Designing for American Indians

Three Minnesota firms specialize in architecture for native people.

**TOP LEFT:** Architect Thomas Hodne's Fond du Lac Community College is designed to celebrate a vision of native and non-native culture.

**TOP RIGHT:** Wieland Architects' planned American Indian Architecture is proposed for future site of the National Museum of the American Indian, on the Mall in Washington, D.C.

**BOTTOM LEFT:** Cunningham Hamilton Quiter's award-winning ceremonial building on an Ojibwe reservation launched a new community for Minnesota's Mille Lacs Indians.

**BOTTOM RIGHT:** The Mille Lacs Museum, designed by Thomas Hodne, is organized around a round diorama of Indian life; a geometric mural on the exterior is based on Ojibwe beadwork.

On an Indian reservation in central Minnesota, license plates read "Sovereign Nation," revealing the autonomy of reservation life. But in 1989, the independence of the Ojibwe exceeded even the reservation's political boundaries, when the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe opened a casino on their land. Two years later, gambling revenues from the casino financed two new schools, a health center, and a ceremonial building for tribal dances.

Since the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act was passed in 1988, new forms of legalized gambling on Indian lands have become a growing industry; there are now some 70 casinos partially owned and operated by native people in 18 states, from Connecticut to California. The Indians' casino-generated wealth means that native people, who once looked to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for buildings on the reservations, can now independently commission architects to design buildings that sensitively respond to Indian culture. On the following pages, projects by three Minnesota firms specializing in architecture for native people reveal the complex process—as well as the personal enrichment—of designing for American Indian clients.

John Cunningham, whose 25-year-old, 100-person firm master-planned the Mille Lacs' new community, says the Indians are like no other clients. He recalls an initial meeting with Tribal Chairman Marjorie Anderson, who looked him straight in the eye and asked, "Will you cheat us?" During programming, the architects, whose design approach incorporates nonhierarchical teams, realized that tried-and-true procedures wouldn't work with the Ojibwe. "You can't just suddenly come to native people and ask, 'Okay, what do you want?'

Expects team leader Robert Zakaras, adding that the Mille Lacs, accustomed to HUD buildings, "didn't know they could make choices." Processes such as deciding a building's scale, choosing materials, and staying on a schedule were all new to the Indians, whose calendar is distinctly more circadian than that of most architects. Architect Thomas Hodne, who has worked with many tribes across the country, explains, "The Indians don't live day by day—they live generation by generation."

Hodne generates structures symbolic of Indian culture by asking his native clients to draw the buildings. Such symbology plays an important role in any thoughtful architecture for native people, according to Dennis Sun Rhodes, an Arapaho from Wyoming who directs AmerIndian Architecture in St. Paul. Sun Rhodes points out that the circle, representing the continuity of life, and colors marking the cardinal directions are repeated in many tribes. But he cautions architects against applying such symbols without researching local tribal customs. Adds Thomas Hodne, "You can't design buildings for native people. Architects must learn from what the Indians have to teach us. We are only their interpreters." —Heidi Landecker
FACING PAGE, TOP LEFT: Metal trim and cladding are painted to represent colors of cardinal directions.

FACING PAGE, BOTTOM LEFT: South-facing entrance flanks student center and amphitheater. Floor-to-ceiling windows permit views of earth and sky.

FACING PAGE, TOP RIGHT: Hodne derived plan from thunderbird form.

FACING PAGE, MODEL: Ring road surrounds campus, forming sacred circle.

FACING PAGE, PLAN: Cruciform plan organizes building into classroom, administrative, and library wings.

Architect Thomas Hodne’s first building for American Indians was the 1972 Native American Center in Minneapolis. For the center, which includes an exhibition area, library, gymnasium, and powwow area, Hodne initially conceived a multi-use, multicultural facility that would unite the Afro-Americans, Latinos, and native people who share the city’s core. “When I dropped that idea on the Indians, there was silence,” recalls Hodne, a spry, ponytailed sexagenarian who works out of a renovated Victorian in downtown Minneapolis when he isn’t teaching at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg. “Native people don’t get up and shout when there’s something wrong.” Hodne continues. “The native community of Minneapolis didn’t want to assimilate. They needed to regain their identity.”

Buildings that assert American Indian identity are what Hodne’s practice has focused on ever since, and his recently completed Fond du Lac Community College epitomizes that vocation. In an era when most architecture evolves from Classical orthogonal geometry, Hodne’s building forms have been based on buffalos, eagles, turtles, loons, and hawks. Animal forms embody spiritual and psychological meaning for the Indians, and Hodne has created a zoomorphic collection of buildings—including the turtle-inspired Native-American Center for the Living Arts (1980) in Niagara Falls, New York, and the buffalo-like Little Wound School in Kyle, South Dakota (1982).

For Fond du Lac Community College, one of only 26 tribally controlled colleges in the nation, the architect convened a design workshop with the college’s planning committee, which included residents of the neighboring Fond du Lac Indian Reservation. Hanging 40-inch-wide brown wrapping paper on the walls, Hodne asked the committee members to draw elements they thought should be represented in the new building. The committee produced a thunderbird, a bear’s paw, a “sacred circle” (which represents the continuity of life), and a “heart circle” (symbolizing the spiritual heart of a community). “Non-native people may find it hard to relate to these forms,” admits Hodne, “but they come from a cultural spirituality. All architecture must reach for a spiritual aspect.”

Hodne incorporated all these symbols into the new building for the college, which offers traditional disciplines along with classes in Ojibwe language, American Indian philosophy, and even birch bark canoe building. Because the college states its mission as a “union of cultures,” Hodne interprets the building’s 50,000-square-foot cruciform plan as both a thunderbird, representing Indian culture, and a Christian cross. The campus’s organizing element is a ring road, representing the sacred circle; and a sky-blue, domed “heart circle” forms a ceremonial space and student center. Within this gathering area, stainless steel columns are interspersed with rustic pine posts that seem to march in from the site, symbolizing the commingling of native and non-native cultures. Four metal-clad wings are painted in colors emblematic of the cardinal directions in Ojibwe culture: white for the north, yellow for the south, red for the east, and black for the west. “By its design,” confides Ojibwe student Victoria Macharn, “this building teaches non-natives to ask questions about our culture.”

Hodne warns architects who seek American Indian projects to seriously consider native peoples’ high regard for symbology and to alter non-native notions about how groups of people behave. “For the Indians, to be in a room with chairs in rows is a sin,” he explains. “A circle makes everyone equal.” The architect adds that buildings should be designed for easy maintenance: “Native Americans don’t have a centuries-old tradition of restoring and maintaining permanent buildings like we do.” But what society really needs is to embrace “a very great change in the attitude of the native to the non-native.” As Hodne points out, “Architecture isn’t the key to that, but it can help.”
Dennis Sun Rhodes began his study of architecture for native people in the communal log house of his great-grandmother, Nellie Three Bulls Sun Rhodes, where all the members of his extended family shared a single room for cooking, living, and sleeping. Raised on Wyoming's Wind River Indian Reservation, Sun Rhodes, an Arapaho native who now directs AmerIndian Architecture in St. Paul, Minnesota, has a unique intuition regarding native peoples' needs. "This communal space developed my worldview," notes Sun Rhodes, "and shaped the entire system of social norms for my tribe."

Sun Rhodes studied architecture at Montana State University and worked in Minneapolis throughout the 1970s and 1980s for The Hodne Stageberg Partners, as architect Thomas Hodne's practice was then called. Sun Rhodes then went back to the reservation to serve as an Arapaho tribal leader, returning to St. Paul in 1992 to establish his own firm with partner Daniel Feist.

One of AmerIndian Architecture's first projects is a 17,000-square-foot headquarters for the Division of Indian Work (DIW), a Minneapolis agency that provides emergency food, shelter, and clothing for Indians newly arrived in the Twin Cities. (Minneapolis has the largest American Indian population of any U.S. city.) Sun Rhodes explains that since the agency is a resource for Indians from many different tribes, symbolism must be general enough to appeal to several cultures. The symbol Sun Rhodes selected is the moon, which is female in most cultures. "The woman is traditionally the provider of nourishment for survival," Sun Rhodes relates, adding that the Division of Indian Work offers nourishment to Indian families.

Sun Rhodes derived the moon symbol from what he calls a "cultural design workshop" made up of local Indian women who are pipe carriers in the traditional Sioux sundance, a religious ceremony. The pipe carriers favored the moon symbol, in part because in Plains Indian culture, 1993 is the "year of the wet moon," an indicator of wet, nourishing weather in the coming months, and also because the DIW headquarters will be a major urban project. "Its downtown site is where the people who move into the city attempting to survive now congregate," notes Sun Rhodes, "so our building will have to relate well to the street life. That's part of the design challenge—not only to give the building a special Indian spirit, but to make the structure come alive at night."

In addition, AmerIndian Architecture has proposed a design for a temporary Native American Learning Center to disseminate information about the future National Museum of the American Indian, to be built on the Mall in Washington, D.C. Sun Rhodes' structure is "inspired by drummers from all Indian nations joining in a circle around a sacred drum." The museum, currently being designed by Blackfoot architect Douglas Cardinal of Ottawa in association with Geddes Brecher Qualls Cunningham of Philadelphia, is scheduled to open in 2001.

Sun Rhodes advises non-Indians who want to pursue building projects for native people to study the tribe's hierarchy of animal and natural symbols, and its four-directional color code. "You can look at the 'rock art', or petroglyphs. I've found many symbolic messages by examining the historic record." Sun Rhodes urges architects to seek books on Indian symbology or visit museums that display hide paintings. He also cautions that some Indians still favor assimilation and so are leery of tribal symbols.

"Take housing, for instance," notes Sun Rhodes. "There are so many middle-class Indian people who want modern conveniences like a two-car garage. And then there's the opposite extreme, those who want a simple log cabin." AmerIndian Architecture strives for a consciousness of symbols among all the firm's native clients. Notes Sun Rhodes, "There seems to be some magic that happens in the creative process when architecture becomes sensitive to the Indian people."
Gambling may be a scourge, but for some 650 Ojibwe on the 2,000-acre Mille Lacs Indian Reservation near Onamia in central Minnesota, casinos have brought economic prosperity. Not only has unemployment dropped from 38 percent to 0, but the profitable casinos guaranteed collateral for the sale of an $11 million bond.

The Mille Lacs put the money toward creating a new community—starting with two schools, a health center, and a ceremonial building—in an attempt to draw more urban tribe members back to their homeland, 95 miles north of the Twin Cities.

The new buildings dominate a peninsula in Lake Mille Lacs, whose surrounding forest and marshlands have been the Ojibwe homeland since the 18th century, when the northern forest Indians moved south and west, driving the local Dakota Sioux to the Great Plains. Designed by Cunningham, Hamilton, Quater Architects of Minneapolis, the schools and health center are constructed of concrete and wood, painted earthy colors, with low, organic forms that seem to rise out of the surrounding woodlands. The drum-dance building—a 3,300-square-foot log house—is a modern version of a turn-of-the-century ceremonial building (following pages), based on an archival photograph. When the question arose of which building should be designed and constructed first, one of the tribal elders pointed out that without the ceremonial building, there would be no need for any of the other buildings. "That prioritized our projects," Partner John Cunningham remembers. "There was no further discussion."

Throughout programming and design meetings, the Mille Lacs made it clear that they wanted their buildings to be state-of-the-art on the inside, but to look like indigenous Indian buildings on the exterior. But, Cunningham explains, "an indigenous Indian building was made of birch bark," and the tribe's idea of a durable building was a functional shingled box, like the kind HUD traditionally dispensed for schools and community buildings on the reservations. The architects' challenge, they realized, was to render a technologically sophisticated building that would evoke the sense of an Ojibwe wigwam.

Through meetings with the Indians, the architects developed a goal of creating culturally appropriate buildings without Indian kitsch, excessive Modernist abstraction, or inappropriate symbols such as tipsis. All the buildings are arranged around circular gathering spaces, which dominate Ojibwe cultural and religious ceremonies: A skytis, 80-foot-diameter rotunda forms an indoor play area in the Nay Ah Shing Lower School; a circular entrance court at the upper school accommodates weekly pipe ceremonies.

The architects also realized they would need new approaches to working with clients it they were going to be successful in generating a new Mille Lacs community. When the architects asked the Indians how large they wanted their drum-dance building to be, for instance, the Indians had little perception of size; the architects attended traditional day-long drum ceremonies to determine how many people attended.

According to team leader architect Robert Zakaras, the team working on the Indian buildings developed a tolerance for slower, more thoughtful processes of resolving basic issues, not to mention a genuine respect for the types of problems Indians have faced for hundreds of years. "As architects, we tend to think we can solve all the world's problems with a building," notes Zakaras. "And there are a lot we can rectify. But to think we can correct 150 years of social injustice with good design is just naive."

Zakaras and Cunningham both repeat Thomas Hodne's advice that architects designing for native people can't succeed if they attempt to dominate or steer the Indians to specific schemes, pretending to have all the answers. "There's a political and a family life in the tribe that we can only observe and react to," notes Zakaras. "You cannot prescribe solutions unless the Indians direct you."
TOP LEFT: Mille Lacs Indians regard their ceremonial building, where spring and fall drum dances offer thanks to the spirits, as the heart of their community, which occupies a peninsula in Lake Mille Lacs.

TOP RIGHT: Section reveals clerestories and octagonal interior.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Ceremonial building is constructed of logs and laminated wood beams and arranged as a square with an octagonal interior. Corner illustration shows drum-warming shelter, where drum is heated over coals before the ceremony.

FACING PAGE, TOP: Log ceremonial building is based on a 1900 archival photograph of original drum-dance building on the Mille Lacs Reservation.

FACING PAGE, BOTTOM LEFT: Interior rises to 30 feet and reflects Ojibwe reverence for natural materials: maple floor, fir structure, cedar log walls.

FACING PAGE, BOTTOM RIGHT: Architects based ceiling fixtures on traditional Ojibwe symbol of bird in flight.