

Re-contextualizing the architectural learning experience: an alternative perspective (part v)

Kenneth J. Chakasim

Laurentian University, Sudbury, Ontario, Canada

ABSTRACT: Canadian Indigenous students struggle to situate their cultural knowledge within a Eurocentric academy, in part because indigenous ways of knowing are informed by a philosophy that is characterized by 'interconnected' relationships rather than an isolated system of thought. In response to this division of minds, the most immediate and intuitive approach is to counteract this perception with a series of strategically placed discussions across a diverse cast of research actors with the intent to reconfigure and *emerge*¹ with a renewed sense of cultural understanding while escaping the nuances that strain Indigenous-Western relationships.

Viewed as an act reciprocity this relates to architectural learning when one considers many of today's contemporary schools of architecture are desperately seeking to establish a restored balance between the complexities of architectural praxis; namely those that are engaging with complex social systems and where the profession is not only being pressured from afar but also from within to respond in creative ways that go beyond traditional means of Western research and conventional practice.

Operating from an Indigenous paradigm, this presentation offers a set of ideological tools for analyzing non-Western cultures, which aim to diminish the risks and avoid the dangers of the misinterpretation of indigenous archetypes and their personal impressions. Another reason the discipline ought to remain open to an Indigenous paradigm, to raise questions of relevant research regarding the design of Indigenous communities that allow for young Indigenous people to contribute, help redefine, and bridge the critical discourse of architectural rhetoric in the 21st century. In turn, addresses the need for academia to take part in the preservation of Indigenous knowledge systems, thereby encouraging Laurentian University, Canada's newest School of Architecture in 35 years to facilitate an ethical middle ground (or space) for architectural learning that does not exclude an Indigenous worldview while helping to re-contextualize Indigenous traditions.

KEYWORDS: emergence, epistemology, indigenous, paradigm, reciprocity,

1.0 Addressing the need for inclusion of indigenous culture in the architectural academy

This article represents a piece of writing within a larger body of *design-based research*² aimed to address the absence of an Indigenous epistemology across Canadian Schools of Architecture. In doing so, what is created is the expansion of an intellectual space – *toward an ethical middle ground*³ - for cultural dialogue that is both intuitive and counter-intuitive to an indigenous worldview. As expressed by Smith and Schank-Smith (2003), in *Perspectives on Diversity and Design*, "Architecture and the built environment can never embrace the challenges of the future without the infusion of new ideas, technologies and especially diverse individuals and approaches. If we refuse, we are destining ourselves to be suspended in the past."

When viewed as a pressing inadequacy, where many global academies - not just Canadian - are unable to bring the indigenous person closer and into direct contact with something or someone representative of their worldview then, a greater obligation is placed upon that academy to uphold the ideal. If universities are a place for universal discussion and serve as repositories of universal knowledge then, without trepidation the academy must remain open

without scrutiny and judgment of the cultural knowledge future indigenous architectural students and scholars will bring forward in the years to come. This deficit not only relates to both the architectural academy and indigenous students of design, but also, it positions favorably a renewed future by calling on all people of Indigenous cultures in the academy to be preservers of indigenous knowledge informed by the creation and recreation of designed stories. Moreover, calls into the action the instructor who serves to benefit the student first with their knowledge and, hopefully, reciprocates a course of design action where intelligence is challenged, extended and held with integrity between all others. Such demands indicate that now may be the time to consider an alternative perspective with which today's indigenous student of design can help redefine and address this academic challenge.

2.0 The political context that preempted a culture's isolation in the academy

Now having to address a more significant issue – *the demoralizing and historical effect residential school systems have had on indigenous peoples in the academy* - not because it engages with a long-standing strenuous relationship held between Canadian institutions and the indigenous peoples within them, but rather, because it reminds us of the continued challenges indigenous peoples have to overcome and still do when concern for indigenous knowledge is persistently appropriated, articulated, and reframed for the Western ideal. For far too long indigenous students in the academy have been socially entrenched without having the opportunity to engage and grapple with the historical trauma imposed upon their peoples as a result of the residential school system (Figure 1). As a result, the indigenous person not only surrenders their individual identity, but also continues to surrender the authority of their cultural creativity along with any ontological style they might employ to rightfully position them self in the academy alongside others.⁴ Although this is *not* the central investigation of the article, it drastically reminds us of the inflicted learning conditions – the way schools were architecturally designed - placed upon Canada's Indigenous people.



Fig. 1 Cree students in Residential School, Saskatchewan, Canada, 1945

The historical and political context imposed upon Canada's Indigenous people sets precedent for the culture's isolation in the academy that exists to this very day. As an undertone to the development of this article, it is imperative to raise the political consciousness of the reader and to bare all truisms that reveal why there may not be any previous architectural criticism offered by a person of indigenous identity. The simple reason is, schools at one time were used as instruments (or tools) of oppression imposed upon Aboriginal people since the early 17th century, when European missionaries established schools for Aboriginal people on Reserves. Since Aboriginal children were seen as the segment of Aboriginal society that would be the most receptive to the imposed standards of Western civilization, assimilation through education became a primary concern of the Canadian Government (Cardinal, 1999).

Therefore the ensuing challenge for any Canadian school of architecture with Indigenous students is to provide an education that is meaningful, culturally relevant and, if possible, supported with quality enhancing education standards. Unfortunately though while

improvements that address indigenous learning styles and ways of knowing have been made at the elementary level, it is still the higher schools of thought, namely our universities that continue to be based on Eurocentric models of education. As a result, today's Indigenous student in any discipline of study – not just architecture - is caught at the extremities, between the margins of society, outside the dominance of Western modalities, always in tension and fully aware they are in prime position to renegotiate their personal senses, values, ethos and ontological traditions in relation to the Other.

3.0 The Indigenous paradigm

As we have come to understand, Western architectural traditions have long-established modes of delivery. It is a credible profession that increasingly branches out into individual rational sciences, each with an isolated sense of order. As a result, the epistemological⁵ dichotomy – Western versus Indigenous - forces Aboriginal students of architecture to justify their ways of knowing to and for the dominant culture while the academy enjoys fresh opportunities for cultural enrichment (Turner, 2006). When viewed as a dichotomy the “indigenous paradigm” emerges. The indigenous paradigm deals with a culturally specific discourse based on indigenous peoples premises, values, and connectivity to the world. Rigney (2001) argues that an indigenous paradigm reflects our epistemologies (ways of knowing), our axiologies (ways of doing) and our ontologies (ways of being). Notwithstanding these multiplicities, an Indigenous paradigm across design-based disciplines means pushing the boundaries ‘in order to make intellectual space for indigenous cultural knowledge systems that were denied in the past’. Take, for example, the following table that positions Western (Scientific) Knowledge to that of Indigenous (non-Scientific) Knowledge. The inherent differences may seem rudimentary but they bring into focus a fundamental division of thought in terms of economics, relationship to environment, philosophy and architecture. The more detailed the comparisons, the more obvious the differences become in almost every category; in many cases they are complete opposites and inform different epistemological stances.

Western (Scientific) Knowledge	Indigenous (non-Scientific) Knowledge
Economics	
Concept of private property a basic value; includes resources, land, ability to buy and sell Nature	No private ownership of resources; no concept of selling the land; human beings are part of nature
Relation to Environment	
Conquest of nature celebrated; living beyond nature's limits; humans viewed as superior	Respect natures limits; no desire to change landscape; humans are not superior
Religion and Philosophy	
Linear concept of time; technology dictates; machine over manual; the dead are gone	Time is measured according to natural cycles; manual over machine; dead regarded as spirits
Architecture	
Construction designed to survive human life; hard-edged forms imported; earth covered with concrete.	Construction designed for changing life-styles; soft-forms; local knowledge; earth is not paved.

Table 1: Inherent Differences. Source: (Mander 1991)

Whether we want to acknowledge, undermine or reject notions of an indigenous paradigm, many Western scholars - past and present – have ignored the indigenous paradigm and its epistemological value. Why? As stated by Kuokkanen (2000), “Western scholars often treat indigenous ways of knowing as primitive, primordial, unsophisticated or in other ways inferior, simply because of their reluctance and, in some instances, total ignorance to want to grasp the totality of an indigenous worldview or Native American approach to life.” Fortunately though,

proactive scholars have started to rationalize the need for an alternative perspective specific to architectural education.

In this case, Smith and Schank Smith (2003) state, “similar to a pendulum in motion, the paradigms governing architectural education swing with trends, movements of philosophy or approach. Within such change new concepts can be realized, since, the voids left by the pendulum’s movement can be filled by the marginal. Here we define margin as a part of anything, for example a society or organization that is least integrated with its center, least often considered, least typical, or most vulnerable. The marginal represents people, ideas or things not included within the center. Those on the edge can be the most unpredictable but also more interesting. It is within this margin that a diversity of ideas exists. We believe that by “creating an environment allowing a degree of play” it becomes more possible to successfully engage the marginal, encouraging diversity. This is not only the diversity of gender and ethnicity but also of approaches to design and basic tenets that can then be integrated into and influence architectural education. The swings of the pendulum might reflect changes in culture, but in the case of a school of architecture this reflection may constitute the profession or the academic environment.”

4.0 Personal Impressions

The strength and value of an interdisciplinary design approach invites a larger and more critical discourse of cultural action⁶ to be established. Not only does this approach overtly reveal the social, cultural, and imaginative qualities of the individual being interviewed but also, provides us with genuine glimpse of the cultural differences or personal impressions we have toward each other. As we shall read, whether expressed as an unspoken idea or a paradigmatic way of knowing, instructors with different cultural backgrounds start to see and understand how an indigenous student struggles to establish a deeper and more intellectual sense of connection to their peers. This begins, strategically, by questioning the perceptions of the instructor with a different set of hermeneutic principles (or interpretation values).

Interview with Dr. John DiNova

Dr. Joanne DiNova is a Ryerson University instructor in the Faculty of Communication and Design and is of Aboriginal heritage (Anishinawbe Métis). In her interview, she describes an indigenous way of knowing as a type of oral-literature binary located in many cultures. Afforded with Joanne’s discussion is an opportunity to explore some of the perceived shortcomings associated with an indigenous realm of thought, but also the acknowledgment of how Western thinkers were at one time able to think purely in the abstract without any connection to reality and how this disconnect is one of the major differences in the way Indigenous and Western cultures express themselves. The interview went as such:

KC: One of the design challenges I am experiencing is how we connect *with* materiality knowing indigenous cultures have undergone a shift from oral-based societies to one that is written (hints of Walter Ong).

JD: In relation to my own research, I did not focus on indigenous thought and literature at first. When I started getting fascinated by Native literature, I found that, in general, it was not understood in the critical mainstream. It was usually read against an oral/literate binary, as the product of a less advanced culture that was only recently shifting from orality to literacy. Oral cultures, the thinking went, had just recently acquired writing, so they were not as cognitively advanced. So the literature was mapped against a linear progressive model of language, which I totally reject. I looked at two different worldviews, the Aboriginal worldview and the Western worldview. Then I pulled them apart – in reality, they are not entirely separate – and did a comparison and contrast thing, and then brought them together in the end, a kind of dialectic.

In general, the dialectic is rooted in the ordinary practice of a dialogue between two people who hold two different ideas or ideals and wish to persuade each other. The presumption is

that even if they do not agree in total they at least share some meanings and principles of inference (conjecture), something that is revealed in Joanne's discussion.

KC: Tell me more about your experience when you brought an indigenous way of knowing to the academy? How did the structure of the university take to that? How did they embrace it?

JD: It was definitely challenging and a real struggle, and having to assert that this knowledge was worthy of critical attention. Also, there was a growth period for myself personally because I came in wanting to study Shakespeare. In regards to Aboriginal literature, there tends to be a contest over the scholarly territory or something, a real struggle over who really has the right to speak authoritatively on matters of Aboriginal literature. Will it be the people whose literature it is? Or the people whose academy it is? It's really hard to stay in that battle for a long time.

Joanne expresses a common experience among many Aboriginal students and scholars and that is, the uneasy relationship with indigenous forms of knowledge because they have been assigned the task of representing their communities (and often other indigenous communities) in the intellectual world of dominant cultures. Again, reinforcing the dilemma Aboriginal students encounter when they are required to justify their ways of knowing to, and for, the dominant culture while the academy enjoys fresh opportunities for cross-cultural enrichment (Turner, 2006).

KC: What kind of medium, message or symbol can you identify with throughout your research? What did you use to help you with the narration?

JD: With my thesis, *Spiraling Webs of Relation*, it was the Dream Catcher – where everything is connected, only it's not static - it continuously shifts. That kind of model informs Aboriginal literature and the indigenous way of knowing. With the Western way of looking at thought, everything is seen as linear and evolving. So Western thought is seen as up here (motion of hands above head) and it has evolved from what are considered more primitive forms of thought. But Western thought had something like the spiraling web. You can see it with words such as a "spell" and "spiel." The words have the same root. To put a spell on someone is to spin a spiel. You story something into existence, same with the words "spirit," and "respiration," and "inspiration." The spiritual is buried in the English language as well. If you go far enough back, it's there. It's something that was lost. Some variation of the indigenous way of knowing is in every culture. When Western thought lost it, though, Western thinkers were able to think purely in the abstract, without any connection to reality, which can be very powerful, and a very dangerous, thing to do.

KC: That is a very interesting comment that they lost the abstract. When you look at indigenous cultures and how we maintained it, how a complete generation may have lost the language, do you think that is the strength we have right now?

JD: In terms of Ong and the notion of evolution towards the abstract, I think we were hugely abstract thinkers already, and quite comfortable with the abstract, because the abstract and the spiritual go together, they may be the same thing, and for traditional indigenous thought, there wasn't a division between the abstract and the material. I think that was and still is the big difference. Even though we have something embedded in us – embodied knowledge – it's in every culture. I think the Aboriginal way of knowing – always finding connections to everything – will try to find some relation to contemporary Western thinking. There can't be an absolute split between Aboriginal and Western ways. Somehow we have to find a way to relate with each other's way of knowing, even if it is imposed or emerging.

Key to this interview with Joanne is the notion indigenous people are able "to move freely and quite comfortably in the direction of the abstract" since much of their traditional customs are

informed by a type of secular thought. She attributes this to be a significant strength with the way Indigenous students come to understand their place in the world and now more recently, across academic settings. As a result, indigenous students will often express themselves in terms of a type of creation story, splicing their story into existence, perhaps even with simple artifacts like the Dream Cather that allows them to combine material exploration with a metaphorical construct (or sub-creation) of their own. From this perspective it becomes evident that the knowledge associated with the making of an object or artifact is connected with the tacit wisdom of the body. The term tacit being understood or implied without being openly stated, not spoken and, perhaps, even seen as “an unspoken idea”.

Interview with Marco Polo

Seeking to counterbalance the indigenous perspective offered up by Joanne the following interview with Marco Polo, an Associate Professor in Ryerson University’s Department of Architectural Science was conducted. Marco’s research interests include Criticism: Contemporary Canadian Architecture, History: Canadian Architecture since 1945, Regionalism in Canadian Architecture and the Cultural Dimensions of Sustainability. He is non-Aboriginal and describes in great detail the essential role narrative techniques have played in establishing first principles of architectural representation and its ordering systems.

Marco’s interview gets to the core of architectural structuralism, both in a linguistic and meditated sense while shedding light on the affordances an indigenous way of knowing has to offer but in a more paradigmatic way – namely, narrative techniques allow for the development of a social and cultural construct which can be interpreted as a form of cultural continuity that allow for living cultures to maintain traditions, adapt to change and to invent and reinvent in the context of changed locations while adhering to their histories and traditions.

KC: What is your understanding of The Primitive Hut and how do you use this theoretical piece as a narrative, which is in fact a type of artifact, throughout your course of research and teachings? Moreover, what other themes of interest do you draw upon from architectural history?

MP: The Primitive Hut is a fundamental paradigm in architectural theory. It’s about taking architecture back to first principles. Many theorists have talked about it in those terms, each with a slightly different stance but it’s the same story just told in a different context. Essentially the Primitive Hut is a different thing to different people so it depends on the story you want to tell. The question then becomes, which primitive hut do you go back to? What is the cultural lens you are going to use? I can tell you some of the different lenses people have used to tell that story in the West. Fundamentally it’s about origin myths - the origins of architecture – again, where different theorist have spun it different ways to tell different stories. We are also a story telling culture [in the West]. The difference is we formalized our stories to such an extent that we now treat them to be true, when in fact they are still just stories with elements of truth, along with a lot of embellishment and conjecture. Also, there is a lot of filling in the gaps so there is a lot of spinning the story to suit a particular outcome. So for me, teaching architectural history and theory is interesting because they are based on the stories people and cultures concoct for themselves and there are a lot of different ways to interpret those stories. In the end, of which there really isn’t one, the story is never told the same way twice. It simply spirals continuously.

The process of narrating is a natural way of recounting experience, which can also be a practical solution to addressing fundamental problems in life that allows for the creation of reasonable order with the unknown. Very often, the concept of narrating, or the narrative is used in connection with how to represent a quantitative research study. Others have claimed that the narrative approach is not a method but rather, an established or reconfigured frame of

reference (purposeful strategy) in a design research process wherein the narrative also serves as artifactual piece and can be seen as producers and transmitters of a constructed reality.

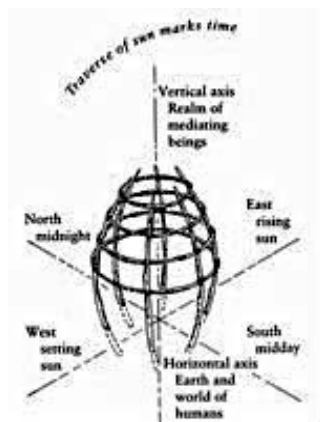


Fig. 2 Indigenous Axis Mundi, Nabokov and Easton, 1989

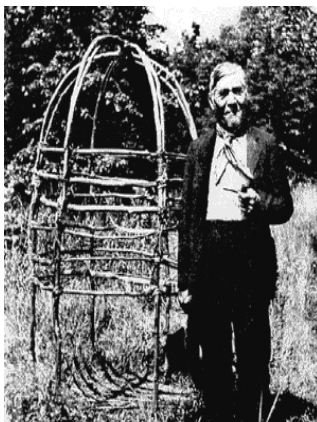


Fig 3. Shaman and his dwelling. Nabokov and Easton, 1989



Fig 4. Venice Biennale: Gravity & Airflow Artifact Installation, 2008

Marco also states that the origin of dwelling associated with Laugier's continues to give us enduring starting point for the recreation and mediation of the Primitive Hut at any time and place in history. It became the primary vehicle for a philosophy on architectural discourse and origins or architectural veracity in any writing thereafter when, in actual fact, the Primitive Hut is a piece of architecture conjecture, which theorists use as a way to discuss their theories that allow them to express their knowledge of human speech, community and culture, perhaps, even serving as an essential structural frame that allows for architectural form and reasoning. This type of philosophy on architectural reasoning can be seen and understood in the "conjuring lodge" wherein the indigenous shaman enters - *he is at the center of his world* – a place where he can make immediate contact between two figured worlds: the horizontal world of humans, and the vertical world of mythological beings (Figure 2 and 3, Nabakov, 1989) (Figure 4, Chakasim, 2010)

KC: Moving forward. Aside from borrowing from other pieces of architectural history and its first principles, what have you utilized to narrate your story, a type of metaphor?

MP: That's interesting. First of all, what I understand is that when stories come together, where certain themes could co-exist and other themes couldn't coexist, *there is a dimension of thought we enter and we do it unconsciously.*

This is a very interesting and critical comment provided by Marco. First, it involves the idea and ability for a person to develop a deeper mental construct with the way stories can come together, which, coincidentally, is derived from Noam Chomsky's theory of how the mind generates language. Chomsky (1968), in *Language and Mind* holds that the mind has the innate ability to organize the world and to frame this understanding with structured language. The reasoning is that architectural forms and form making processes must be generated from innate orientations within the mind, very much the way in which human language is oriented from the body – observation through movement.

MP: For instance, where there might be a model or framework a person can work from, he or she will go over their material over and over but they are not going at it in the same way. What they reveal or withdraw from the individual(s) is the retelling of a story but they keep hearing and telling it at a different level. The first story is everything. It's true to an extent that it controls a person's life completely. The next level is that you start to see it as

something else, *you can still feel it* but it doesn't govern your behavior to learn how to cope and, later at another level it becomes something else. Expressed as a metaphor, again, the ideal would be a spiral, by going deeper and more focused in thinking. The story doesn't change, but the individual's perspective and their role in the story changes radically. A lot of this stuff is complex so when we say, it spirals continuously, I find that very interesting.

As with the previous interview, Marco identifies the spiral as a paradigmatic symbol in the sense it is one of the major metaphors used to describe an architectural ordering system. What is more interesting is how Marco expresses the spiral as a procession towards the unknown or across the unknown - which is fundamental to an indigenous worldview and the oral based narrative structures Aboriginal students continuously create for themselves - connecting personal linkages between natural points of change.

Marco iterates that individuals within certain traditions are impervious to change where there are key opportunities to capitalize on this continuous change. In fact, according to McMinn and Polo (2005) in *41^o to 66^o: Regional Responses to Sustainable Architecture in Canada*, "An emerging body of scholarly work supports the perception that the time is ripe for an approach to sustainable architecture that goes beyond technological considerations to address a variety of intangible but essential cultural values." In other words, emphasis is placed on "approach" with the intent of "grasping" the conditions that make those cultural values acceptable at the moment.

As we have heard and read from the interviews conducted with Joanne and Marco, it is understood that one's figurative language becomes immediate, more so than writing, because of the mind's ability to organize the world and to frame this understanding with a structured language – even if it seems abstract and contradictory to opposing worldviews. Moreover, it is a proactive way of drawing out comparisons in the form of narrative. As much as any narrative is a string of symbols, gestures and mediations that allows for different knowledge structures to be heard or understood, we must *not* limit ourselves to a single course of action, method or mindset if we are to create pedagogical spaces inclusive to indigenous people worldwide.

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¹ The term emergence, of course, implies the appearance of something new, something unexpected. Although it may be hard to capture as a design process it raises interdisciplinary questions as to how we must prepare for the rise of an enormous Canadian urban Aboriginal population.

² Design-based research is an emerging paradigm aimed to capture the study of learning through systematic design and/or instructional strategies. Design-based research can help create and extend knowledge about developing, enacting, and sustaining innovative learning environments (Brown, 1992; Collins, 1992).

³ The term 'middle ground' is synonymous with the term 'ethical space' and is informed when two societies, with different worldviews, are positioned to engage with each other. It is the space in between them that contributes to the development of a cultural framework from which this report aims to achieve.

⁴ The notion of an ontological style – *ontology: nature of being* – is associated with the theoretical underpinnings associated with Heidegger and the supportive role of reflexive strategies. Wherein reflective equilibrium is characterized by deep thought in relation to others (humans), reflexive strategies take account the role of the researcher and the type of self created work being investigated for discussion or debate - an essential binary (or twofold) of sorts.

⁵ In general, epistemology is the philosophy of knowledge. It asks simple questions we have long taken for granted: "What is knowledge?" What is indigenous knowledge? What is the difference between the two types of knowledge?" In short, it is a vital cultural debate to the issue of knowledge because it represents and may help fulfill the academic needs of Aboriginal people.

⁶ The term 'cultural action' promotes the understanding and acceptance of values, beliefs and the stories we choose to tell about ourselves – it is culture at work.