

# Sustaining Land, Culture & Place: An Experiment in Cross-cultural Values

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The word sustainable has roots in the Latin *subtenir*, meaning 'to hold up' or 'to support from below.' A community must be supported from below – by its inhabitants, present and future. Certain places, through the peculiar combination of physical, cultural, and, perhaps, spiritual characteristics, inspire people to care for their community. These are the places where sustainability has the best chance of taking hold.

- Muscoe Martin<sup>1</sup>

## CULTURAL SUSTAINABILITY AND ARCHITECTURE

In 1987, the Brundtland Commission proposed the now oft-cited definition of sustainability as “meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, or the health of the planet.” As with this definition, sustainability in architecture is most often applied under the rubric of environmental conservation. While technologically based sustainable architecture is important, this paper asserts a broadening of sustainable design to include people, land and place. In providing for the needs of present and future generations, designers should understand sustainability as not only a concern for natural resource protection and renewal, but also cultural maintenance and regeneration. Our understanding of what sustainability is, therefore, needs to be complicated as opposed to reduced to the latest *cause célèbre*. If we assume, then, that sustainability is a cultural construct and

not a natural fact, then what is it that we are trying to sustain? And, are there people, places, or things being left out and left behind in this construct? In other words, for whom are we engaging in sustainability? By corollary, then, we must consider: What is the nature of the knowledge base that informs what we mean by sustainable? What are the assumed values in this knowledge base; and, how can we sharpen our attention to recognizing potential bias? Cultural sustainability calls for an awareness of the unintended consequences of expertise driven design decisions, of issues of equity in the process and product. But how do we push at those set of cultural assumptions to make sure the “universal” isn’t being imposed on the local; and, how do we think beyond any specific paradigm or template in order to embrace the particular and let the peculiar thrive?

In considering how to intertwine human, natural and physical systems, sustainability prompts consideration of principles that have been and are still the foundational value systems of many American Indian tribes. In order to develop a fuller notion of sustainability, in the summer of 2009 faculty and students from the University of Maryland traveled to Montana to engage the Northern Cheyenne Nation as equal partners on the issue of making and sustaining culture and place. Together the groups explored the potential of cultural values that exist within the physical environment, in interpretations of that environment, and in the design of the built

environment. This essay will describe the interaction in an attempt to understand how architecture and cross-cultural values play a role in the definition of sustaining land, culture and place.

### WEST MEETS WEST

An obvious starting point, within architectural discourse, to the nexus of the cultural and physical is Critical Regionalism. Critical Regionalism, as codified in Kenneth Frampton's seminal essay, approaches its thirty-year mark as a significant proposition in design methodology. While Frampton's polemic was clearly a response to his perceptions of the excesses of postmodern architecture (whether it be the high-tech proffered by Richard Rogers or the scenographic designs of Michael Graves and Robert Venturi), he held up some of the modern masters (Alvar Aalto and Jorn Utzon) as embodying this ultimate synthesis of the universal and the specific.

In his concern to re-assert an architecture separate from the fetishes of postmodernism, Frampton put forth topography, climate, light and the tactile as key components to a Critical Regionalism that he believed would acknowledge the culture of a place and achieve High Architecture without resorting to vernacular mimesis. What is left out of his proposition is, in fact, the *culture* of the place: the people, their actions and rituals. When Frampton proposes that design might "find its governing inspiration in such things as the range and quality of the local light, or in a tectonic derived from a peculiar structural mode, or in the topography of a given site,"<sup>2</sup> he belies any holistic approach to place and instead offers a grab bag of favors any one of which might provide the designer delight. Even though Frampton asserts that Critical Regionalism seeks to invigorate design by establishing an "opposition between universal civilization and autochthonous culture," what he articulates is not a tension between cultures, but an embracing of natural, site elements that he believes will elevate the universal elements of modernism to an Architecture both timeless and belonging to a specific culture.<sup>3</sup> Culture here, then, is thinly defined by nature; in fact, the cultural component (i.e. the people) of place is divorced from design as only the physical and natural ones hold sway.

In reality Frampton's Critical Regionalism serves as a "cultural strategy" only when one's goal is ultimately

to achieve the next great form of Western Architecture. The foundation for this can be found in his opening epigraph, a quote by philosopher Paul Ricoeur:

But in order to take part in modern civilization, it is necessary [...] to take part in scientific, technical and political rationality, something which very often requires the pure and simple abandon of a whole cultural past. [...] There is the paradox: how to become modern and to return to sources; how to revive an old dormant civilization and take part in universal civilization.<sup>4</sup>

Ricoeur's paradox depends upon an Enlightenment Project-based definition of a linear historical progression wherein the lessons of the past inform future progress. Critical Regionalism as proposed in Frampton's essay, thus, is a question of the relationship between a cultural past and a progressive present/future. The misnomer here is that tradition and/or the vernacular only resides in the past and not in the contemporary practices of a group. Thus history and the modern are again posited in their constant struggle against one another in the question of modernity. And while Frampton proposes a synthesis, it is one that still preferences the modern and climatological present against a static, cultural past. Ultimately Frampton admits that "Critical Regionalism" is a vehicle of universal civilization,<sup>5</sup> and in doing so he reveals the failings of his construction of this design methodology: this universal civilization—and its concomitant architecture—still arises from a European-*cum*-Greco-Roman center. In its cloak of the local, Critical Regionalism maintains the illusion that Western culture is, in fact, by right a universal culture. It is to be adopted in transformation in developing countries, but it still is the ultimate foundation for a regionalist-based architecture with a claim toward criticality.

### WEST MEETS WEST RECONSIDERED

"No new architecture can emerge without a new kind of relations between designer and user, without new kinds of programs..."—Alex Tzonis and Liliane Lefaivre<sup>5</sup>

This is precisely the juncture met by the University of Maryland group: How to acknowledge their own Western biases and values without imposing them? In this regard, a reconsidered Critical Regionalism still holds value as a means by which one might engage cultural sustainability by acknowledging

the necessity for a critical self-consciousness and a reconsideration of the relationships between designer and inhabitant that is more urgent than ever.

What needs to be explicitly stated in a reconsideration of Critical Regionalism is a definition of culture that includes people. This reconsideration necessitates that a conception of culture that is a standard of excellence, reified, bound in formalism, and held static in the site of the material object be expanded to a way of life. The later anthropological concept of culture sites itself in the social. While the former definition of culture remains a product tightly bound to an exclusive and elitist realm, one of excellence and therefore exclusion, the anthropological definition is more populist and all embracing; it is both the product and process of dynamic social interaction in all its forms.

An understanding of culture as a bottom up process (as opposed to a top down imposition)—one which makes the ordinary visible—begins in part in the early twentieth century with the work of anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski in his ethnological study of the Trobriand Islands. Malinowski took a radical stance against the ethnological orthodoxy of the time; he believed that anthropologists needed to immerse themselves in the daily life of the people they are studying.

As I went on my morning walk through the village, I could see intimate details of family life, of toilet, cooking, taking of meals; [...] Quarrels, jokes, family scenes, events usually trivial, sometimes dramatic but always significant, formed the atmosphere of my daily life, as well as theirs.<sup>6</sup>

It is these contingencies of everyday life that Malinowski believed were only revealed when one pitched a tent in the village. And it is these contingencies that Malinowski believed would reveal not only the ephemeral and quotidian practices of the people, but also an interpretation more “permanent and unconscious.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, Malinowski’s radical methodology was to move from the particular to the general based not on the exceptional ritual or limited contact, but based on the banalities of everyday life. The result was an understanding of culture enriched by the dialogue between the qualitative and quotidian experience and the more stable and fixed cultural structures.

## A SENSE OF THE RESERVATION

“[Critical Regionalism] resists cultural entropy, cultural trivialization and cultural homogenization”—  
Doug Kelbaugh<sup>8</sup>

Critical Regionalism’s premises and practices are made self-conscious in this workshop and essay, without being abandoned entirely. In engaging in the cultural landscape occupied by the Northern Cheyenne Nation in Lame Deer, Montana, the workshop attempted to affirm the imperative for local self-determination as noted in Doug Kelbaugh’s “Towards an Architecture of Place: Design Principles for Critical Regionalism.” It is his design principles that were borrowed and transformed as a way to begin the dialogue between the creative capital brought forth by the University of Maryland group and the local and social capital imbedded in the members of the tribe. Kelbaugh calls his principles “senses,” and they are as follows: Sense of Place, Sense of Nature, Sense of History, Sense of Craft, and Sense of Limits. Kelbaugh defines them by proposing that uniqueness should be celebrated; that buildings are “vitalistic”; that patterns and types are significant clues; that traditional building materials and methods should be honored; and, that architectural space can be finite.

These definitions were expanded for the purpose of the workshop with attention to acknowledging not only the physical environmental but also the socio-cultural and temporal elements of the reservation. This examination sought to ask how the social infrastructure, operating within the public realm (both built and unbuilt) directly affect culture, community, landscape, and the constructed environments. It did so by seeking to examine how culture and its significance is negotiated, defined and projected in everyday issues and how cultural conditions are seen and redefined in the contemporary condition. A focus was placed on the influence and knowledge that the Cheyenne elders of the community have in relation to the youth of the society. Finally the documentation of this experience was not uni-directional as members of the nation were given cameras and asked to photograph alongside the University of Maryland group the same issues and senses so that a simultaneity of observation and experience could stimulate conversation and cross-cultural awareness.

The workshop lived in the community for three weeks, not under the assumptions that specific

questions would yield specific answers, but rather to understand if the questions as formulated even related to an "Indian's" definition of living. The material and data gathered in this research intends to question a western-based understanding of "Dwelling." It was hoped that these collaborative exercises would foster a discussion of what sustainability means to the land, culture and place of the Northern Cheyenne Nation. In order to not make assumptions about the who and what of the reservation, the group generated a series of initial questions that would help guide the more organic interactions as well as formal interviews. These questions were not meant to be a scientific survey, but a basis by which new questions and topics would arise:

1. Are the youth happy being here, do they envision coming back?
2. What does it mean to be Northern Cheyenne?
3. What is the socio-cultural hierarchy?
4. What is the role of woman?
5. What is the role of youth?
6. What is the role of the elders?
7. Where do adults interact? (at the home, outdoors, in public areas?)
8. Where do youth interact?
9. Are there "public spaces?"
10. What defines these "public spaces?"
11. What is the Cheyenne concept of privacy? (culturally and spatially)
12. What is the Cheyenne concept of ownership?
13. What is the Cheyenne attitude towards nature?
14. What defines the Rez? (boundaries, cultural traditions)
15. What cultural traditions are more valued?
16. How are traditions and language passed down?
17. How many people participate in ceremonies or other religious/cultural activities?
18. How do people travel from house to house (from friend to friend)
19. What are the greatest socio-economical problems?
20. How do the Cheyenne feel about other American Indian tribes? How do they feel about non-Indians? How important is unity?
21. How do the Cheyenne feel about "change"?
22. How do the Cheyenne define respect?
23. What housing types are found on the Rez? Which ones are most successful?
24. How do Cheyenne interact (at each scale) with space. (individual, family, community)?

As discussions emerged and photographs were shared, the university group attempted to categorize observations by sense.

### Sense of Place

"This place is evolving at its own pace"—tribe member, Northern Cheyenne nation

In expanding Kelbaugh's quest to assert difference and suppress nostalgia and sentimentalism, sense of place made the socio-cultural an equal partner to the physical. After putting cameras in the hands of the community and sitting down to talk, the discussion centered on the following: hierarchy within the four societies; discussions of poverty but no concept of homelessness...the family structure extends to the community; an understanding of the family structure and how they make neighborhood; the cultural significance of position; the mapping of social phenomena onto physical territories; the land is sacred both for its beauty and the resources it provides; how Cheyenne craft is expressed through traditional art, clothing, and ceremony buildings; and, how oral history continues to be passed down—while there is a clear effort to preserve Cheyenne language and traditions, these elements have not found their way into present building culture.

### Sense of Nature

"This is our land, we fought for it." —tribe member, Northern Cheyenne nation

"Animals and plants give us our way of life." —tribe member, Northern Cheyenne nation

"You don't own the land; you use the land." —tribe member, Northern Cheyenne nation

While Kelbaugh's focus is on understanding the building from an ecological point of view, this study expanded to understand the social and physical community from this point of view. What we learned from the Cheyenne included: Having a sense of nature means respecting the earth as a teacher; it also means understanding that dwelling spaces are living things; just like a person, a structure is born, grows old with time, and eventually returns to the land; the built environment can show appreciation of a landscape through use of natural forms and materials; nature can provide an excellent blueprint for creating a sustainable community; questions of ownership, how one defines land and property, resources, reliance and interdependence on the land are distinctly held and different from Western values; the desire to "find a new buffalo" in establishing an interdependence between natural resources and the prosperity of the tribe; the decision to not tap into the tremendous economic resource of coal below the reservation was based on the reverence for the landscape and a desire to achieve a balance between it and the nation; and, how western ideals about acreage and ownership have created conflicted viewpoints with in the tribe.

### SENSE OF HISTORY

"Language is how we see the world around us" —tribe member, Northern Cheyenne nation

"What does it mean to be Northern Cheyenne" —tribe member, Northern Cheyenne nation

Like many of the other categories this one was expanded to include the non-physical. History was supplanted by tradition; and, these traditions constituted language, actions, nature, and artifacts. Collaborative discussions focused on: how language, culture, and oral tradition have shaped and defined Northern Cheyenne history; while forms such as the sweat lodge and teepee can inform

and preserve history, they should not be copied; instead, the use of Northern Cheyenne cultural values and traditional building materials or methods, can create a culturally rich and climatically sensitive building; how traditions of family structure, inhabitation and dwelling and definitions of public and private differ on the reservation from Western norms; the imposition of western culture that led to "annihilation, relocation, assimilation, and self-determination;" the desire to bring back a sense of respect for culture, tradition and hierarchical structure in the younger generation; and, how age defines status; how social hierarchy informs the occupation of physical space.

### SENSE OF CRAFT

"The houses don't last" —tribe member, Northern Cheyenne nation

"Building have become junkier. They are built with less human care and of less authentic, less palpable, and less substantial materials....The loss of craft is part of a bigger economic web that is beyond the designer's control." —tribe member, Northern Cheyenne nation

Sense of craft was one of the few senses where Kelbaugh's definition was not expanded or transformed from the notion of the thing made and the practice of making the thing. The interactions revealed: the significance of the indigenous arts, crafts, and construction methods for the society—art as cultural substance; landscape and portrait paintings as well as intricate beadwork on clothing, jewelry, and other accessories were key components to the artisan nature of the Northern Cheyenne; symbols and colors are used to represent ideas, objects, and nature in their designs; Construction of tipis and ceremonial lodges also represent a rich cultural heritage of building craft; and, this sense of craft, however, has not been integrated successfully into current building practices.

### SENSE OF LIMITS

"The people must lead the change they want" —tribe member, Northern Cheyenne nation

Kelbaugh focuses his definition on discrete architectural space. Here the group expanded to include discussions of the following: how the physical boundaries of the reservation help define and shape the Cheyenne culture and tradition; how

greater social and economic issues influence the preservation of the Cheyenne tradition; how these physical, social, and economic limits help define the development of a place; focus needs to be placed on how the reservation can prosper along with the tradition and values of the Cheyenne people; how the people cope with the externally imposed burden of home ownership; what is the nature of the relationship with the nearby Crow reservation; issues of sovereignty; tensions between their traditions (as an open plains, nomadic people) and contemporary life on the reservation; the limits of U.S. government spending and the economic dependences on the U.S. government; and, the history of prior exploitation.

## CONCLUSION

While this workshop had high aspirations, participants quickly realized there was much to learn from the Northern Cheyenne before any design proposals could or should be proffered—that is for future collaborations. The knowledge gained from initial discussions and photographs is far too much to be contain within this short essay, but is portrayed in an exhibition created from this base material. The exhibition attempts to show, ala Malinowski, the contingencies of everyday life and dwelling on the reservation, not just the exceptional rituals and buildings. The laying out of the methodology is the first step in acknowledging and recording what the Northern Cheyenne mean by dwelling on their own terms as they struggle with tensions between their own synthesis of Western and Cheyenne cultures. This reconsidered Critical Regionalism seeks to find a way to collaborate with the Northern Cheyenne in an attempt not to trivialize, stereotype or reduce who they are and how they live, but also not to standardize and homogenize their patterns of dwelling. In seeking out what sustainability means to this nation, it is clear that they struggle with their desire to live in the twenty-first century, but to do so without compromising their values; values often in conflict with Western traditions regarding land, family and dwelling. The unintended consequences of the Federal assistance offered to Native Americans have been that it has left them with the lesser of both cultural systems. They dwell in impoverished conditions as seen both by Western and Northern Cheyenne standards. Even with strong senses of place, history, craft, nature, and limits, the North Cheyenne's interaction with the United

States government has facilitated the creation of a place where sustainability has not be able to take hold. A rethinking of policy interactions within reservations needs to include a way of creating and managing a built environment that, as Muscoe Martin asserts, must be supported from below.

## ENDNOTES

1. Muscoe Martin, "A Sustainable Community Profile," *Places*, Winter 1995.
2. Kenneth Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance," in *Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster, originally published 1983 (London: Pluto Press, 1985): 21.
3. Frampton (1985): 26.
4. Paul Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, org. published 1955, translated by Chas. Kelbley (Evanston: Illinois, Northwestern University Press, 1965): 277.
5. Frampton (1985): 20-21 in quoting Alex Tzonis and Liliane Lefaivre "The Grid and the Pathway. An Introduction to the Work of Dimitris and Susana Antonakakis" *Architecture in Greece*, 15 (Athens: 1981): 178.
6. Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (London: G. Routledge & Sons, 1922): 7.
7. Marc Augé, *An Anthropology for Contemporaneous Worlds*, translated by Amy Jacobs (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999).
8. Doug Kelbaugh, "Toward an Architecture of Place: Design Principles for Critical Regionalism," *Critical Regionalism: The Pomona Meeting Proceedings* (Pomona, CA: College of Environmental Design, California Polytechnic University, 1991): 182.