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ABORIGINAL ARCHITECTURE

Living Architecture

Everyone is familiar with certain types of Aboriginal architecture. Traditional igloos and teepees are two of the most enduring symbols of North America itself. But how much do we really know about the types of structures Native Peoples designed, engineered and built? For more than three hundred years, Native communities in North America have had virtually no indigenous architecture. Communities have made do with low-cost government housing and community projects designed by strangers in faraway places.

Thankfully, across the continent, political, financial and cultural changes have created a renaissance of Native design. Modern Aboriginal architects are turning to ancient forms, adapting them in response to changes in the natural and social environment, and creating contemporary structures that hearken to the past. Employing old and new materials and techniques, and with an emphasis on harmony and balance, Native designers are successfully melding current community needs with tradition. The resulting buildings are testaments to the enduring strength and ingenuity of Aboriginal design.


Featuring expert commentary and stunning imagery, **Aboriginal Architecture Living Architecture** provides a virtual tour of seven communities—Pueblo, Mohawk, Inuit, Crow, Navajo, Coast Salish and Haida—revealing how each is actively reinterpreting and adapting traditional forms for contemporary purposes.

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Produced by Mushkeg Productions Inc. in co-production with the National Film Board of Canada
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ABORIGINAL ARCHITECTURE LIVING ARCHITECTURE

Despite huge differences in climate and culture, Aboriginal communities across North America share fundamental similarities as they begin their architectural renaissance.

History

There's been a 300-year pause in the natural development of traditional architectural styles. Today's architects have to leap that gap with every structure they build. Building materials have changed. New structures have a different social purpose. And questions abound: What is the essence of the traditional design? Is it the materials used, the shape of the structure or the motif behind it?

Values

No matter what the local geography, each community wants new structures that are in tune with the environment, and they all face the same questions: What is the best use of scarce resources? How do you work with nature to create the most efficient heating and cooling systems? Where do you get the funding?

Dialogue

New buildings that speak to people are finally going up in all these Aboriginal communities. What should these new buildings say to the world? To future generations? To the community?

This documentary film explores these questions from the perspectives of seven Aboriginal communities. Below are some discussion questions for each one.

PUEBLO: Role of the Ancestors

At Acoma, the oldest city in North America, descendants of the Pueblo are working on a new cultural centre that reflects the evolution of building materials and design since ancient times. Brian Vallo, manager of the centre, takes us to the home of his ancestors and explains how the mysterious ruins of Chaco Canyon are geographically and spiritually connected to Acoma.

- Q How do you honour ancestral achievements in a modern structure?
- Q Does innovation still have a role to play in Aboriginal architecture?
- Q What role did religion play in Acoma building design? What about today?

MOHAWK: Building a Community

Brian Porter, a local architect, designs for Mohawk communities new multipurpose complexes that defy typical urban zoning conventions but are true to the democratic spirit of the traditional longhouses. Brian explains how changes in government procedures have drastically affected building styles in Native communities in Canada.

- Q What is the relationship between the structure of a building and community?
- Q How does the design of a building define the social relationships of the people who live and work in it?
- Q How does the social tradition of the longhouse affect buildings in modern Mohawk communities?

INUIT: Adaptations for the Environment

Whether the structures are made from snow, whale bone and stone or steel and plywood, the fierce climate continues to define architectural design in the Arctic. Anne Hansen understands the importance of traditional expertise while also anticipating new Inuit-designed permanent constructions in Nunavut.

- Q How do different peoples with different resources respond to the same extreme weather conditions?
- Q What is the traditional design response to the strong Arctic winds? What is the modern response?
- Q How do the structure and shape of building materials affect design?

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CROW: A Change of Purpose

Crow architect Daniel Glenn reinterprets the teepee lodge when he designs sustainable buildings, like the college at Little Big Horn, that will never travel like a teepee. Robert Howe, a Crow elder describes the ongoing role of the transportable teepee lodge in modern Crow life.

- Q What traditional values and design techniques still work in a structure with an entirely different purpose?
- Q What role does motif play in creating meaning in a building?
- Q Are functionality and efficiency more important than icon and motif when adapting traditional designs to modern purposes?

NAVAJO: Buildings that Talk

At the Design and Engineering Department on the vast Navajo Nation, designer Harrison Martin maintains the belief system intrinsic to the original hogan as he works to build schools, chapter houses and senior centres on tight budgets and schedules. Richard Begay Jr., a young Navajo architect, dreams of the day when his designs will grace Window Rock, the Navajo seat of government.

- Q How do you maintain the original language of a building on a different scale using different materials?
- Q What role does direction play in Navajo buildings?
- Q How do shape and direction in architectural design interact to convey Navajo values?

COAST SALISH: Past and Present Conversations

Archeological discoveries of the oldest pit houses built in Canada are helping the Coast Salish people reclaim their land, history and culture. Patrick Stewart is a Niska architect who works with Coast Salish and other nations to develop buildings that reflect their own cultural values through consensus discussion.

- Q What is the effect of historical information and contemporary consensus on the design process?
- Q What is the importance of archeology to modern Aboriginal communities?
- Q What is the role of discussion and consensus in architectural design?

HAIDA: Art and Architecture

Now that the Haida have regained some control over their old growth cedars, prominent Haida leaders and artists have begun to build their own cedar big houses based on traditional designs, with a few individual twists. Chief Jim Hart, a respected Haida carver, shares his own experiences with Haida designer Gina Mae Schubert.

- Q How do individual artists interpret traditional structures in their private homes?
- Q How did regaining control of cedar forests affect modern Haida architecture?
- Q What is the relationship between Haida art and architectural design?

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