tricks* on view at Hannah Traore Gallery. Photo courtesy of Hannah Traore Gallery

According to Lopez-Carmen, only 11% of U.S. medical schools have a curriculum on indigenous health. This lack of representation has perpetuated an ignorance that artist and self-proclaimed science storyteller Amelia Bearskin seeks to combat through her work. “I often use that famous phrase that the future is here, it’s just not evenly distributed,” she shares. “So, for instance, water will be a crisis for all of us one day, but currently those shouldering most of the burden are the global Indigenous.”

Having endured extraction and pollution of their ecosystem, one in 10 Native Americans lack access to safe tap water or basic sanitation. Through her initiative Talk

to Me About Water, Bearskin is building climate lounges that will pop-up in public spaces—libraries, museums, art weeks, conferences—to congregate passersby around the fundamental role water plays in climate restoration and, by consequence, reservation restoration. Bearskin is awakening the community to the role water plays in tribal sovereignty by combining water sound baths with embodied land practices.

Across housing solutions and improved education pipelines, Indigenous leaders in design, art, and activism are refusing to accept colonial erasure. “[The U.S.] spends a lot of time understanding other countries more than [their] own indigenous reality,” shares Edgar Heap of Birds, whose latest work is on view at [Hannah Traore Gallery](#) in New York. “We are not subjects, we’re citizens.” At the forefront of effective solutions is the drive to preserve all facets of indigenous culture. So be it through legal frameworks or design school initiatives, the ethos of [Indigenous Cultures Institute](#), shared by Bobbie Garza Hernandez, reads as a universal staple to the movement: “We’re just trying to help the community understand the value and beauty of their indigeneity.”

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