

Browning Visioning Project

1998 ACSA Collaborative Practice Award

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In 1996 Earl Old Person, chairman of the Blackfeet Tribe, requested "a design document to aid us in our planning process" for the Blackfeet Nation. The Blackfeet Nation is in the northwest corner of Montana and is bounded by the Rocky Mountains and the Bob Marshall Wilderness to the south, Glacier National Park to the west, and Canada to the north. No community based planning or comprehensive urban design analysis had ever been undertaken by the Nation.

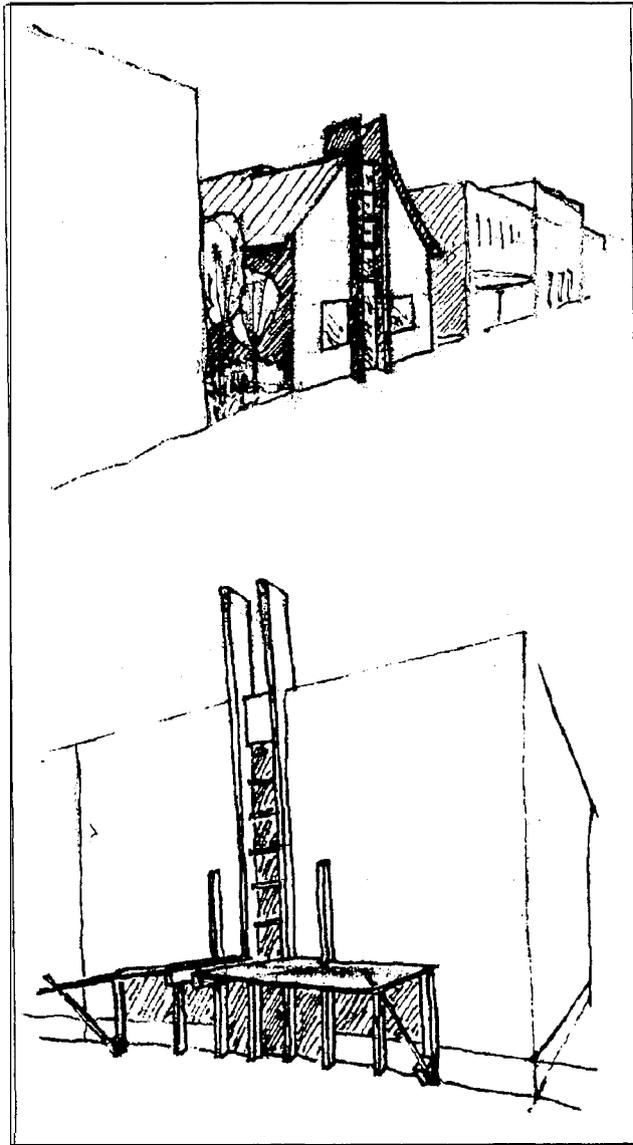
The Blackfeet Nation suffers under remarkable economic and social duress. Its unemployment rate is 56 percent and the physical condition of housing, institutional, recreational, and commercial properties is poor to say the least. The public domain, open space and natural resources are treasured but undeveloped and the richness of the culture is often hidden under a veil of poverty. The principal community within the Nation's 1,525,712 acres is Browning, with a population of 1,200. Within Browning the most significant and critical social, cultural, economic, and physical manifestations of the Blackfeet Nation are clearly apparent and concentrated. It was the tribal council's wish that we utilize the Browning community as a model for developing a tribal vision of the Nation's future. We were to aid in establishing this vision and to articulate the community's desired future, illustrating the ideas, concepts, and projects which would guide the community in achieving social, cultural, economic, and physical characteristics in which the Blackfeet people could take pride. Of primary importance to the Tribal Council was the necessity that this "vision" belong to the Blackfeet people.

Three architectural students, guided by the director of the School of Architecture's Community Design Center, collaborated with faculty in Community Development, Business and Extension; the planning and engineering staff of the State Highway Department; the State Commerce Department's Board of Tourism; members of the Blackfeet Nation's Resource Development Foundation; the staff of the Blackfeet Nation's Planning Department, Department of Revenue and Department of Transportation, Engineering, Resources and Operations; and members of the Blackfeet Nation in completing the Browning Visioning Project. The students prepared for the project by reading and discussing *Montana's Indians*

by Bryan, *Fool's Crow* by Welch, *Rural Environmental Planning For Sustainable Communities* by Sargent and *The Small Town Planning Handbook* by Daniels. This enabled the students to become familiar with the Blackfeet Nation, its history, culture, economic, and physical characteristics as well as general principles of rural planning and design.

The first phase of the project was to assist the Blackfeet Nation in identifying cultural, social, economic, and physical attributes valued from the past, document the present condition, and describe a desired future. This was achieved through a series of public meetings and small task force groups coordinated, assisted, and guided by the students. Students served as facilitators, researchers, resources, recorders and synthesizers. The most valued attributes of the past were the Blackfeet Nation's sustainability and harmony with nature. The present condition was eloquently summarized by a tribal council member when he stated that "the Blackfeet Nation lives under a dark cloud and everyone: friends, visitors, and those who only pass through our land are afraid of us and the place we live." The desired future was equally succinct. The Blackfeet seek to revitalize and preserve their social and cultural heritage.

The second phase of the project required the students to assist the community in developing an action plan and coordinate the development of the action plan with tribal, local, state and federal agencies. Our task was to lace together a series of ideas, concepts, and projects proposed by the people of the Blackfeet Nation in a manner that would promote a sustainable economy based on the stewardship of natural resources, replace the image of failure and fear with one of success and hospitality, and celebrate the symbols of the Blackfeet culture and social institutions. Our ultimate goal was to create opportunities for pride in the people and place of the Blackfeet Nation. The students then illustrated the ideas, concepts, and projects of the action plan, coordinating specific projects and plans as well as alternatives in a manner commensurate with achieving the community's desired future. These were reviewed by the general public, focus and community groups, as well as government agencies and ultimately approved by the Tribal Council for publication in the Browning Visioning Project handbook.



Figs. 1-2. Creating new styles.

The success of the project can be measured in several ways. The first and foremost was illustrated by tribal councilman St. Goddard when he stated that "the vision handbook illustrates the ideas of the Blackfeet Nation and that every member of the tribe should take pride in the vision the Blackfeet have created." Equally significant has been the Tribal Council's commitment of \$600,000 towards the highway enhancement projects illustrated in the handbook. Federal and State grants have been written to support the Visitor Information Center project and remodeling funds have been loaned to several small businesses. An arts' group has been formed to insure the funding and installation of Blackfeet art projects on the highway in Browning. The Tribal Housing Authority has begun negotiations with the federal government with regard to the control of housing funds and six different interest groups have been formed to support the development of various open space proposals.

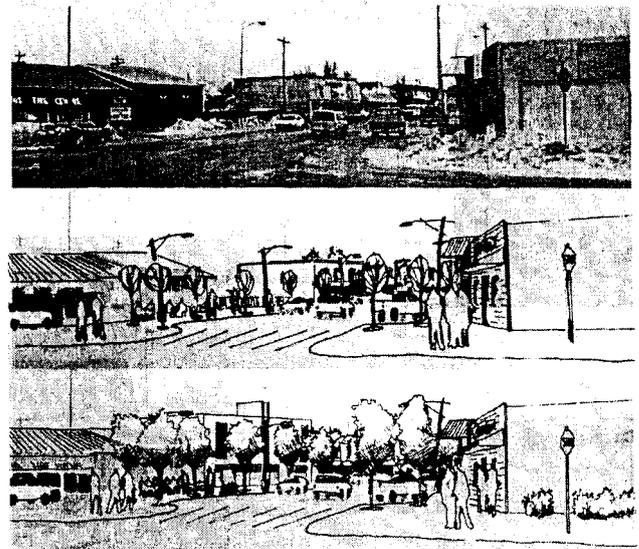


Fig 3. Street improvements showing existing condition (top), projected one-year condition (middle) and projected ten-year condition.

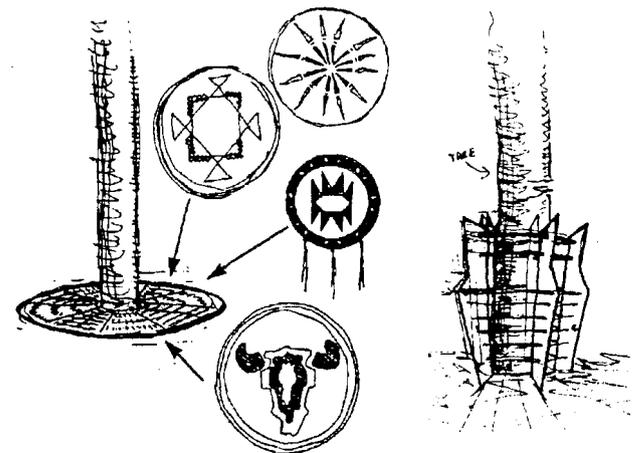


Fig 4. Tree protection designs.

Of equal importance academically was the knowledge gained by the students. By living and working with members of the Blackfeet Nation for five months they developed an empathy for alternative social and cultural values and the diversity of those values among the Blackfeet. They found an extraordinarily rich culture expressed in dramatically different ways from their own. The students discovered that their technical skills are valued assets which can be used to serve a community and help lead a community in unanticipated directions. In this regard they discovered that they are capable of articulating the social, cultural, artistic, and technical beliefs of others based on traditional research methods, interviews, and insight. They learned the importance of listening and compromise in achieving consensus and they learned that consensus can lead to imaginative design solutions. Perhaps most importantly they learned of the pride, theirs and the community's, that can result from achieving a shared vision.