

A Native Identity Crisis: A Look at the Navajo Nation and its Disappearing Architectural Identity

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Background

The Navajo Nation, culture, and architectural manifestation, is most often found in ruin, both figuratively and physically. Focusing on people and place, who have undergone a continuous disruptive renovation process since their first visitors arrived hundreds of years ago, this paper looks at important disruption of traditional Navajo culture, the turmoil behind it, and how efforts are being made to reintroduce ancient concepts and forms at differing scales and the benefit they bring.

Setting the Stage

[...] yet if the light goes, the Nava[j]o becomes uneasy. The night holds many terrors for him, haunted by spirits and worse, by beast men perhaps and unfriendly souls and unmentionable dangers. The Navaho make all the noises of darkness in their night dances, especially in the yeibichai. These are for the healing of individuals: the sickness of one may pull all down. There is good reason for the Navaho to feel some uneasiness, in view of the fact that he is almost the only one of the Indians of North America to live alone.

He does not gather willingly in villages like the Hopi and almost everybody else, including all those swaggerers on the plains. Instead, he occupies his own tiny hogan alone in the vast expanse with his nearest neighbor set at what one might call a family's grazing distance away from him. Only in this way could his dry rose-and-amethyst desert be occupied--by this willingness of men to spread out across it in order to make do with the scanty water. Each hogan is thus a little haven of warmth and coolness [...] being nothing less than a universe within itself[...]¹

Architecture of Earth and Sky

The Hogan, both the male and female versions, are based on a circular construct, similar to many Native American constructions, such as the Great Houses and Kivas of the Anasazi, referred to the Navajo as the 'ancient ones'². The Navajo were originally a nomadic people, and the male Hogan lends itself to that lifestyle, but when they began to become permanently established, created the female Hogan as both a ceremonial but also familial form of their homes, always with a door facing east.

The dirt floors reminded them of their connection to the Earth, while the walls represented everything on the earth, often covered in murals and paintings or tapestries representing their livelihood and relationships with animals, plants, and each other. The roof included the sky, a hole for smoke ventilation, as well as tree limbs climbing upward towards the sun.

¹ Scully, Vincent Joseph. *Pueblo : Mountain, Village, Dance* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1989)

² Cook, Jeffrey: *Anasazi Places: The Photographic Vision of William Current*/text by Jeffrey Cook; foreword by Karen Sinsheimer. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992.

in order to fully understand the architectural solutions to their everyday needs. Often these needs include a sense of pride, a place of establishment, and a new beginning to embrace culturally ancient ideals. Many times the client starts over after a home is completed, finding that their architecture has recreated a connection to the earth and a renewed sense of belonging to their Navajo Ancestry.

In having firsthand experience with this program, I have found that a quote from their website says it best, "We don't just build homes. We build hope."⁷ The program changes the students as much if not more than the constructions change the people. A new sensitivity to materials, a caddy eye towards reuse, and a deeper understanding of how architectural solutions really can change small habits or attitudes in its inhabitants deeply impacts the pedagogy of the program's graduates. The scale of DBB is small, focusing on 10-15 students and a single Navajo family each semester, though it plans to increase scale in the near future.⁸



Image 4: Janet Yanito painting pottery in her new studio designed by Design Build Bluff, 2010



Image 5 :Detail of sink, Yanito Home, Design Build Bluff, 2010

VCBO Architecture is a private design firm of about 80 members located in the heart of Salt Lake City, UT and prides itself on modern regional architecture of the surrounding area and people. They have worked with the Navajo Nation on a handful of projects, most notably the development and programming of a proposed new campus for the Navajo Supreme Court. I had the fortune to work intimately on this project, under the direction of Brent Tippetts, AIA, and was able to learn firsthand from the court justices many of the traditional values that are still held in high esteem and are very symbolic. Orientation and how materials are used were pertinent concerns to the client, while we did our own research and proposed patterns and colors specific to the Navajo culture.

These sensitivities, and others, are providing a great base to have furthering discussions on how architecture can influence the livelihood of both inhabitants and visitors to the courts, and many modern architects are pushing for a sensitive bridge between the modern conveniences that the Navajo see as symbolic of progress and success, and the roots from which we believe that success must be planted.

⁷ Luis, Hank. Design Build Bluff motto. 08 May 2014. ONLINE <http://www.designbuildbluff.org>

⁸ "TEDxSaltLakeCity - Hank Luis - *Compassionate Sustainability - Project for Excellence in Journalism Videos*. TEDxSaltLakeCity. N.p., n.d. Web. 9 May 2014.

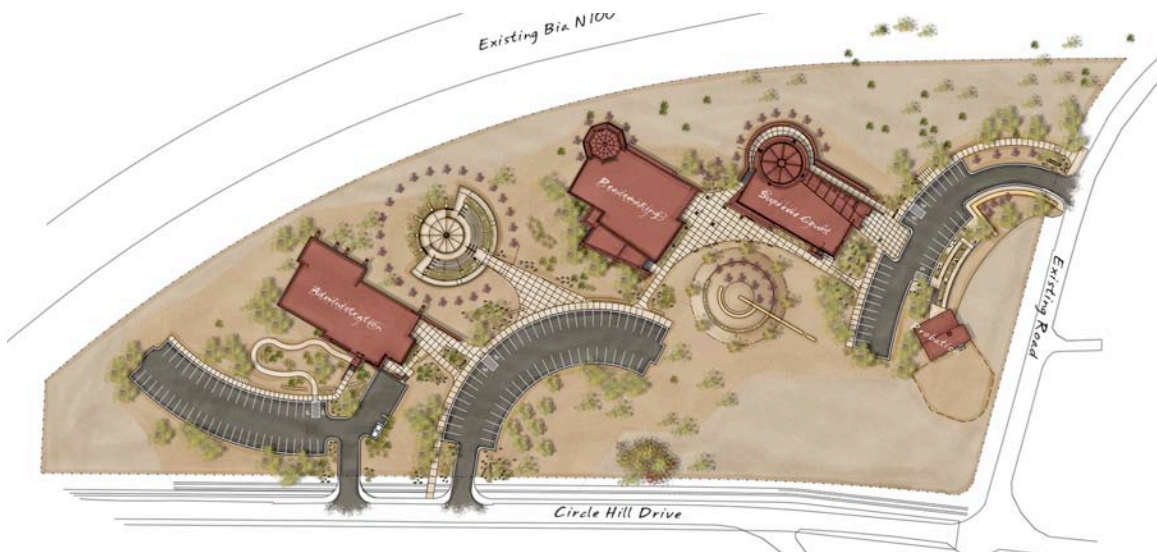


Image 6: Site Plan for proposed Navajo Nation Supreme Court, used with permission VCBO Architecture.

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- Image 1: Lenny. "Travel Diary.": FAQ Hogan : Traditional Navajo House. Canyon De Chelly National Monument, 5 Dec. 2013. Web. 08 May 2014. ONLINE <http://len-diary.blogspot.com/2013/12/faq-hogan-traditional-navajo-house.html>
- Image 2: Navajo Hogan - Canyon De Chelly Arizona. N.p., n.d. Web. 08 May 2014. ONLINE http://gocalifornia.about.com/od/toppicturegallery//bl_azcdc_hut
- Image 3: Durango Roadtripping: Having a Whopper at the Navajo Code Talkers Display & Navajo Culture Center in Kayenta Arizona. N.p., 9 July 2011. Web. 08 May 2014. ONLINE <http://durangoworldamerica.blogspot.com/2011/07/having-whopper-at-navajo-code-talkers.html>
- Image 4: Janet Yanito. Used with permission. Design Build Bluff, 2010 Studio 23. May 2014. ONLINE <http://designbuildbluff.org/?q=node/83>
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- Image 6: Site Plan, Navajo Supreme Court. Used with permission. VCBO Architecture Archives. September 2010.