

# Nipmuc Empowerment by Design

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## ABSTRACT:

Public-interest design pioneers Lisa Abendroth and Bryan Bell have articulated the need for "creatively using and devising strategies to solve problems that often push the boundaries of conventional practice." (Abendroth/Bell, 2016) One of these problems is the persistent "black box" moment between community information-gathering and design production. The focus of this study is about empowering individuals and communities through a design-integrated planning process, so that they become full participants throughout the procedure in their own cultural production. Effective techniques need to be explicitly described and shared at a granular level, with detailed descriptions of and analysis about the multiple roles of design thinking and making in the empowerment process.

I have been working with the Nipmuc Native Americans of central Massachusetts to develop such a process as we work towards the dream of establishing a Nipmuc cultural center. We seek not only to create a building/site that embodies their cultural and environmental values in both old and new ways, but to do in a process that will both help bring together the divided Nipmuc community and enabling it to move forward on shared goals.

I will argue that design can take on a myriad of manifestations as "instruments" to play an integral role in eliciting hidden information and exciting response, as well as serving to enact narratives and become an engine of collective memory. I will also demonstrate the benefits of tapping into knowledge opportunities outside the design milieu. Methods described are entirely qualitative, relying on non-scientific "experiments" derived through design thinking, and using natural observation, subjective analysis and interpretation to assess their impact. The outcomes include greater confidence to participate and take on ideation and leadership roles, and various workshops getting turned into recurrent annual events.

KEY WORDS: empowerment, design instruments, culture, Nipmuc, body language

## **INTRODUCTION**

I have been working with the Nipmuc Native American community of central Massachusetts towards the goal of creating a Culture and Education Center. We are about four years into what is likely to be a ten-year process, as we have worked to help build up the empowerment individually and collectively required to take on such an endeavor. After an initial period of working in a more conventional engaged process with students in the architecture studio, it became clear that a deeper, more gradual "building up" process would be needed for this significantly disempowered community. I obtained a public service endowment grant from my institution in 2016, which gave me both the support and flexibility required for such an undertaking. Rather than review the full undertaking to date, I will discuss four of about a dozen different steps we have taken, in order to focus on several questions: 1) what authentic empowerment means in the context of a group like the Nipmuc; 2) how design and design thinking integrated from the get-go can enhance empowerment; 3) and the merits of using purely qualitative observational methods to gauge the effectiveness of the work.

## **1.0 BACKGROUND**

### **1.1. A Brief Nipmuc History**

One of the first groups to encounter the "Great Migration" of English colonizers in the 1620s and 1630s, the Nipmuc ("People of the Fresh Waters") were a substantial confederation of small kinship groups which migrated seasonally between settlements, extensively managing land, forest, and water for food and resources in what would become known as central Massachusetts, northern Connecticut, and Rhode Island. Overwhelming colonial pressure to take possession of these fertile lands soured relationships that had started on a relatively equal footing, and the backlash against the Nipmuc's near-victory in King Philip's War (1675-76) resulted in their almost complete genocide by the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Despite the destruction, small numbers survived and regrouped, leaving descendants who fought in the Civil War and worked in the factories of the Blackstone River Valley (originally the Nipmuc River), where the American Industrial Revolution is said to have begun. (Connole, 2007) Reservations hadn't yet been invented during early colonialization, but their precursors—"Praying Towns" that corralled and Christianized the Nipmuc population—were successively shrunk until only a 2.5-acre homestead of the Hassanamesit band Nipmucs "never owned by the white man" persists to this day. While largely urbanized and dispersed, family groups kept memories and traditions alive for centuries under the radar, and began pressing for formal recognition starting in the 1920's. Other than the Hassanamesit Homestead, almost no other Nipmuc "buildings" per se remain, but extensive traces of constructions and ceremonial markers in the landscape and waterways throughout the region have been increasingly identified through ongoing formal and informal research.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Nipmuc sought state and federal recognition, a legal step which would have put them in a much stronger legal position and guaranteed them access to desperately needed resources. The state of Massachusetts recognized them in 1976, but the very means by which they had survived through the centuries—intermarriage and assimilation—worked against federal recognition, which was denied in 2001. The campaign for federal recognition was long, costly, and divisive, because it required determining who belonged on the tribal rolls. The wounds from the recognition process were still felt even a dozen years out: people still speak of the pain of being forced off the rolls at the time, and others speak of the pain of feeling forced to make those determinations. As Nipmuc author Larry Spotted Crow Mann wryly comments about the Native American experience, "No other people have to prove who they are." Today the Nipmuc number about 3000 in the region and beyond. Most belong to two predominant bands, and they practice their culture through powwows and other seasonal celebrations, language and history teaching, and organizational activities. For the Nipmuc to move forward with new initiatives without federal recognition was difficult, because they do not have access to funding instruments such as casinos—nonetheless, they are determined to do so.

### **1.2. Nipmuk Cultural Preservation, Inc.**

Nipmuk Cultural Preservation, Inc. (NCP), the non-profit with which I work, was formed in 2013 to counteract this bitter legacy and to reach out to the broadest possible community of Nipmuc. Its leadership has always given highest priority to the idea of constructing a cultural and education center. An unusual outcome of the failed recognition campaign, is that the NPC leadership has developed a clear preference for locating any center on "neutral" ground, away from rather than near or within the historic locales of either of the two predominant bands, even though it would put a project at some distance from the daily lives of most members. An added advantage would be the likelihood of being in a less thickly settled area. Most engaged processes, however, rely on a community embedded in a locale, where people have layers of memories and pride of place, as well as local government agencies and other sources of support. The NPC could assume none of these for all the reasons outlined above. Furthermore, most Nipmuc are from the working class—nurses, construction workers, teachers, social workers—and are already stretched thin for money and time. Even young Nipmuc often hold down multiple jobs on top of other responsibilities to the tribe. Although they are a

lively, intelligent, and creative crowd—it was also clear that the idea of having an actual site and a building of their own seemed as remote to most tribal members as the stars. As a Narraganset preservation officer said to me, "When you've only had nothing for so long, that's all you know how to get."

The task before us was to use the design process as a tool to empower the Nipmuc community to the state in which it would be possible for them to envision truly having a center of their own. Even more to the point, the project would be an act of invention to enable the Nipmuc to imagine who they are and what they want to be, as keepers of an ancient culture in the modern world—but emphatically on their own terms as contemporary people. Native American groups are at an interesting historical moment as the depth of indigenous culture and knowledge is becoming better understood and recognized as relevant to all of us moving forward, putting such acts of recovery and invention well beyond the nostalgic and into the necessary.

### 1.3. Gifted Land

The awarding of the public service grant coincided with a long-contemplated land gift to the tribe of a 2.5-acre parcel in Petersham, Massachusetts, which is within historic Nipmuc territory but otherwise relatively far from where most tribal members live. The donor wanted the Nipmuc to be part of a consortium of sustainably-oriented communities in that locale, and subsequently offered the NCP an additional 35 acres of land adjacent to the original parcel which could be purchased if funds become available. A key feature of this land is its proximity to a fine example of an archaic (non-colonial) stone chamber, possibly by Nipmuc ancestors (Fig. 1). In addition, much of the area's land is within the watershed of the Quabbin reservoir, which supplies Boston and will likely be in conservation in perpetuity.

Although all of this was good news, the Nipmuc Cultural Preservation Chair and I knew that we'd have to make sure that the top-down process driven by the donor and his priorities would not overrun the delicate process of developing within the Nipmuc community its own attachment to this remote piece of land, and the individual and collective will to move towards inhabiting it. Keeping this in mind, we were able over the course of the year to work through a multi-stage process with students and the Nipmuc community, including an informed study of the nearly 40-acre area of the two parcels, and development of a building and landscape design that can move the project towards fund-raising.



Figure 1: NCP Chair, donor, author, collaborators & students at indigenous formation on the land. Source: (Author, 2017)

### 1.4. Empowerment Processes

The SEED evaluation system offers comprehensive guidelines for creating a successful public-interest design process. While the general procedure relatively straightforward—articulating your mission, setting milestones, evaluating as you go—the SEED system notes that one must expect the unexpected, and that "not all strategies are transferable—evaluation of each context is important" (Abendroth/Bell 2016, 123). Techniques and mechanisms need to be searched out or invented, tried and discarded as needed—the usual approaches may not work at all. One of the key goals of public-interest design is community empowerment, but this seemingly self-evident notion is anything but straightforward, especially when architecture is involved. The process of engaging with and eliciting information from a community to incorporate into a design project which reflects their values may be assumed to be empowering, but it could merely fall into the category of using design for an empowering *outcome* as opposed to an empowering *process*—a nicely designed building reflecting community input may still fall short of co-developing the political and economic empowerment needed for the long-term success of such a project. In other words, the architect has to be willing not only to design buildings, but to build capacity.

"The notions of enabling design and empowerment have been fused in community design and many of its failures have resulted from not understanding the difference between the two activities" (Comerio 1987, 27).

According to Julian Rappaport's *Terms of Empowerment*, empowerment is a "process by which people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over issues of concern to them" (Rappaport 1987, 122). Here "mastery" is the key word. In other words, to have a successful empowering process the community should develop from being simple "participants" into co-equal partners, "develop[ing] skills as to not have to be dependent on professionals" (Rappaport 1987,122). On an individual basis this would mean "perceptions of personal control, a proactive approach to life...critical understanding of the sociopolitical environment" (Zimmerman 1995, 581). The individuals' sense of how to operate in the broader context becomes critical not only for knowing how to help move a project forward, but also for maintaining its long-run vitality. While most community members would not want the burden of actually being the architect, they needed to begin to see themselves as high-level project participants and "owners".

Working with the NCP, I have tried as the professional architect to lead from behind or beside—providing ideas and materials for work sessions but letting others own the process (except when they wanted me out front). As per Awan, Till and Schneider's *Spatial Agency*:

"There are many examples of how the architect can operate modestly and invisibly, but to great effect, through an intelligent and imaginative engagement with the economic, social and political contexts of spatial production." (Awan, Till, Schneider, 45)

We tried to make it seem like events were just unfolding by themselves, and that what was needed just happened to be at hand—something that requires considerable action behind the scenes coupled with a willingness to be both flexible and creative when faced with contingencies. Serving from the outside as an agent for their vision required an added attentiveness. Oddly enough, my interest and scholarship into Alvar Aalto and, separately, Japanese culture had convinced me of the legitimate potentials of designers to interpret and generate ideas anew, as active participants in cultural production. Resonance for the community, and an ability to withstand the test of time and use would ultimately be the judge of the results.

### **1.5. Design Instruments for Empowerment**

The advent of sustainable-design approaches has been a boon for the empowerment process. Hands-on involvement in gardening, sustainable landscape infrastructures, design/build community structures, and so on are win-wins for attracting people of all ages and building skills that in turn build leadership. But most engaged processes that I had studied or been part of did their initial work of engagement through "get to know you" paper-based activities that range from questionnaires to artful hands-on exercises that physically involve people in drawing, images, word-play, cutting, pinning, posting. They tap memories and information—subjective and objective--and snapshots of everyday lives as well as other cyclic events. Although a successful process gets people involved and can bring leaders to the fore, it does not necessarily prepare them individually or as a group for the spatialized work ahead. As the NPC leadership and I brainstormed, we wondered if there could be ways to bring Nipmuc people deeper into the realm of the architect, or more specifically into a spatialized mind- and skillset. Those of us who undergo architectural training rarely have the opportunity, in the crush, to reflect on the remarkable design instruments that we have been required so quickly to master. Even the most basic aspects of design, such as working in and between scales—from the vast to the tiny—to represent a world in miniature, or drawing sections as if at will the world can be dissected in slices, startle and delight non-designers. With the Nipmuc, I hypothesized that these instruments or tools of design could be shared more explicitly to let the community start to feel bodily located within the site and the imagined project. "Some of the most inventive examples of spatial agency focus on the design of these tools, seeing them as primary means to unlock the potential of a given situation." (Awan, Till, Schneider, 45)

### **1.6. Evaluating Impact**

From the outset of our working relationship, I realized that trying to obtain evaluative feedback through standard means such as surveys or feedback sessions would be awkward, and should be reserved for moments when the community itself particularly wanted to do it. Tribal members are constantly asked by others how they feel about this or that "as a Nipmuc", yet for obvious historical (and possibly cultural) reasons, they are quite guarded about expressing strong opinions openly to any outsiders. Listening with deliberateness is also valued over immediately voicing an opinion. For all of these reasons it was important to ensure that the group never felt that they were part of an "experiment," and that I was going to collect the data and run. John Quale from the University of Virginia ecoMOD projects also refers the sensitive handling of such issues (Kraus, 138). I needed alternative ways to gauge whether or not our engagements were having any impact.

Working with clients over years of professional practice, I've noticed that body language is often more telling than the spoken word. If something is way off the mark, clients will usually tell you directly, but their body language will let you know if something is just "OK" or if they really love it. If people really like something—a drawing or model, for instance—they don't just look at it, they take them into their hands and even cradle it

slightly. They begin to grin and even giggle spontaneously. Verbally, they might start spinning tales about what they could see themselves doing there (Fig. 2). This is an extremely subjective or qualitative observational technique, but which in my experience can be useful in situations such as this, where overt measurement techniques would be inappropriate. In consequence, I kept informal notes and images to capture such moments throughout the process.



**Figure 2:** Joyful body language? Source: (Author, 2017)

## 2.0 CASE STUDIES OF DESIGN INSTRUMENTS USED FOR EMPOWERMENT

### 2.1. Case Study 1: Scale Figure Conversations

The first example is a simple variation on a get-to-know-you exercise. After a year of work with the founding Chair of the NCP, it was time to widen the pool of those involved, and introduce the new Chair's tenure. Armed with a big bag of art supplies, we asked participants to make self-portraits of themselves or each other at  $3/8"=1'-0"$  scale for a hands-on modular model "kit" that was partially put together and set to the side. This could be construed as a modestly more ambitious version of a typical step in a guided workshop where students create a scale figure that represents the client, which "more easily allows clients into the dialogue because they can imagine themselves in the design." (Kraus, 41) The elaboration here, was that the community itself was doing the making alongside some student helpers, as much to elicit unselfconscious conversation as to supply figures. Sitting around a big table, we had people chat about what they could see themselves doing at a culture and education center as we twisted pipe cleaners, felt and modeling foam. Responses ranged from the intricate portrait of a daughter dancing in her full regalia, to gardeners cultivating traditional herbs and foods, to the Chair in tan khaki's expounding about Nipmuc history. We took short breaks to informally chat using some information-packed user-friendly posters that "road-mapped" different courses of action (these were designed to be left with them for their own explaining purposes to the rest of the community).

Soon we had about 20 figures, and lots of useful information. A couple participants really got going and leaped into assembling the model's modules and to churn out scale garden plantings (Fig. 3). The activity focused people on making, so that information flowed unselfconsciously. Building to scale (we had tiny paper rulers) helped people imagine themselves in the scene while feeling like real participants in preparing a representation of their future project right at the get-go. The model itself was essentially a throw-away—a more attuned design would be developed with them later, and the scale figures and plants would populate the new model—nonetheless having scale model components there to 'play with' was key. In this case, the positive body language consisted of the enthusiastic making and handling of the scale figures and model parts, reinforced by lots of smiles and laughter. The chair heard afterwards that the participants loved the experience and wanted to do it again.



**Figure 3:** Scale Figure Workshop & Figures populating eventual design, Source: (Mighty, 2016)(Author, 2017)

## 2.2. Case Study 2: Mapping

The distance and unfamiliarity of the gifted land to much of the community was concerning, compounded by my not yet knowing much about the area myself. Luckily, based on a lead from the donor/stakeholder, I heard that another regional Native American-oriented non-profit had received a small grant to help train native youths in geo-mapping, in particular around indigenous ceremonial stone landscapes. For centuries people have noticed unusual stone configurations throughout New England, but only recently have they become fully recognized as systematic and symbolic constructions that are clearly not colonial. After some delicate negotiations we got agreement from the tribal elders that a mapping training could take place on the new land, in partnership with the other non-profit. I arranged for equipment, software licenses, and supplemental honorariums, understanding that as an outsider I should not be present nor disclose any findings. The session exceeded expectations, and subsequent workshops are already being planned by the NCP.

In a related vein, I had reached out to several scholars of Native American history in the area and learned that one scholar in particular had developed significant new research on the Nipmuc that included the geo-mapping strategic routes and landmarks throughout the region as derived from descriptions in primary 17<sup>th</sup> c. Nipmuc documents (many were educated and literate within a few decades of colonial arrivals). Among other things, the mappings showed the positioning of Petersham (previously known as Nichewaug) as a waystation for the Nipmuc in particular, between their primary area of inhabitation in the Blackstone River Valley and the mountainous “safe zones” of southern Vermont where colonials were at considerable navigational disadvantage (Brooks, 2017)(Fig.4). In other words, new information previously unknown to most of the Nipmuc community was unfolding in real time just as they were getting to know this new land. In our collective perception, the sense of the region had suddenly shifted, and the worry of far away-ness began to evaporate as we began to read the land from a truly native perspective. While all this was a lucky and specific circumstance, the use of Geo-mapping to train youth in a highly useful technology while gaining personally relevant spatialized historic knowledge about a place and its relationship to a wider region, further reinforced the notion of using an instrument of design—i.e. of scale and positioning—for empowerment.



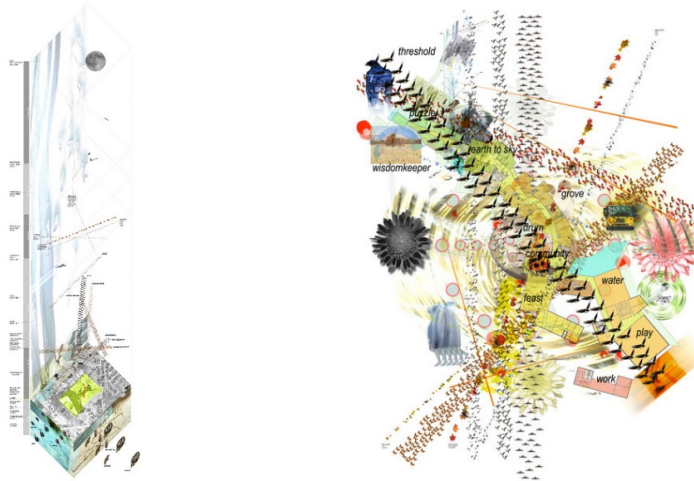
**Figure 4:** GIS Map by Prof. Lisa Brooks, showing routes in and around Petersham/Nichewaug, Source: (Author, 2017)

## 2.3. Case Study 3: A Lecture

For some time I had wanted to invite a Native American architect to come lecture and converse with the Nipmuc, who were very interested in how architecture could address both their modern and ancient selves (as was I). Such an invitation would also fulfill a desire an obligation to provide a learning opportunity for architecture students and faculty less familiar with the kind of work I was doing, not to mention the broader community. I happened on an intriguing article about a young and innovative Oneida architect, Chris Cornelius, and rang him up with an invitation. Architectural lectures can be quite intimidating for those outside our field, so I went to some trouble to prepare friendly flyers and personalized emails to send to the Nipmuc as well as to Native American Studies students and faculty in the Five Colleges.

Chris Cornelius was nothing short of brilliant. Having extracted himself from difficult childhood circumstances to attend architecture school at University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, he made his way ultimately to graduate school at the University of Virginia, where he had clearly soaked up its fine tradition of deep thinking and exquisite drawing and design. In turn, he had also tapped a deep sense of Oneida culture, particularly in its story-telling traditions and narratives which he metaphorically embedded into his projects. He moved fluidly between remarkable, meditative hand drawings to soulful digital and analog models. His work was extremely sophisticated but also clear and easy to grasp because the ideas and narratives had been enacted with such delicacy and deliberation. Cornelius had clearly spent years working the question of how indigeneity could manifest itself in contemporary life such that he was able to share his journey and findings to immense effect on a large crowd of strangers.

A couple drawings that Cornelius had generated for a Native America school struck me as particularly strong examples of instruments of design that provide avenues to empowerment, concretely furthering my thoughts on this topic. In the first, he took the convention of a section and showed that to make it truly meaningful in a native context it would have to begin at the height of the moon and descend well below the surface of the earth, since the moon as well as the trajectory of birds and other animal migrations and the earth-connected badgers are fundamental to indigenous cosmology. In the second, a corresponding floor plan inflected towards bird migration paths, and program elements were deliberate differently-named— “feasting” instead of “cafeteria”, “gathering” instead of “auditorium”, reminding us all how conventional programming takes the life and spirit out of our daily actions (Fig. 5). These are simple examples amongst a remarkable body of work, but it was as if shafts of new light had pierced the audience’s consciousness, and the Nipmuc and other Native Americans present were practically jumping out of their seats by the end of his talk (again, the body language was clear). We would like to have him back for further discussions and work, but at the same time, he gave us a sense of how one could move forward meaningfully with or without him—a true gift.



**Figure 5:** Studio Indigenous conceptual section and plan, Indian Community School. Source: (Cornelius 2005)

#### 2.4. Case Study 4 Starplate Dome

While the land donor’s intentions about the eventual transfer had put us on a slightly uncertain trajectory of planning the cultural center for the larger parcel, the NCP board and I felt strongly that we wanted to establish a toe-hold on the initial land as soon as possible. Parenthetically, well-meaning outsiders inquired repeatedly why the Nipmuc didn’t just want to build an ancestral dwelling or *wetu*, so we had to explain that, while the typologies of the *wetu* and settlements of grouped *wetus* were very much on our minds, the Nipmuc were a modern people not museum pieces, who wanted a comfortable, accessible and relatively bug-free contemporary evocation of their traditions to encourage their community to be there on a regular basis—once established, *wetu*-building as a teaching activity could be considered. Amusingly the NCP Chair suggested a “starplate dome” system as a kind of modern *wetu*—an inexpensive set of pre-engineered pentagonal plates and bolts designed to quickly put up geodesic-type chicken coops, sheds and gazebos. I immediately shelved some more grandiose, labor-intensive design/build thoughts, realizing that the Chair was mindful of the fact that there wouldn’t be hundreds of free hands or hours available—speed in terms of total hours and effort on site would be of the essence—without compromising quality—for this busy and distantly-located community.

Eight-foot 2x4 struts would let us build a “shed” just under 120 square feet, which would not trigger a permit requirement and would let us nestle it into the forest with minimal disturbance. The chicken coop brochure renditions were homely, but inspired by Chris Cornelius we could all now see the simple structure’s potential. A few extended struts gave us a moon-gazing oculus and the first structure would become the elegant “crow” with planning for a second that would be the earth-bound “badger,” host to solar composting toilets and captured rainwater. The somewhat triangulated deck frame we called a “travois”, recalling the formation of lashed saplings that indigenous peoples used to move heavy loads—these could also be lifted and moved later by a couple dozen volunteers if re-siting to the larger parcel was desired. While clearly bearing no literal resemblance to a traditional (*wetu* or longhouse) structure, which are sophisticated frames of bent saplings overlaid with large, adjustable sheets of tree bark—we tried to embody their cleverness and versatility, as well as their constructional elegance. Off-site, with a couple students on hand, I took charge of pre-cutting, pre-drilling—and pre-thinking—various items such that the on-site work would proceed seemingly effortlessly. In one day-long session with about eight community members, we were able to build the deck and erect the

core structure—and three half-day sessions later it was more or less done. We were able to strike a balance between real effort invested by the community, with a payoff that was satisfyingly achievable and reasonably attractive to boot (Fig. 6). In this case, the behind-the-scenes preparation to create an empowering illusion of ease, acted as a “design instrument”—though perhaps the analogy is at this point getting stretched. Developing the narrative of the “crow” could also be seen as a means for generating an attachment narrative to the site and overall undertaking as well. Planning for the second structure is about to begin, and a Nipmuc theater grad is planning a summer workshop/performance for on site. Both of these reflect a growing feeling for the site and a confidence in moving forwards.

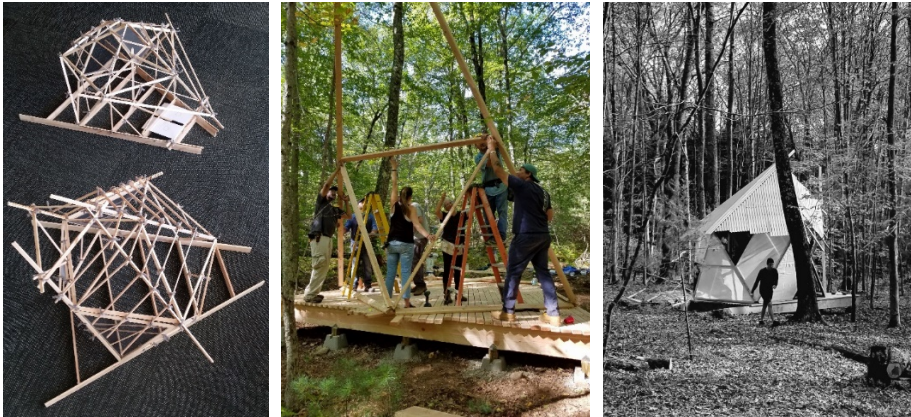


Figure 6: Starplate domes, Source: (Author 2017)

## CONCLUSION

Mechanisms for generating genuine empowerment are worthy of being studied at the granular level, even though each example may seem rather basic under scrutiny. The moments that spark engagement and change in individuals and groups are subtle and emotional as they are rational. Design and the “instruments of design”—a clumsy term that needs refinement—should be explored as simple mechanisms with great power because they can build bridges of understanding and whole-body engagement for non-professionals. Architects should be less fearful of being at times simplistic, understanding that we wield powers that often feel like magic to others—and too often leave them too far behind. And as instruments or tools, each mechanism can be tossed away as easily as it is created, so that they continually provide the means if not necessarily the ends to a process. Similarly, the designer that is at ease moving between foreground and background as needed, while all the while paying attention to and adjusting with the bodily actions and reactions of those whom they serve, is likely to achieve great trust and a greater likelihood of project success.

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