# Community as Virtue: Returning to our Native Spirit

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#### Introduction

Scarcities of resources combined with a rapidly expanding material progress has colonized local and indigenous communities on a massive scale, and has tended to accelerate a gradual spiritual corrosion by effacing cultural past and identity. This suggests that designers of indigenous environments should have the capacity not only to unearth vital forms of native culture, but also be able to satisfy our contemporary needs and aspirations without diminishing the opportunities of future generations. However, environmental designers often like to make ambitious propositions for the 'creation' of a 'spirit' in a place by means of some professional intervention.

Difficulties in particular arise in trying to articulate the elusive characteristics of the sacredness indigenous culture has at its deepest core, and as it is instantiated in the physical environment. What are the essential characteristics in this native place? How might these 'placed' characteristics work together in such a way that a new whole sense of community can emerge? The study seeks a resounding lesson pre-Columbian indigenous culture teaches us—community with deep cultural landscapes ought to be the center place where the native spirit fosters our deepest sense of being.

#### Landscape as Worldview

Native American world view is not widely viewed. The study discusses Native American concept of nature and their understanding of landscapes as central to pre-Columbian indigenous cultures. Native Americans worship landscapes as the metaphysical ground for their own cosmic ideas that provided economic, aesthetic, spiritual, and daily inspiration. The Holy Spirit has the teleological force, moving toward its parts, such as four cardinals, the basic elements-earth, air, fire and water. So, an understanding of landscapes in cycles is central to Native American cultures. The discussion will include the metaphysical ground for their own cosmic ideas that provided economic, aesthetic, spiritual, and daily inspiration and that has a full significance of the *genius loci*.

# Morals of Well-being

To understand the sacred of indigenous settlement, we need to look into their concept of dwelling. The study examines the innate (i.e. phenomenological) meanings of dwelling that are inherited from the Pueblo native settlements and characterized as 'creation centered' humanity. It argues that 'morals of dwelling' will underlie indigenous traditions and closely related to our sense of belonging and of connectedness to the wholeness of community, and thereby become the spiritual practice of 'well-being.' Home is an inherently sacred place in all cultures. The principle of dwelling for Native Americans can be characterized as 'creation centered' humanity, which embraces the cycle of life for the harmony and balance of the individual, family, clan, and community.<sup>3</sup> The life centered spirituality also suggests environmental ethics as universal moral rules.

# The Locus of 'Native' Spirit

The genius loci are an important determinant of any culture after all, because every culture has its unique sacred places and particular ways of appreciating beauty, and prehistoric people are thought to have the incredibly accurate sense of locality. The spirit of place present itself as a particular local character of which native people make sense. This is why it has been an important precept for environmental designers even to date. In seeking to embed the indigenous spirit in the course of contemporary place-making, I would put forth six attributes that constitute and contribute to the virtue of indigenous community: 1) center and edge; 2) balance and tension; 3) pattern and synthesis; 4) participation and performance; 5) symbols and symbolism; 6) simplicity and subtlety.

# Center and edge

The center is a physical, geometric, and geographical space that presents a psychological function called 'orientation' or 'way finding.' It is also a symbolic and existential space that echoes the meanings of human life and self. The center signals the emergence of human life as the beginning of 'placing' ourselves on earth under the sky—being-in-the world to form a perceptual territory for self-identity and safety. Suppose we get lost. Losing our way means losing a sense of being centered or a sense of connection with the peripheral surroundings. <sup>6</sup> We experience a fear of being estranged from the surrounding, or fail in finding a continual path to the center, due to the lack of the identity and the characters of other things on the edge.

#### Balance and Tension

Balance and tension is a popular theme in a mystic conception of the creation of Earth and Sky and in the stories of sun and moon, as found in a considerable piece of Native American poetry. To native ancient people, good medicine is meant to listen to the sound of one's body and mind (spirit), and to restore it in harmony with nature's sacred rhythms. The sky echoes our sense of mortality; the sound of the wind in turn provokes the deep understanding of the earth's spirit—the struggle for life.

# Pattern and synthesis

The native people have the great ability to unveil hidden knowledge and secrets of the soul in images, and making it accessible to every believing heart, every sensitive vision. <sup>7</sup> They 'feel' the environment as interconnected patterns and rhythms. Although it is always vague, feeling orchestrates an authentic experience by which we are cognizant of essential characters of the surrounding in time and space. A native place offers something inherently intense, defined by quality and locality that we, native-minded people feel our way into and make sense of.

# Participation and Performance

What we may think to be most mystical about Native American spirituality is their oral culture. However, to native people, oral tradition is perfectly natural knowledge and thought that are handed down in patterns of participatory communication. This ephemeral nature may be the one of the reasons why Native American culture is particularly in crisis. Nevertheless, their oral and participatory culture brings us a deeper view of indigenous landscape and of what it means to build a community. Their ceremonial performance is therefore the process of participating fully in the rhythms of the environment.

## Symbols and Symbolism

The symbolic language of place is pervasive in Native American culture. As modern society is mechanized and globalized, we lose our symbolic connection with nature as well. <sup>8</sup> We never hear the sound of life from stones, plants, and animals, nor do we believe they can hear or feel us. Native American spirituality is expressed in the anthropomorphic or humanlike images of natural

features and living creatures, echoing stories of human nature. Symbolism is of importance in contemporary design in that it provides us with a poetic and practical language for what we call humanist design now.

## Simplicity and Subtlety

Indigenous environment presents a composite quality of simplicity and subtlety, for its culture holds a strong symbolic structure and meanings. For instance, archetype is understood as a primary and simple symbolic reference, universally significant not only in the primitive culture but in all circumstances at all times; yet the representation of the archetypal patterns is indefinably varied in different cultures. The most primitive of all sacred places known in history is the remarkably simple, archetypal landscape of stone, water, and trees, and at the same time, the symbolic representation of the holy landscapes shaped by subtlety rather than by noteworthy features.

Such vital characters of place stem from a lively summation of the habitual patterns infused with traditions and values of a native community. A trait of characters manifested in habitual action is a virtue, says Aristotle. <sup>9</sup> A virtue has its own distinctive features that spring from both an individual and the collective course of action. Therefore, the vital characters of a place define the very virtue of a place—genius loci. A true lesson to be drawn here is the vulnerability of a place has the potential to become a place of vitality if the locus of our native spirit is conserved and continued by those who create, belong to, and inherit the place. The vital characters of native places resonate with an important lesson: the ecological and spiritual understanding of indigenous culture actually could be the key to the virtue of community—the way to a fuller humanity.

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#### **Endnotes**

1. Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical Theory* (New York: Thames and Hudson Inc., 1992), 314.

<sup>2.</sup> Christian Norberg-Schulz, *The Concept of Dwelling: On the Way to Figurative Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1985), 17.

<sup>3.</sup> Michael T. Garrett, Walking on the Wind, 78.

<sup>4.</sup> Carl G. Jung, Modern Man in Search of a Soul, 129.

<sup>5.</sup> Christian Norberg-Schulz, The Concept of Dwelling, 3.

<sup>6.</sup> Alfred N. Whitehead, Process and Reality.

<sup>8.</sup> Carl G. Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconsciousness*, trans. R.F.C. Hull (Princeton University Press/Bollingen Series XX, 1969), 7.

<sup>9.</sup> Jonathan Lear, ed. Aristotle: The Desire to Understand. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988, 84. 10. James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003), 175-176.