

Taking the Pulse of Bluff

Design-BuildBLUFF is the most recognized program of the School of Architecture at the University of Utah. It is the brainchild of the generous Utah architect Hank Louis. His vision was centered on separating students from their known surroundings and immersing them in a hands-on cross-cultural experience benefiting the Navajo community of San Juan County in the Utah Four Corners. Until very recently, Louis both directed and ensured the financing of the program. He has promised to continue to support the funding of the program for another 10 years as a new director takes over this fully crafted teaching engine. Begun in the year 2000, it has created enough of a trail, graduated enough architects, inspired enough publications and generated enough publicity for the School, to merit critical inquiry of its successes and failures.

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FIRST SUCCESSES

Every fall, a graduate studio of up to sixteen students designs a small single-family home for a pre-identified beneficiary of the Navajo Nation in the southern Utah tribal area. They study indigenous architecture and Southwestern vernacular. They read specifications on wood frame construction and building materials. They make working drawings and project management documents. In spring these students move more than 300 miles away from the school of architecture, to the remote campus' small home and namesake in Bluff, close to the Navajo Nation's northernmost chapters. They spend the better part of this semester converting drawings into habitable space. As the edifice rises, so does a community of cohorts, who can boast hands on experience of construction, teamwork, successful project delivery (in most cases), budget management, publication of their work and incredible amount of physical labor—all upon mere graduation. They come to appreciate the expertise of plumbers and electricians; the knowledge of vendors, and the importance of sunscreen. During the economically dark years from 2008 to 2013, should we be surprised if Bluff graduates got an edge with employers over peers who opted for the certainties of university environs and the comforts of home instead?

Participants agree that Bluff is an absolutely transformative experience for everyone who participates in it. It has turned idealistic students into professionals not just invested in public interest rhetoric but an ability to execute it. It has injected the workforce with architects who know how to activate the power of humble projects

over glittering spectacles. Bluff has serviced the profession with professionals capable of taking advantage of the room made by small scale commissions for delicate gestures and sensitive details; the occasion they create for intimate knowledge of the functional needs of the client; and the time they allow for introducing small pleasures and comforts of life into a house. Bluff is a year trainees spend in the apprenticeship of the god of small things.

The graduates of this program have under their belt award winning houses like Rosie Joe. Sitting on the ground with the delicacy of a butterfly poised for flight, Rosie Joe, the first of the Bluff houses at once recalls the Navajo tendency to ascribe animal attributes to rock outcroppings and mountains. Its student designers demonstrated the ability to convert passive energy systems into poetic forms. They have delivered a design response for a community with reasonable resources of coal, oil, gas, uranium and copper, but without any reasonable resources left to them to mine these. In this, and every project since it, Design-BuildBLUFF has proved itself in capably translating this historical injustice into a call for sustainable energy solutions. They have oriented every house with a symbolically faced entrance to the rising sun as is customary among Navajo. At Rosie Joe, they converted the needs of the occupants into a three bed, one bath bungalow with living, kitchen and storage room, all pushed to the north. The south face is fully glazed and a long single-loaded circulation corridor that doubles as a thermal mass sink. Thick-rammed earth walls on the interior support the passive thermal functions. The team hand-tamped sand and clay from the site into formwork for erecting these walls producing a red face with dynamic figure and striations in various tones that mimic the surrounding landscape. Overall the plan is decidedly not reminiscent of traditional Navajo spaces, which tend to be circular, flowing and open. The reason for this might have been based out of the designers' intentions to acknowledge the contemporary identity of its resident for a non-traditional lifestyle, but more than likely reflects a growing pain of the program in its first attempt to synergize the with a non-modern culture. If the house plan speaks to any time period and culture at all it is more closely related to the architectural response to the contemporary energy crisis.

Nearly all of the single-family homes built by Bluff students on the Navajo Nation



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Figure 1. *Rosie Joe House*
Photo by Daniel Hennessy



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do well to enhance the photogenic ease of the desert panorama. They appeal to contemporary devices of architectural representation. These single-family homes may have nothing of the neo-classical or neo-gothic styles. But they carry every bit of their anthropocentric attitude to the domus. All of them are well-made machines for living. They are functional, efficient, comfortable, poetic, economical, and environmentally responsible. Each of them helps put and keep in motion the most fundamental pedagogic ambition of Bluff: to raise technê (making) to the status of episteme (knowing). Each of the projects keeps in check, the academic preference that has grown throughout the twentieth century, for the conceptual over the practical. Collectively, the annually delivered homes –construct a powerful critique of the notions of space, materiality, and locality in the academy that takes little notice of the capacity of the building industry to realize them. Beginning with the historic avant-garde (at the turn of the twentieth century), then the paper architects and critical theorists (in the 1970s and 1980s) arriving all the way to most recent modeling software and digital fabrication fever (at the turn of the twenty first century), our educational system has fixed its attention on the imagined as opposed to real space. These much esteemed interventions in the discipline of architecture have had several adverse effects. They have drawn a wedge between the high and low design opportunities available in the marketplace. They have created graduates alienated from the dominant conditions of the material production of the built environment. The curious animosity between technê and episteme or making and knowing has daunted western architecture since the days of Aristotle and Plato. It created a huge headache for Diderot in classifying architecture in his Encyclopédie during a period that Europeans insist ought to be called Enlightenment. Of course today, it is a key “decider” in the fateful ratings of architectural schools. By reinstating, what Freud would diagnose as the “reality principle,” in the training of the architect, Design-BuildBLUFF has brought into question the social hierarchy within the building industry between an architect and a builder, a plumber and an electrician and so on.

NOW FAILURES

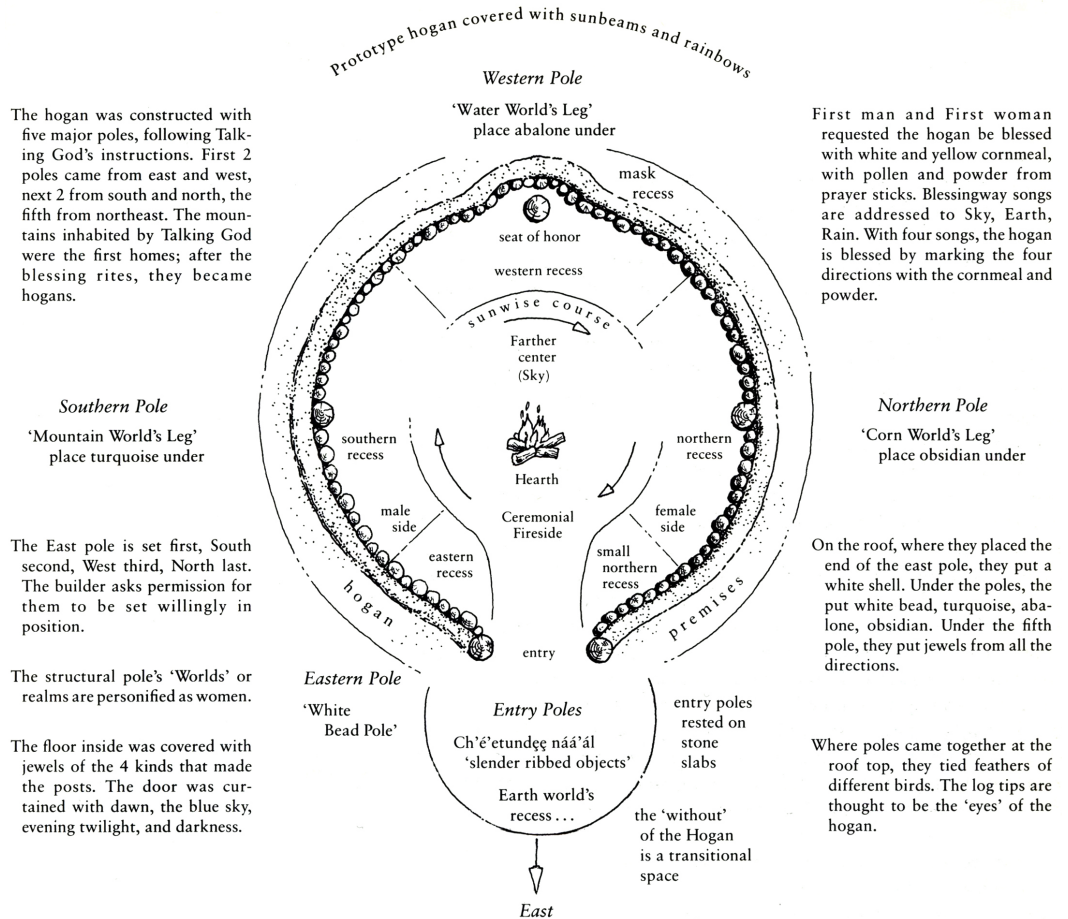
Figure 2: Rosie Joe House Plan

Much more can be said in praise of Design-Build pedagogy and the fine institution that is Bluff. But if one goes on, one runs the risk of celebrating the asymmetries of power that underpin the successes of Bluff. This case study situates us at a prodigious vantage point. Here we see a struggle between the Navajo's cosmocentric and our anthropocentric definition of architecture and the architect; and the balance is clearly tilted in our favor. After all it is an interface between one of the poorest, most exploited, and discredited communities in the United States, and the representatives of American Academy, one of the most forceful cultural institutions of its day. This unlevelled playing field has been remarkable. It has freed design from the cumbersome building codes and building inspectors with which it is laden in enfranchised communities like Salt Lake City. It has turned the Navajo land into a laboratory for affordable experiments on pedagogy and innovative architecture in ways not possible in our towns and affluent suburbs. Most valuably, it has helped students envision their labor on these projects in a most charitable light. For most, their oblivion to their privileged institutional position has encouraged them to see it as a service to a disadvantaged community that cannot afford a professional architect. It is difficult to see it as a labor made possible by the generosity of the Navajo people. Their hosts let them try out notions of architecture that clearly don't partake in the spirit of native built environment and therefore are not meant for them but the real estate market. It is for this market that they are being trained here. Such are the merits of the invisibility of asymmetries of power. It makes the world go round.

We need to educate our students that this community is disadvantaged not because they don't have architects. Till the middle of nineteenth century, building was an essential life skill, like cooking, stitching, weaving, storytelling and throwing pots. Men and women built their houses together. Instead, the Navajo are a disadvantaged community because the dominant culture of which we all are the beneficiaries and publicists, has robbed them of all their institutions, means of sustenance, and land. They are a disadvantaged people because we have subjugated their spiritual (cosmocentric) attitude of space and time to our modern (anthropocentric) attitude. If this were a problem unique to Design-BuildBLUFF, School of Architecture and the state of Utah, it would not have taken us a decade to see the glaring colonial and exploitative nature of this our most cherished public interest architectural program. Our blindness to this prejudice is the legacy of the scientific cultural heritage with an old genealogy in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition. Its not just us, the seductions of modernity, combined with the scornful attitude of the dominant culture towards non-modern, spirituality oriented architectural practices, have resulted in their abandonment by considerable number of indigenous people.

Scientific revolution has replaced native reverence for landscape and earth with modern instrumentality, indigenous gratitude to matter and materials with a longstanding sense of entitlement, aborigine belief in the cyclicity of life and death with teleology, equality between animate and inanimate beings with hubris. "The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the disenchantment of the world," observed the greatest of modernist amongst us, Max Weber. The Navajo architecture holds a mirror to the closures and dangers of this disenchanted world. It reminds us of modernity's intolerance to anything that it cannot subsume.

For us, the house is a rational and phenomenal space. It is a piece of property made of inert material. It is made pleasing to the eye and the mind by the taste and talent of the architect. We develop sentimental attachment to it because of the



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Figure 3: Conical Forked Pole Hogan Symbolism taken from Peter Nabokov and Robert Easton's book *Native American Architecture*.

memories we make there. It is the primal site for the production of self, privacy, and normativity.

For the Navajo, the house is not a commodity. It is devoid of windows not for the sake of privacy but because it is conceived as a return to the womb of Mother earth. Regardless of the specifics of design, the plan of the Hogan does not serve to capture surrounding views. It is a model of the cosmos. Building a house is embedded, not in the logic of comfort and efficiency, economy and self (though these are not entirely forgotten). It is grounded in ceremonial meaning. Modern education teaches that the Juniper or Pine poles that support the roof of the Hogan are just that, structurally rational supports, not the Mountain or the Water's World's Legs. They are therefore disposable. Practical thinking suggests that it is nothing but mere superstition to call the north-pole the Corn World's Leg, nothing but mere false consciousness to treat the plan as sacred. Devoid of modern infrastructure, it is easy to give the houses east-facing entrances and all our houses do. It is also easy to make concession to the color of poles: white in the east, turquoise in the south, abalone in the west, and red in the northeast. Alas some common ground! But it is difficult to have poles in every house. It goes against the ethos of innovation. And who cares if they erect east pole first, then the south, west and northern poles in accordance with the guidance of the sun. Learning by doing should not mean that we have to learn how to build from east to south, to west to north. The east entrance should suffice. It is the beauty of economic wood frame construction that ought to be introduced to the Nation, because that is what we need to learn. Gypsum boards are far more durable and low



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on maintenance compared to sod, bark, and grass that fill the gaps of the Hogan. This must count as an improvement. And what are we to do with the silly tradition of sealing and abandoning the Hogan upon the death of its occupant so it, like the owner, returns to dust too?

It would be short sighted to dismiss our call for attention to native principles of design and construction — like following of sun and stars and return of organic material to earth — as romanticism. Far from being a simple disposal process it is today, the “return” of the Hogan, for example, provides a link between man and soil, and animate and inanimate existence. It partakes in the cyclical nature of life, death, and rebirth. It is an intentional attempt to maintain these links active and alive in the collective consciousness. This ethos has nothing in common with our salvaging of materials from demolished structures or recycling milk cartons. The Navajo’s sealing and abandonment of the Hogan is an act of respect. It is a reciprocal exchange and participation in regenerative cycle that is the opposite of the extractive actions dominating capitalist economy. If we consider organic materials as “natural resources,” the natives revere them as gifts of a benevolent, revered, mother. A comparison of this “environmentally conscious,” “sustainable” architecture steeped in “regenerative” rituals of reciprocity with what today is called Green Economics and Green Architecture, should be instructive. Our “environmentally conscious,” “sustainable” Green Architecture translates all exchanges between us, water, air, fire, into visible externalities that can be quantified and calculated in monetary value, and economic parlance. If our fall from grace after the destruction of the planet should teach us anything, it should be for us to revisit epistemologies discredited as superstitious architecture.

Again, much more can be said about the missed opportunities, the closures and blinkers of Design-BuildBLUFF. But doing so runs the risk of dismantling an institution constructed over ten years. The question we ought to ask is: how can the next generation of educators at Bluff turn learning-by-doing into creative making? What ought to count as creative making? What can we learn from the construction techniques of the Navajo? We also have more fundamental questions to ask: How should we engage a people whose way of life is on the verge of extinction? Currently our interventions, even when welcome are a form of development, service, and extension of modernity — that offsets historic injustices by destroying the historic

Figure 1. *Sweet Caroline House Interior*
Photo by Jacob Gines



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role of architecture among Navajo people in substantiating and passing on their cosmological beliefs, social codes, and the production of community.

This paper, it must be clear, is not arguing for disengagement. It is not recommending leaving native communities to their own devices after destroying almost everything that makes them who they are. Nor it is an argument for reviving dead systems, or preserving existing ones. These are not communities frozen in time. Linguistically and architecturally connected to tribes in Alaska, Navajo have changed and evolved, adapted to droughts, and climate change, they have migrated and traded, developed astronomy, geology, and geography. They have moved from pit houses to conical and semispherical Hogans without dugouts. We know now that what we cannot do is throw all caution to air and reproduce their homes in the image of modern homes, or conversely to turn them into images of their past glory. We need to rethink how architects intervene in informal economies. What roles can they perform in communities that are built for themselves? How do we build with the Navajo rather than for them? These questions are an occasion for the opening up of modernity to alternative models that will mutate themselves and dominant culture alike. It is time to think dialectically rather than us vs. them. While history provides of wonderful examples of traditions in Japan, China, India, Scandinavia, that have enriched the modern world, we have little to show for healthy transformations of cultures that have been suppressed as much as the natives. This is the challenge history has left for the next generation of BLUFFERS—one that could not be envisioned without Design-Build.

Figure 5: *SolRose House*
Photo by Scot Zimmerman