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2 Sinte Gleska University, FROM ABOVE: Landscape; Hexagon Building

CLARK STEVENS

EVERYDAY OBSERVATIONS

Sinte Gleska University and RoTq Architects

RoTq was founded in 1991 to navigate, explore and exploit the uncertainty of the conditions of the 'everyday' in the pursuit of architectural ideas. Our working process develops a particular language of form and human relations for each project based upon aggressive and continuous research of the natural and social conditions that form the spatial condition of the everyday.

A collaborative approach to the authorship of our work is guided by a respect for and celebration of individual knowledge, talent and experience. We have assembled an organisation of individuals who share a generosity of spirit and yet maintain divergent formal skills and world views. The openness within RoTq has also made it possible for us to collaborate in a genuine sense with those who commission and inhabit the architecture we facilitate. We enthusiastically embrace found conditions and conventions as an opportunity for improvisation.

Since the spring of 1994, we have been funded by the Lannan Foundation Indigenous Communities Program to plan and build a new campus for Sinte Gleska University. Sinte is the oldest tribal university in the Americas, founded 25 years ago by the Sicangu Lakota in Rosebud, South Dakota. When we first came to the Rosebud Reservation to begin our campus planning work, we felt that we were unable to ask the right questions, and the Lakota people seemed to be unable to tell us what they wanted. Perhaps they were unable to tell us because nobody had asked them before, but it is more likely that they knew exactly what they valued and chose not to say. I suspect that they felt that we, in light of their cultural and life experiences, were not to be trusted with that knowledge.

Planning, programming and community design techniques for architects have traditionally centred around collective exercises, structured to quickly obtain facts and data from representative client and 'user' groups. They typically rely on the tendency of individuals (generally white male individuals) to state their personal opinions freely. Certain architectural firms have developed elaborate 'facilitation' methods to encourage, coerce or otherwise extract enough information to start drawing in as short a time-frame as possible. I recall from my professional

practice courses that one well-known firm called such exercises 'squatter sessions', a wildly inappropriate term in the context of a people who lost their way of life to a squatter culture.

After a few relatively unsuccessful attempts at conventional programming, we ultimately did what we do in our office when thought alone fails to produce an answer: we made something. Not a building of our own design, but something that an individual member of the Lakota community had needed, planned and brought into being by sheer energy and force of will. Two of us went and lived and worked for a week and built, along with a dozen Native American men, women, and children, a 16 x 24 foot straw-bale house for a tribal elder. While we were there, we heard stories, jokes and myths. We learned a bit about how we should act and what was expected of us.

After we helped to build Grandma Little Elk's house, we were told of modular building components available from defence contractors that were being downsized. Experimenting with four 12 x 60 inch modules, we adapted the straw-bale techniques we had learned to complete an existing campus building that had lost its funding in the late 1970s. In the process we helped to reactivate the Tribal sawmill and provided an opportunity for the community to gain construction experience. Our construction crew was the maintenance department of Sinte Gleska University and the ninth grade boys' basketball team of the St Francis Indian School.

We spent many hours in the next year with the people of the Sicangu Lakota Nation getting to know them and absorbing their landscape. We continued to build as we learned, and we began to know what to look for because we engaged with the place. We participated in systems, natural and cultural, that were not of our making or under our control before we proposed any permanent alterations to the landscape at the new campus. Our understanding derived from engaged listening and active participation. We did not import an aesthetic system that was derived from elsewhere. (2,4-7)

By coincidence, my own family has had a tradition of spending a week in South Dakota every year since I was a boy. I first came to this land when I was ten years old and have returned every year since with my brothers and



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FROM ABOVE: Grandma Elk's House; Hexagon Building, Sinte Gleska University



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Hexagon Building, Sinte Gleska University

my father. Before I understood that there were Native Americans and Americans, I began to understand the land.

Over the years, as I visited each fall, my perception of the place changed. A landscape that had at first seemed flat and empty transformed into a place that contained an immense variety of life and spaces. I noticed that living things, whether they crawled or flew, walked on two legs or four, were most comfortable in very particular types of prairie spaces. These spaces were forms initially indistinguishable from the spaces adjacent to them. After years of such observations, it now seems to me that life is not 'found' in these spaces, it is made from and of them: the pheasant is made from the space that divides the dense yellow shortgrass prairie from the more open stand of blood red rosehips. The pheasant is the boundary and the blending of the earth, sky, prairie grass and rosehips. The grouse grows from the chokecherry tree and the chokecherry tree is made of the concave space where the base of a bluff becomes the base of the next. What I have learned about Lakota cosmology has reinforced this understanding of space. (1,8,11,12)

My goal in all of our work is to produce an indigenous architecture of the present day that is as inevitable a completion of its context as the trout is of the eddy behind the rock. I am beginning to think that becoming 'native' or indigenous has as much or more to do with learning to be conscious and respectful of the natural world than it does with blood ancestry or cultural inheritance. It also involves learning that human systems are only a subset of natural systems, and that our technologies, including

building technologies, should be applied with a sense of balance and restraint.

We have found that gradual transformation of the known and familiar made the built results of the process more meaningful and valued in the community. Being respectful of the 'comfort level' of the people and place in which we worked not only allowed all the collaborators in the process to develop a proprietary interest in the results, but also kept us from missing the opportunities of generic conditions. Even the most mundane and conventional aspects of the everyday provided opportunities to access larger systems of meaning.

Our approach to learning in a context dominated by landscape and cultural history has been to look for the values and abstract systems of order inherent in the reality of the place. Not to act as 'preservationists' of some Disney ideal, but to look at the contemporary condition and find links to traditional, organic and integrated systems of values. We look for tangencies that connect the social to the technological to the natural, within the framework of reciprocity that is the basis of an indigenous understanding of the universe. Many of the people of the Rosebud remain there because they know that human beings complete the natural world by engaging that world responsibly. They have reinforced my belief that by knowing a place through engagement, participation and listening to the conditions of the everyday, the things that we build can complete the intentions of a place. (9,10)

Our techniques for identifying the programme, location and form of contemporary indigenous architecture at Sinte Gleska began with a mapping of the relationships that were described to us: earth to sky, people to earth, sons-in-law to mothers-in-law, river to willows. We mapped the



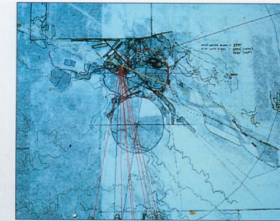
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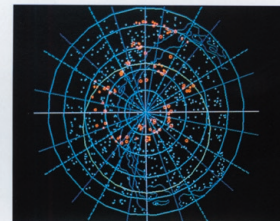
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Sinte Gleska University, LEFT FROM ABOVE: Landscape; Technology Building; RIGHT FROM ABOVE: Campus plans; siting study



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Sinte Gleska University, FROM ABOVE: Technology Building; campus plans

relationships that connected story to place. (13) When we presented these maps to the Lakota people – our attempt at campus planning – we were afraid that they would be perceived as mundane, presumptuous, arrogant or irrelevant. They were, in fact, received as if they were a part of history that the people and the community had always known. They were pleased that we were finally catching on. (14)

Learning was reciprocal. At first they said, 'build us circles, not squares'. As we became more comfortable with one another, we reminded them that the land contained many forms, and that the stories they had told us contained spaces that were deserving of more study. Their knowledge demanded a more considered approach to a permanent alteration of their landscape than picturesque reproductions of traditional shelters could accomplish. Nevertheless, we began to see circles in the land. (15,16)

We grappled sincerely with the notion of 'community design', because of the history of outsider impact on Lakota culture. Eventually we found a balance between our desire to act as architects, and our commitment to give the people a voice. We also found a Lakota cultural precedent that helped us to better define our role. In the Lakota *tiospaye*, or extended family, an individual's position (which is not quite an appropriate term) is determined not by skills, gifts, talents or knowledge, but rather by the generosity with those particular abilities that are shared for the good of the community, or *tiospaye*, and not just for the existing community; the

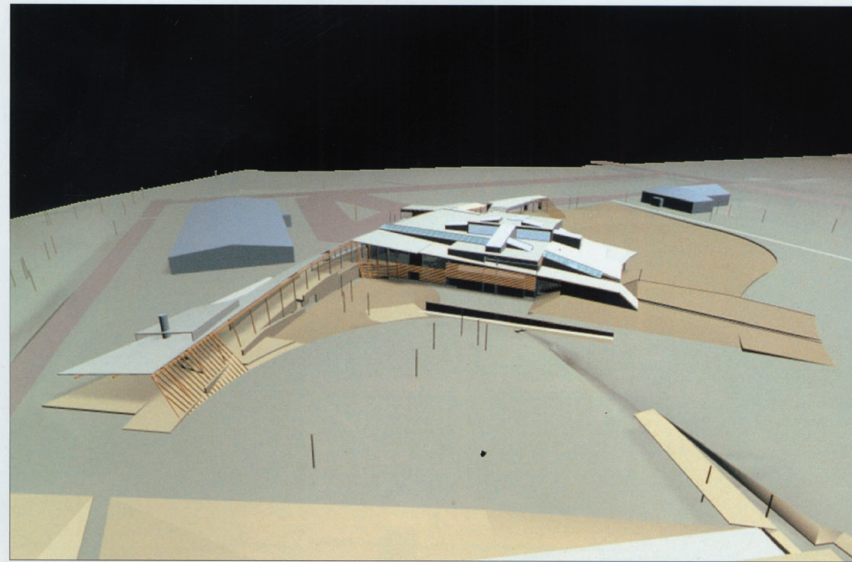
Lakota always speak of the impact that their decisions and actions have on the next seven generations. (17,19)

Suppression of one's individuality is not required to be a good *tiospaye* member. Not every individual has been given the vision of a warrior, a healer or an architect. The only imperative is that an individual does not use his gifts to satisfy his individual desires at the expense of the *tiospaye*. Lakota values do not confuse individualism with selfishness like the culture that replaced them in North America. Traditional Lakota had an expectation that those who were gifted would act in the best interests of all, which gave them the power of faith.

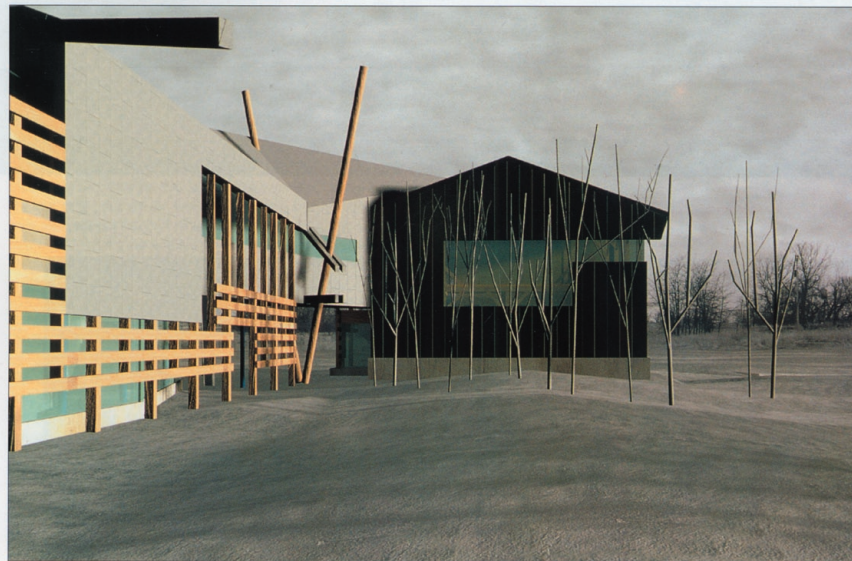
In the 1990s, however, there no longer exists the integration of nature, art, culture, war and love that produced and was produced by those traditional values. Our shared process aspires to those values, even as it deals with the pettiness of small-town relations, bad weather, lack of skills, shortage of hope, the limitations and opportunities of local conventions, crumbling infrastructure, and 80-per-cent unemployment. (18)

We once asked Paul Leader-Charge, a 99-year-old Lakota elder, how the Lakota people had known to locate and move their camps. We expected that his answer would reveal one of the clues to the Lakota version of 'feng shui'. Instead, he answered in the terms of the everyday: 'We are clean people. When the latrines were full, it was time to go'.

Numbers in brackets refer to images.



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19 Sinte Gleska University, FROM ABOVE: Multipurpose Building; Technology Building