

## On Design

# A Spiritual Celebration of Cultural Heritage

KATHARINE E. LEIGH AND ABIMBOLA ASOJO

This article examines the architecture of contemporary sacred places as a manifestation of culture and tradition in Native American, African, and African American communities in the U.S. today. Tribal and urban minority groups in the U.S. are currently engaged in a struggle to create new identities that demonstrate their cultural heritage and role in society. Through case-study analysis, ancient forms of sacred places are compared to the elements of contemporary cultural and spiritual spaces. The article explores in particular how reinterpretations of the meaning of traditional forms, materials, ceremonial artifacts, and design and planning processes have been used to help forge modern identity.

*Sacred architecture is never devoid of content. It is not a rational, inanimate object, but an animated and dynamic setting that is charged with meaning. Enchanted natural places are typically points of confluence, where disparate elements dramatically meet — the edge of the sea; mountain heights; great waterfalls. . . . It was, and still is, an artifact built to delimit sacred ground. In time [sacred space] came to symbolize the meanings and to accommodate the rituals of the religion it was built to serve. . . . [R]eligious architecture is fundamentally built myth, which symbolizes a culture's belief systems . . . and accommodates and facilitates the enactment of shared rituals.*

— T. Barrie<sup>1</sup>

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Since the 1970s the pace of cultural revival among Native and African American communities in the United States has accelerated, leading to a renewed search for identity that demonstrates cultural heritage and position in society.<sup>2</sup> The civil-rights movement and new legal and economic opportunities have furthered such processes. According to K. Singh, “Culture can no longer be looked upon as a secondary element to economic growth, rather culture itself provides the social basis for development.”<sup>3</sup>

Culture, whether defined as heritage, tradition, or ethnicity, has also moved to the forefront of world conscience. In May 1998 participants at the Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies for Development in Stockholm, Sweden, called for cultural reaffirmation through economic-development actions, cultural policy-making, heritage preservation, and respect for human rights. According to D. van Bekkum, culture has emerged “as the exclusive form in which humans as individuals and as groups can exist.” Such a view stands in contrast to the “prevailing notion among specialists years ago that culture would vanish into nationality in the course of modernization.”<sup>4</sup>

The preponderance of cultural environments developed since the 1960s in Native and African American communities clearly demonstrate how assimilation and acculturation have not consumed tradition in the way once imagined. The nature of these new spaces, which accommodate ritual and embody cultural values and traditions, reinforce a renewed attention to the relationship between physical place and tradition. Nevertheless, such spaces must generally be understood as reinterpetive acts. As Weinstein-Farston has written, “For some minority communities, the past has actually been long lost, and communities must interpret upon their past heritage to build a new identity for the future.”<sup>5</sup>

This article uses a cross-cultural examination of selected new sacred places to reveal how the built environment may articulate and reaffirm cultural values. Through this examination, it attempts to show how certain similarities have emerged and been demonstrated in the way ancient elements have been reinterpreted for use in the contemporary built environment.

## SETTLEMENT HISTORIES OF NATIVE AMERICAN COMMUNITIES

As extensions of ancient societies, one might expect Native and African American communities today to begin their search for potential influences and sources for the design of contemporary cultural and spiritual facilities by examining their early traditions. This research examined the vernacular built heritage of two Native American tribes — the Makah and the Wampanoag. Contemporary communities of both groups are descended from tribes of coastal dwellers who engaged in fishing and whaling, as well as other, more common settlement activities.

Both tribes built extended structures to accommodate many people under one roof, and relocated their housing to interior streams and hunting grounds during summer seasons. The Makah of the Pacific Northwest built longhouses from cedar planks, while the Wampanoag of the Northeast built dome-shaped *wigwam* structures. Within both cultures, the built environment was primarily used for shelter and was created in direct response to the need for seasonal mobility, proximity to ocean-related activities, and access to indigenous

materials. (The scale difference between the constructions of the two groups owed largely to the use of large timbers from tall Northwest trees by the Makah, as opposed to the reliance by the Wampanoag on smaller saplings.) A further similarity in settlement history between the two groups was their relative geographic isolation. While the Wampanoag were found in many of the coastal areas of Massachusetts and interacted with other northeast tribes, the Gay Head band this research chose to study relocated to the small island of Martha’s Vineyard off Cape Cod. The Makah were the southern-most Northwest tribe. Although they interacted with other tribes, their activities were largely confined by rugged mountains to the coastal areas of Washington State.

As mentioned above, the community life of the Makah was supported by a multifamily housing system. It revolved around the activities of survival, celebration and family. When required for family celebrations and tribal ceremonies, a chief’s house would provide a gathering space for the entire community. Indoor ceremonies often incorporated costumes featuring oversized carved and painted wooden masks. At such times, ceremonial dancing would take place beside a hearth, often with a screen by one wall as a backdrop for action. According to a modern tribal publication: “The Makah . . . didn’t separate function and economics from the spiritual realm. Life was a whole. No activity was apart from that wholeness, therefore spiritual well-being entered every act. Illness — or an unsuccessful hunt, or a poor salmon run or berry harvest — came when the harmony was temporarily broken. Ceremonies could restore the harmony. . . .”<sup>6</sup>

Makah longhouses were built at ground level without an excavated foundation. Planks for walls were laid on edge horizontally between posts, or set vertically in trenches, with a shed roof often completing the structure. Makah building technology made use of both the oaks and conifers (cedars and firs) found in the area. Using planks from these large trees, a typical house might accommodate from four to six families, and could be 60 ft. or more in length and 35-40 ft. in width. Each village might also feature one larger structure, perhaps more than 300 ft. long, which might be used as a residence by the village leader or be reserved for celebrations. The interior areas of Makah longhouses were furnished with two tiers of shelves running around the perimeter walls: the upper tier was used for storage, the lower as both a sleeping and work space. Each longhouse contained multiple hearths, and the ceiling was constructed of loose boards which could be angled to let out the smoke or closed to keep out the rain. Inside, the environment was dank and smoky, but such conditions contributed to the preservation of dried fish and other foods, which were hung on racks from the upper shelves.

In the 1800s potlatch ceremonies were introduced to Makah culture, creating highly ritualized uses for such dwelling spaces. At such times, a village leader would supervise as gifts were given, food prepared, skills demonstrated, competitions

held, and dances performed. With time, specific decorations, songs and ceremonies — as well as prized heirlooms such as embossed copper sheets — came to be associated with specific families. Canoes and house fronts were also often painted with characteristic figures and totems, and support posts were sometimes carved to resemble simple giant figures.

In contrast to such cultural practices, the Wampanoag community structure was based on the basic unit of a two-family cooperative. The extension of the traditional *wigwam* form into a short longhouse to accommodate more than one family may have been occasioned by the practice among tribal leaders of adopting widowed or orphaned individuals or to accommodate a related familial relationship. *Wigwams* were constructed of bent saplings tied together to form a dome-like frame, which was then sheathed with sheets of birch bark, slabs of elm or conifer bark, mats, or animal hides. A doorway would be formed of two overlapping walls. *Wetus*, semi-permanent structures, were also sometimes used for habitation when tribal members traveled inland to hunt. At this time they would take some bark mats and wall coverings with them. The size of a Wampanoag house varied according to the activity and construction ability of its makers. Lengths of 20-40 ft. were common, but records exist of *wigwams* that were 60-100 ft. long.

A key aspect of Wampanoag religious belief was reciprocity. The tribe, which was also known for having welcomed the Pilgrims to North America, also had a reputation for hospitality. Furthermore, Wampanoag heritage placed importance on the unity of the community and the need for the individual, as a part of that community, to find his or her own direction and means of self-expression within the spirit world. Three religious ceremonies were central to Wampanoag traditions: the unity circle, which involved a gathering of neighbors and family; spiritual gatherings that coincided with the full moon; and *pow-wows* that were open to the public.

#### SETTLEMENT HISTORIES OF WEST AFRICAN COMMUNITIES

The sacred spaces of three coastal West African ethnic groups—the Ibos, Yorubas and Asantes—were also examined as part of this research. While a diversity of spiritual beliefs existed within the region in which these cultures emerged, religion was generally considered an integral part of everyday life. This was evident in the location of shrines or temples in close proximity to dwellings and the use of sacred places for both ceremonial and community activities.

Ola Balogun has stated that in spite of their basic simplicity, West African habitations often received sculptural intensity through a remarkable balance of volume and form.<sup>7</sup> African artistic genius was also strongly asserted in decorative embellishment of the built environment. Varying decorative patterns were sculpted or painted onto walls and wooden doors, rang-

ing from figurative designs to complex abstract patterns which revealed an exquisite balance of form, color and shading. Painting was carried out as an extension of architecture rather than as an independent form of expression.

Within the diverse communities of West Africa, traditional architectural forms included simple rectilinear clay structures, round clay structures, tents, sophisticated tombs, obelisks, palaces, pyramids and monumental structures. Several historians have classified traditional West African architecture according to form (tent, beehive, and underground), and style (Sudanese and Impluvium).<sup>8</sup>

The first group, the Ibos, today inhabit southern Nigeria. Their sacred spaces traditionally took the form of meeting and spirit houses associated with the various deities they worshipped. Traditionally, the Mbari Ibos built rectangular or square temples (*mbari*) that were sometimes three stories high. Four major columns supported such structures; timber was used for their rafters; and, until the advent of tin roofing, their pyramid-shaped roofs were constructed of thatch. The temples were usually completed in an elaborate manner, with both interiors and exteriors decorated with murals, and with elaborately carved doors and columns also painted with geometric patterns. N. Elleh has noted that once such a temple was completed, it remained a monument; the act of its construction was regarded as an act of worship.<sup>9</sup> In addition to such temples, the Ibos built elaborate burial chambers for their dead, which were lined with carved wood.

The second study group, the Asantes, live in present-day Ghana. Their sacred beliefs surrounded ancestor worship, and the shrines and temples they built to honor their ancestors were based on a courtyard system, with a central court usually joining four buildings, one of which was closed off. Such a courtyard might be used as a meeting space, a children's play yard, or a food preparation area. To demonstrate wealth, windows were ornamented with gold and silver inlay and applied finishes.

The Asantes were governed by a monarchy. Historical surveys indicate that the king's palace would be located in a town center, overlooking a central playground for children. The palace consisted of several buildings around a series of courtyards, with the main entrance leading to a court 200 yards long. Palace roof structures generally took gabled forms, and walls were well decorated with symbolic ornamentation. The Asantes also built royal mausoleums, which contained several rooms to house the remains of their kings. The link between the living and the dead made these mausoleums uniquely celebrated buildings.

The third African group studied was the Yoruba, one of the largest ethnic groups in Africa today, residing in southwestern Nigeria as well as neighboring Benin, Togo, and Sierra Leone. According to N.Q. King, people of Yoruba descent have had a profound influence on world culture.<sup>10</sup> They were transported as involuntary migrants to Brazil (where they are known as Nago), Cuba (Lucumi), Sierra Leone (Aku), Jamaica, the United States, North Africa, and the

Islamic world. King believes no other African group has contributed as much to the culture of America as have the Yoruba.

In terms of sacred space, Yorubas traditionally built many shrines because they did not regard any single location as the permanent abode of a divinity. The great number of such shrines accounts for their small size, and many were designed to accommodate only a priest and one or two attendants, while ordinary people would congregate in the open spaces outside. The Yorubas also considered certain natural formations, such as groves, hills or mountains, to be sacred. Yoruba religious objects included amulets, charms and masks.

Like those of the Asantes, Yoruba dwellings were built with four rectangular units facing each other across a common courtyard. These are today referred to as Impluvium-style houses. According to Yoruba monarchical tradition, the king's palace was a sacred place. Palaces were designed as larger versions of Impluvium houses, and they included elaborately carved columns that supported gabled roofs along the courtyard perimeters. Susan Denyer has noted that Yoruba palaces sometimes had as many as a hundred courtyards,

and that each of them could be of enormous size, larger than an ordinary house.<sup>11</sup> The largest palace in the Yoruba Oyo Empire was twice the size of a sports field. Each of its courtyards was reserved for a special function: the largest for public assemblies or dancing at festivals; the smaller ones for private activities of the king. Some courtyards might be paved with quartz pebbles and pot sherds. The largest Yoruba palace today is in Owo, in southwestern Nigeria, covering an area of 44 hectares (4,400 acres).

REINTERPRETATION OF SACRED SPATIAL ELEMENTS

The accompanying chart presents a comparison of the Native American and African cultures examined, identifying how forms, materials, building technologies, and ceremonial artifacts were used to create sacred spaces (FIG.1). As can be seen, the sacred spaces of these ancient societies shared certain features. The existence of such commonalities provides an opportunity to compare ways in which traditional sacred ele-

TRIBE / COMMUNITY	LOCATION	COMMUNITY FORM	SACRED PLACE TYPOLOGY	BUILDING FORM	MATERIALS / TECHNOLOGY	CEREMONIAL ARTIFACTS	COMMENTS
Makah	Northwest coast of U.S. (Washington)	Village	Chief's house or ceremonial house	Longhouse with shed roof	Conifer and oak planks, posts and rafters Walls not tied structurally at the corners 35-40 ft. wide by 60 ft. long	Painted relief carvings on facades Wall panels or screens Totems and carved timbers wooden painted and carved masks	Structures were made mobile depending on the season. Ornamentation denoted rank and family crests.
Wampanoag	Northeast coast of U.S. (Massachusetts)	Village	No formal structure	Wigwam or wetu (dome-shaped)	Sapling frame with sheets of birch bark, slabs of elm, or conifer bark Mats or hides with lashed ties (min. 10-ft. diameter at the base)	Not integral with the structure Object orientation: pipes, tools, etc.	Seasonal dispersal of families.
Ibo	West coast of Africa	Village	Temple or shrine with restricted-access spirit house	Rectilinear with pyramidal roof	Adobe block Timber rafters Thatched roof of raffia palm	Wall murals Carved doors and columns Geometric patterns painted on walls Painted and carved wooden masks	
Asante	West coast of Africa (Ghana, etc.)	Town	Temples with shrine	Four rectangular structures tied to a central courtyard (Impluvium style)	Adobe block Timber rafters Thatched roof of raffia palm Shutters embellished with gold and silver	Wall murals Carved doors and columns Geometric patterns painted on walls Pot-herd surfaces Kings' skeletons held together with golden wire	Worshipped ancestors and venerated their mausoleums.
Yoruba	West coast of Africa (Nigeria, Benin, Ghana, Togo,	Town	King's palace and temples with restricted-access shrines etc.)	Four rectangular structures tied to a central courtyard (Impluvium style)	Adobe block Timber rafters Thatched roof of raffia palm Courtyard of pebbles and pot-herd surfaces	Wall murals Carved doors and columns Geometric patterns sculpted on walls Carved masks, amulets and charms	Social structure was based on a system of monarchy Kings were regarded as sacred.

FIGURE 1. Aspects of Traditional Communities.

ments have been reintroduced in the design of contemporary sacred spaces. Such cross-cultural analysis may reveal how reinterpretation of such elements facilitates transmission and/or transition of cultural learning from one generation to the next.

The following sections present a comparative analysis of selected contemporary Native American, African and African American sacred places. The specific sites were defined as places in which cultural symbolism could be attributed to the presence of spiritual beings, or where religious-based ceremonies and worship are conducted. Such spaces are sanctioned and consecrated by their respective communities. In these places, noncommunity members are welcomed, but their presence is only of minor importance. The cultural and spiritual centers selected excluded certain primarily public facilities — for example, museums, smokehouses, sweat lodges, day-care centers, and retail outlets. Halliday and Chehak have identified a host of such potential Native American spiritual places.<sup>12</sup> However, these authors examined limited examples of sacred places as defined by this study.<sup>13</sup>

The process of selecting spaces was made difficult by the fact that published information about such cultural and spiritual centers is extremely limited, especially with regards to the interrelationship between the built environment and spiritual celebration. The task was further complicated by the goal of the study to document projects that incorporated culturally sensitive design processes.

In the course of researching possible case studies, extensive discussions were held with members of the American Indian Council of Architects and Engineers (AICAE). Few of the suggested spaces that emerged from these discussions incorporated design professionals from the Native American community, or involved a design process deliberately intended to enhance Native American tribal values. Similarly, in researching spiritual centers in the African and African American communities, it was found that important elements of spirituality emerged only from a shared experience among African Americans, who regard their passage to freedom as synonymous with the historical release from slavery.

In the end, two spatial typologies, the cultural center among Native Americans and the church as a place of worship as used by African-Americans, were examined. The investigation explored the preservation of community heritage through inclusion of elements and details which symbolize community ritual and considered the role of culture-based design decision-making in the creation of contemporary form. Several questions framed the development of the project observations, interviews, and surveys questionnaires:

- What was the relationship to cultural elements in new building types?
- What elements were critical to successfully enable the structure to inform future tradition?
- In order to empower cultural heritage, who was involved in the design process?

- Were cultural needs communicated in an unconventional manner?

The projects selected were chosen as representative of three time periods: the 1970s, the early 1990s, and the present day.

## CONTEMPORARY NATIVE AMERICAN SACRED SPACES

The first Native American project studied was the De'aht Elder's Center in Neah Bay, Washington, completed in 1973. The building's form was designed to reflect the personal memories of tribal elders, conversations with tribal members, and historical information from archeologists at Washington State University. According to architect Johnpaul Jones of Jones & Jones, which designed the building, "the center is a revival of Makah architecture, a statement of their values and interest in maintaining their Native culture."<sup>14</sup>

Specific features of the building are used in support of the Makah tradition of gathering and ceremonial worship. Reflecting traditional dwelling form, the structure is built at ground level without an excavated foundation, and its shed roof is angled away from the water, allowing its northeast-facing windows to present a view of Neah Bay (FIG. 2). From the outside, these elements are reminiscent of the facade of ancient longhouses. Structurally, the cedar columns along the window wall and adjacent to the kitchen and food preparation area, and the large-scale cedar beams perpendicular to the window wall, recall the basic skeletal structure of Makah longhouses (FIG. 3). These elements are treated in a way that resembles the craftsmanship of ancient beams from nearby Ozette.

Programmatically, the elder's center features a large dance room, surrounded by seating at two levels, opposite a large stone fireplace. The central hearth and peripheral seating for ceremonial participants symbolizes the ceremonial nature of the center. To this basic spatial unit was added an upper level



FIGURE 2. De'aht Elder's Center, Neah Bay, WA. The planked exterior resembles ancient longhouses in its color, orientation to the beach, and heavy wood timbers.



**FIGURE 3.** De'aht Elder's Center, Neah Bay, WA. The perception of the massive structural elements is reinforced along the main path of entry.

designed as tribal work space, in a way which may symbolically recall how functions such as food preservation and tool storage occurred in the upper reaches of a longhouse. Outside, upper- and lower-level decks wrap around all sides of the building except the kitchen/service area. Such an arrangement permits symbolic passage "through" the kitchen, an area traditionally designed to ensure that food could not be poisoned by challengers. A final feature of the building plan is an extension of seating areas toward the water with doors that provide unobstructed views to the bay (FIG.4).

In cross-section, it is possible to see how the center's long shed roof, massive columns and beams, and plank siding are reminiscent of ancient forms (FIG.5). The structure itself can also be read as resembling a whale, beached for harvest, at the site of the original village of De'aht.



**FIGURE 4.** De'aht Elder's Center, Neah Bay, WA. The upper and lower decks recall the two-tiered benches in old longhouses. The structure faces the bay, as did original longhouses. (Photo courtesy of Jones & Jones, Seattle, WA.)



**FIGURE 5.** De'aht Elder's Center, Neah Bay, WA. This original cross-section drawn by the architect, suggests that the elders will engage in spiritual celebration. The canoe shed, and carved terminations of beams were not included in the final project. (Source: Jones & Jones, Seattle, WA.)

In terms of decorative features, two floor-to-ceiling totems have been installed on the interior window wall. Although their symbolic content was not referenced through site interviews, elders did note their figures were relevant to Makah tradition. A dark golden ochre stain was also applied to the building's exterior planking to depict the coloring of original longhouses, derived from hearth fires and smoking fish. A more elaborate plan for carved and shaped beams, resembling tribal canoes used to hunt whales, (which would have extended through the northeast facade) was never realized. And although the landward side of the building was originally intended to be devoted to canoe storage, this area has now been taken over by out-buildings and winter fuel-wood storage.

Such a simple visual analysis can only provide one level of understanding of the building. Full spiritual and emotive understanding can only be derived from the experience of walking up the wooden ramp under the massive roof beams and entering the warmth of its interior spaces.

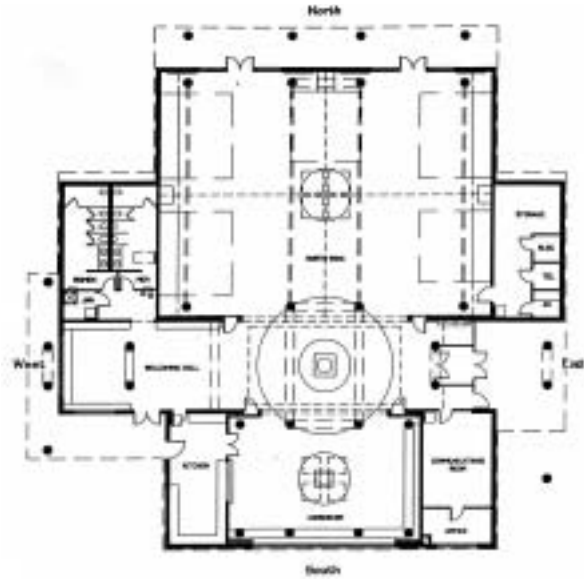
The second Native American building studied was the Longhouse Education and Cultural Center on the campus of Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington (FIG.6). This building, also known as the "House of Welcome," sits on a site once marked by a large boulder with Salish bear symbols. Completed in 1992, and sanctified by tribal elders, it serves as a gathering place for all Salish nations, and is home to the college's Indian Studies Program. It was also designed by Johnpaul Jones of Jones & Jones.

The structure, in essence, is a full-scale adaptation of a Salish longhouse (FIGS.7,8). There are no permanent rooms, and uses fire and smoke inside, while providing up-to-date toilet and kitchen facilities and classroom spaces. In the classroom spaces, seating is accommodated as built-in shelves along the window walls. Outside, the land is treated as an extension of the spiritual qualities inside. Indian elders advised throughout the project, and after comment from one community member, the original plan was modified to align the hearths.



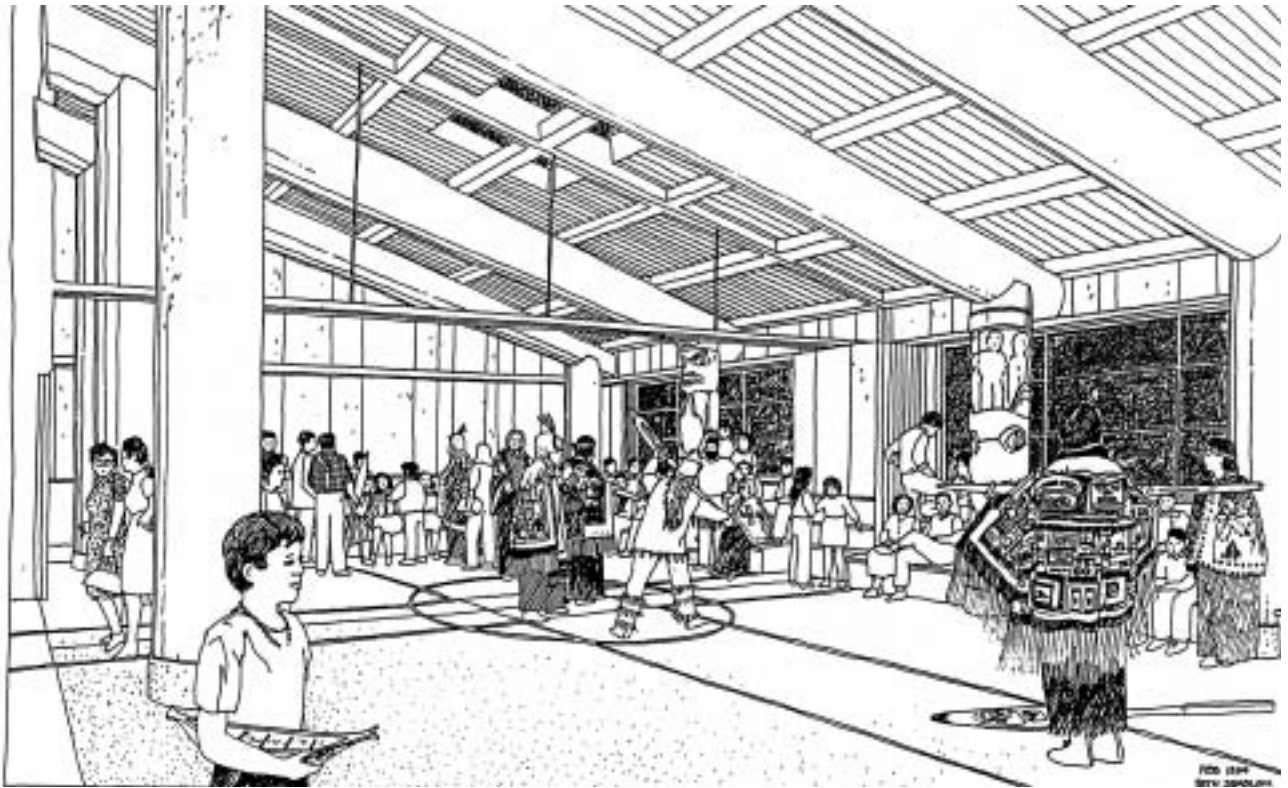
**FIGURE 6.** [ABOVE] Longhouse Education and Cultural Center / “House of Welcome,” Olympia, WA. The entry is dramatically emphasized by the installation of a monumental Thunderbird, reminiscent of older painted relief sculptures but here represented in contemporary manner as a free-standing totem. (Source: Jones & Jones, Seattle, WA.)

**FIGURE 7.** [RIGHT] Longhouse Education and Cultural Center / “House of Welcome,” Olympia, WA. The plan shows the recentered hearths which traverse the welcoming hall. (Source: Jones & Jones, Seattle, WA.)



Decorative elements provide an important feature of this building. A massive Thunderbird, carved and painted by Makah Greg Colfax and Skokomish Andy Wilbur, is perched over its front entrance. The interior window covers are cedar-bark mats, illustrated with creation stories by

Skokomish artist Bruce Miller; other figures from Native American mythology adorn screens around the two central fireplaces (FIG.9). The hoods over the fireplaces are finished with hammered copper, the most common metal used by Pacific Northwest tribes prior to European contact.



**FIGURE 8.** Longhouse Education and Cultural Center / “House of Welcome,” Olympia, WA. The flexibility provided by moveable walls enables larger gatherings to be accommodated. Large-scale beams, bark window coverings, and interior window ornamentation reflect the heritage of the Northwest coast tribes. (Source: Jones & Jones, Seattle, WA.)



**FIGURE 9.** Longhouse Education and Cultural Center/"House of Welcome," Olympia, WA. Painted bark window coverings and a copper-covered hearth are part of the building's symbolic ornamentation. The entire environment reflects a sense of warmth and welcome to native and nonnative visitors alike. (Source: Jones & Jones, Seattle, WA.)

The third Native American example, the Aquinnah Cultural Center on Martha's Vineyard island in Massachusetts, is currently in development stages (FIG.10). Planning for this cultural center and museum was a joint effort between tribal members, elders, and Native American professionals led by Jones & Jones. As part of the planning process, a series of community discussions, meetings, and charrettes were used to create a phased effort by which spaces were established on a gradient from private to public. The planning process also reflected the Wampanoag tradition of reciprocity. The planning team looked at traditional structures and talked about the many activities to be accommodated. Elements of the existing landscape also helped shape the vision of the cultural center: for example, the presence of sea breezes, the access through wooded areas, views, and the presence of cranberry bogs. Among aspects of the project that emerged from these team explorations was a desire by the community for the center to include a native plant and herb garden.

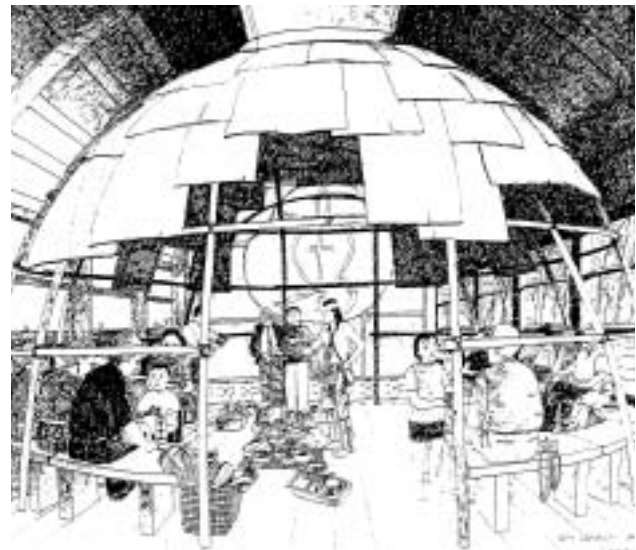
Both in plan and form, the final building design takes its physical expression from Wampanoag longhouse and *wetu* structures. A three-part design enables the complex to fit surrounding landforms. One structure includes the Wampanoag Longhouse with Elder's Lodge. A second, the Aquinnah Longhouse, provides space for the museum and its support spaces. A third structure, the Gay Head Longhouse, will serve as a community building and contain classrooms, a day-care center, and a kitchen facility. A number of factors were specifically mentioned by the tribal planner as important to the design of these contemporary structures.<sup>15</sup> These included energy efficiency, federal restrictions, and the overall scale of the buildings in relation to the land. The tribe was also interested in the possibility that technology might be used enhance the message the buildings provide to noncommunity members.

## CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN AND AFRICAN AMERICAN SACRED SPACES

The first African example, the Dominican Church in Ibadan, Nigeria, was constructed during the 1970s (FIG.11). The facility is modeled on the traditional West African hut, a form directly attributed to ancient African culture and one which reinforces the nature of community. A significant tenet of the Dominican Order is the vow of poverty. In his design for the building, the Nigerian artist Demas Nwoko attempted to integrate traditional elements and natural materials with contemporary forms and materials in ways that respected the church's need for simplicity.

Major elements from the Yoruba culture in this region can be seen in the engravings on columns and the wall treatments in the sanctuary. In a way similar to traditional African palaces or shrines, the sanctuary partially circumscribes the altar, reinforcing a central focus. Decorative elements, such as woodwork on the altar, seats, and ironmongery, also recall the traditional artistry of the region. A pond around the perimeter of the church relates to the Yoruba appreciation of natural forms.

Contemporary materials, such as reinforced concrete, concrete block, and a long-span aluminum roof, were carefully blended with these traditional elements to reinforce the simplicity of the building's form and recall ancient clay surfaces. As such, the structure directly exemplifies a common message surrounding and encompassing a system of community values and traditions among community members and clergy. The success of the effort can be seen when the build-



**FIGURE 10.** Aquinnah Cultural Center, Martha's Vineyard, MA. The Wampanoag building heritage is expressed through a *wetu* form introduced into the longhouse in which community members will carry out their activities. (Source: Jones & Jones, Seattle, WA.)



**FIGURE 11.** Dominican Church, Ibadan, Nigeria. The structure is modeled after the traditional Yoruba hut, and illustrates major cultural elements, including column carvings, exterior covered gathering spaces, and a roughly fashioned steeple.



**FIGURE 12.** SMA Church, Ibadan, Nigeria. This structure illustrates the adaptation of traditional hut form executed in Western materials. The steeple is a contemporary interpretation, reflecting an uplifting notion of spirituality.

ing is compared to another facility of similar form, which utilized Western materials: the SMA Church in Ibadan (FIG.12). The attempt to tell a story in this building is somewhat hindered by the introduction of nontraditional materials.

The second African American example is Saint Benedict the African Church, built in 1990 for a neighborhood of African Americans in Chicago. While concerned with representing community heritage, both the church's building committee and the architects they chose, Belli & Belli, were also concerned with creating a place that would uplift the spirit.

The final design for this project incorporated a *parti* based on interlocking circles (FIG.13). This idea, which was actively advocated by the building committee, was based on the multiple circular forms of traditional West African compound dwellings. African form was reinforced through the choice of wood decking for the sanctuary ceiling (FIG.14), a semicircular seating plan, and trees planted below grade along the interior walls. At the same time the scale of the sanctuary is heightened to reinforce the notion of "hope," parishioners are afforded a panoramic view of the hut-like interior.

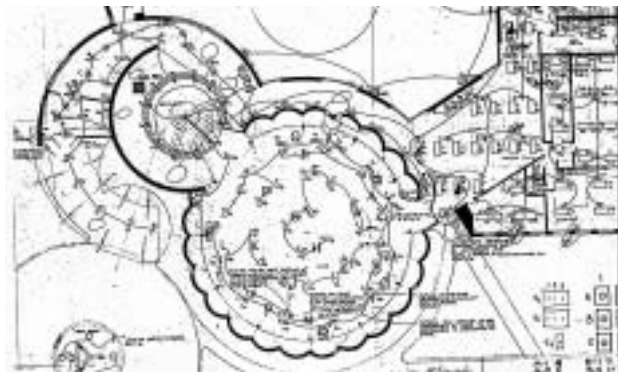
The building's other decorative elements include a stone wall at the baptismal pool and wrought-iron grillwork that exemplify natural forms common in West African culture. The altar and ambo are carved from walnut similar to patterns derived from African woodcarvings. Carved wood elements are also introduced in the sanctuary.

The third African/African American example is Saint Mary's Catholic Church, scheduled for completion in Houston, Texas, in the year 2000. The parishioners of this community were insistent upon retaining an African-American architect, both to alleviate misconceptions and stereotypical responses, and to employ African American professionals (African Americans currently comprise only a very small percentage of registered architects and design professionals in the U.S.).

The design firm chosen, Archi.technic/3, Inc., approached the cultural-based design issues in the project through the use of form, materials and artifacts. The architects collaborated with building committee members, who engaged in detailed research on historical African forms. To reaffirm the sense of the parishioners' African origin, the building committee insisted upon a circular plan similar to that of traditional African huts (FIG.15).

A key feature of this project is the concept of a gathering space, developed at the entrance to the sanctuary, which provides a transition from open exterior space to interior sanctuary. A baptismal pool, modeled to resemble Goree Island in Senegal, was placed in this gathering space. In a recent sermon, the parish priest made an analogy between the African American quest for spirituality and the passage from enslavement to freedom. Thus, the design of the church attempts to incorporate symbolic forms related directly to a particularly African American sense of identity.

Another important feature of the building is its exterior courtyard, which was designed both for meditation and as a way to integrate natural environment with building structure. In a manner reflecting the courtyard concepts of early African



**FIGURE 13.** *Saint Benedict the African Church, Chicago, IL. The plan illustrates the interlocking circular features of the interior walls, which surround the sanctuary and adjacent gathering space. (Source: St. Benedict Building Planning Committee.)*



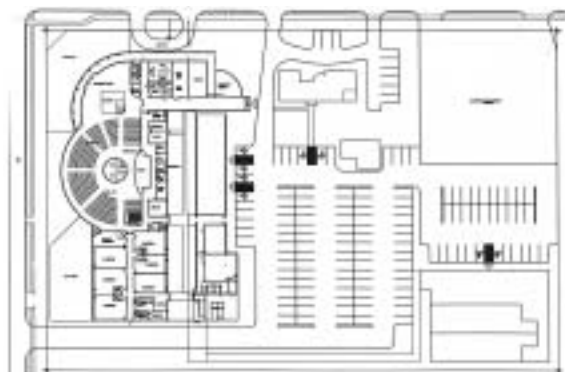
**FIGURE 14.** *Saint Benedict the African Church, Chicago, IL. The ceiling system reflects the traditional hut form and uses wood decking to emphasize its circular form. (Source: St. Benedict Building Planning Committee.)*

settlements, this exterior space is located at the place where parishioners gather before and after services, immediately adjacent to the main circulation route through the building.

The building's decorative elements include carvings proposed for the altar, walls, and Stations of the Cross. These reflect African origins, but, more importantly, will serve as a prompt for shared cultural story-telling.

#### TRADITIONAL SIMILARITIES

The above descriptions of contemporary projects reveal the numerous ways in which traditional elements are manifested in contemporary Native American, African, and African American



**FIGURE 15.** *Saint Mary's Catholic Church, Houston, Texas. Preliminary planning reflects curvilinear forms in the sanctuary and gathering spaces in addition to rectilinear classroom facilities. (Source: St. Mary's Building Planning Committee.)*

sacred space. The accompanying chart breaks these essential connective threads into several categories, and it reveals how the impact of traditional culture is considerable in the design of contemporary sacred spaces (FIG. 16). As the chart indicates, common characteristics of contemporary sacred spaces, modified by assimilation yet reinforced by tradition, include an emphasis on centrality, indigenous form represented with the use of contemporary materials, and the expression of spirituality through spatial planning. Cultural needs are communicated through every part of the planning, materials, and artifact-selection processes, and symbolism plays an important role, from the overall form of the building to individual decorative features.

For the most part, ornamental features remain traditional in nature, either carved or painted, although the quality of these elements has benefited from improved materials and technology. Cultural artifacts tend today to be used as focal points and as the culmination of vistas, in a manner which emphasizes the use of traditional forms. The projects also include elements which are more celebratory than in the past: for example, baptismal pools, speaking platforms, doors, windows, and trim details.

Many choices are available in the design of contemporary sacred spaces other than those which overtly reproduce past components. However, many of these plans, materials, forms or artifacts do not convey the appropriate message. Nevertheless, modern materials and forms have been successfully incorporated in all the projects in an effort to provide inspirational links to heritage. This is evident in such features as the spiraling shape of the African churches and the dark quality of the Makah Elder Center's planked siding. In the African American churches, the use of circular, interlocking forms may also be understood as demonstrating a sense of sacred cultural complexity, introduced to the world of Western rectilinear planning.

In terms of program, the new building projects expand functions related to teaching and the transmission of tradition through the community. This may perhaps be most overt in the interpretative function of the Native American projects, which use site and facility to tell the tribal story. The case studies also show how, for funding or functional reasons, such "secular" functions as museums, day care centers, educational

FACILITY / LOCATION	FUNCTION	PLAN FORM	SPECIAL FEATURES	MATERIALS / TECHNOLOGY	SYMBOLISM	COMMENTS
De'ah't Elder Center Date: 1973 Neah Bay (WA)	Ceremonies Community center Social-service offices	Longhouse plan with shed roof	Dance floor Central hearth Unobstructed view toward the bay Large open space Rear access from kitchen Canoe shed	Plank siding Post-and-beam construction Blue metal roof	Totems at interior glass walls Perimeter seating	Excavation of ancient houses confirmed oral traditions. Structure is lighter and brighter on the inside than old smoke houses would have been. Original carved beams were eliminated.
Longhouse Education and Cultural Center / "House of Welcome" Date: 1992 Olympia (WA)	Ceremonies Spiritual worship Education/learning Exhibitions	Longhouse plan with gabled roof	Central Hearth Landscape is integral and symbolic	Beams similar to more northern coastal tribal form Plank siding Post-and-beam construction	Bark window coverings Painted totems Floor patterns	During the design of the facility changes were suggested related to the location and alignment of hearths.
Aquinnah Cultural Center (in progress) Martha's Vineyard (MA)	Ceremonies Community center Education Museum	Extended <i>wigwam</i> plan with domed roof	n/a	n/a	<i>Wigwam</i> interior structure	Layout of the complex relates the spaces to one another in a symbolic manner.
Dominican Church Date: 1970 Ibadan, Nigeria	Spiritual worship Community center Education, Seminary	Round plan	Gathering space Pond around building perimeter	Stone, Reinforced concrete Concrete block Long-span aluminum	Carved doors, columns Ironmongery Wooden stools and altar	Adaptation of traditional form utilizing modern materials.
SMA Church Date: 1994 Ibadan, Nigeria	Spiritual worship Community center Education, Seminary	Round plan	Gathering space Outside structure around the perimeter	Reinforced concrete Concrete block	Wooden doors, altar and pews	Adaptation of traditional form utilizing modern materials.
St. Benedict the African Church Date: 1990 Chicago (IL)	Spiritual worship Education Community center	Interlocking circular plan, with hut-style roof	Gathering space	Concrete Wood Stone	Stone baptismal font Wrought-iron grille Walnut altar and ambo Sanctuary around altar	Planning similar to interlocking forms of West African compounds.
St. Mary's Church (In progress) Houston (TX)	Spiritual worship Education Community center	Combined circular and rectilinear form	Gathering space Meditation courtyard	Concrete Concrete block	African art Baptismal font	Combines rectilinear, circular, and courtyard concepts from Africa.

FIGURE 16. *Aspects of Contemporary Sacred Spaces.*

classrooms, spaces for age-specific programs, and galleries and retail stores may be combined with community sacred places in contemporary projects in the broader interest of cultural reaffirmation. In such a process of blending, cultural elements are often incorporated as special features: ceremonial dance areas, gathering spaces, artifact displays, and areas for meditation and contemplation. Certain functional elements, such as hearths and perimeter storage/shelving/seating, may also present a dual sacred/nonsacred identity.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY COLLABORATION

As the chart in Figure 16 shows, the most prominent and recurring themes begin with traditional building form: the longhouse, *wigwam*, *wetu*, or hut. But the process of integrating such traditional building elements into a contemporary context requires consideration of not only building function but also cultural meaning. The entirety of the physical location — pathways, trails, views, exterior gathering spaces, natural forms — must be considered along with cultural messages to be interpreted by the community and the public. Furthermore, opportunities for the development and disclosure of special functions or features, perhaps unknown to the planner, may be created through planning processes which empower the community. This may require adjustments to traditional practice, particularly with regard to Native American groups. While the case studies show the planning expectations of African American communities have been greatly influenced by Western mannerisms and strategies, a successful planning strategy among Native American groups may require that time be introduced as an independent variable in order to allow ideas to develop or surface as necessary.

Personal interviews with community members revealed how each of the projects was successful in creating meaningful cultural forms and selecting meaningful materials and ceremonial artifacts with which to facilitate spiritual celebration. An important reason was that in all cases community members were highly active participants with professional design and planning team members. Both the Native American and African American groups requested professional contributions from members of their own cultural group — or at least one similar in tradition. Such a process also engaged the participants in thinking not only about built space but about the context of the natural environment.

In the case of both the Native and African American examples, architects worked toward translating community needs. In the Native American examples, the professional role was one of facilitation. In order to assist each tribal group in establishing a unique spatial plan, Jones & Jones considered the critical requirements of gathering, worship and ceremony. The designers then asked for cultural participation from four worlds: spirit, land, animal, and people. In the African and African American examples, the planning process was largely driven by

the common knowledge and beliefs of building committee members, who orchestrated the design-development process. In both cases, however, the relationship between community and professional was collaborative, with all involved working to empower the specific cultural heritage. For example, concerning the design process for Saint Benedict the African Church, Associate Pastor David Baldwin commented: “Our building committee felt strongly that ours is an African-American community, with the emphasis on ‘American’. No one wanted to be hit over the head with African design or art, yet we did want this structure to reflect the culture of its worshippers.”<sup>16</sup>

Sacred structures send different messages to community and noncommunity members. Nabokov and Easton have written that “different forces—economic, ecological, social, technological, historical and religious—contributed to both the hidden significance and actual appearance of Native American architecture; their extensive survey of Indian architectural traditions suggested that unseen social and religious meaning [were] encoded into buildings and spatial domains.”<sup>17</sup>

In some instances — for example, the metaphor of the beached whale identified with the Makah Elder’s Center — meanings may become lost when an activity ceases to be part of the common culture. For some community members, culture becomes interpreted — that is, separate from meanings intended by designers, but still viable in support of oral tradition, story-telling, religious activities, and ceremonies carried out by the community. Such subtle messages are difficult to transform in cross-cultural communication. In fact, with regard to the Makah, such messages would preferably be kept private. To be effective, however, symbolism must root itself in the shared spiritual understanding of community members, and elements must not be readable only by a few.

The contemporary sacred buildings of both the Native and African American groups employ systems of restricted access to control ritual information. However, misconceptions may arise among outsiders when meanings are identified only as “different,” particularly in facilities where public access is encouraged to support learning about the culture. To serve as useful facilities for intercultural exchange, such facilities would benefit from “guides” that enhance the interface between community and noncommunity members. As E. Guidoni has pointed out, basic orientation is very important. “[Once] the ideology is understood, it becomes possible to view the constructed [environment] from within the society and, in that way, to go beyond ethnocentric classification. The boundary between the reality of construction and the way it is ‘interpreted’ — understood, explained, rationalized — by the . . . populations responsible for [such built structures] is no longer an impassable one for investigators from the outside.”<sup>18</sup>

## SUMMARY: REINFORCING TRADITION

Despite the importance of religious beliefs among Native Americans, Africans, and African Americans, the primary forces behind cultural activity today seem to be those surrounding personal/group identity and political standing. In this regard, the widespread appearance of new sacred spaces within these groups since 1970 may be taken as an expression of the capability of minority communities in the U.S., when economically empowered, to construct significant spiritual centers.

This discussion has also shown that the design of contemporary Native and African American sacred spaces reflects the interests and needs of specific communities. On a case-by-case basis this may involve assembling a number of functional activities which may not consistently reflect ancient heritage. A dichotomy between community members who assimilated European models and those who have continued their reliance on oral communication, memory, and adherence to ancestral beliefs also underlies the renewal of indigenous religion in Native and African American communities. Nevertheless, successful new sacred spaces seem to have one element in common: their reliance on a community-based design process. In such a design paradigm, the architect or designer may play the role of facilitator, or the community itself may take the lead in design decision-making.

According to the preamble to the action plan of the Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies for Development: "New trends, particularly globalization, link cultures ever more closely and enrich the interaction between them, but they may also be detrimental to our creative diversity and to cultural pluralism; they make mutual respect all the more imperative."<sup>19</sup>

The phenomenon of cultural invention for political or social purposes is not new. And in many cases it can be shown to involve a return to ancient forms and symbols, as in each of the projects examined. What is difficult from an architectural standpoint is for this activity to result in visually distinctive, spiritually or emotionally persuasive buildings that are culturally specific in a manner understandable to contemporary users.<sup>20</sup>

Through examination of two diverse but similar communities and their sacred places of celebration and worship, this article has illustrated how distinctive elements, framed by participatory design processes, can enable groups whose identities may have been weakened by historical events to establish communication with the "other," while creating contemporary cultural identities through reinterpretation of past traditions and beliefs.

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All photos are by the authors, except where otherwise noted.

