

# The Spiritual Resonance of Douglas Cardinal: How one American indigenous community created a symbol of modern resilience.

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## Introduction

The Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians chose Douglas Cardinal to design their civic center, known as Strongheart. Strongheart is a place to strengthen mind, body, and spirit. The facility is also home to cultural and spiritual gatherings, as well as athletic events. This geodesic dome, modeled after the form of a turtle, is located in the Grand Traverse Bay region of northwest lower Michigan, an area known for exquisite natural beauty and recognized as sacred land by tribal members.<sup>1</sup> (Fig.1) Cardinal's philosophy and shared heritage resonated for the members of this Anishinaabe community which was almost driven to the brink of legal extinction. The Grand Traverse Band is now a national leader in advancing Indian treaty rights, gaming, and federal and state land rights.<sup>2</sup> Strongheart is a result of Cardinal's signature *Vision Sessions*, and the interplay between a community's heritage, renewed resilience, and modern technology.

## The Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians

In 1980, the Grand Traverse Band was the first tribe to be formally acknowledged by the United States Bureau of Indian Affairs.<sup>3</sup> Federal recognition of Indian tribes is a formal political act that establishes government-to-government relationships between the tribes and the United States. The Band, while small and relatively unknown to those unfamiliar with Indian affairs, has long been on the cutting edge of American Indian law and policy. The Band was part of the Three Fires Confederacy consisting of Ottawa, Chippewa and Potawatomi Indians known as the Anishinaabe people. They had been living in Michigan's Grand Traverse region as early as 1675, with Anishinaabe people and others living in Michigan for perhaps as long as 11,000 years.<sup>4</sup> The band was one of several Indian tribes who were signatories to the 1836 Treaty of Washington, a document that would change their existence forever.<sup>5</sup> While they previously maintained a government-to-government relationship with the United States from 1795 until 1872, they are a successor to a series of treaties with the United States. In 1872, then-Secretary of the Interior, Columbus Delano, improperly severed the government-to-government relationship between the Band and the United States, ceasing to treat the Band as a federally recognized tribe. This occurred because the Secretary had misread the 1855 Treaty of Detroit. Following termination of the relationship, the Band experienced increasing poverty, loss of land base and depletion of community resources. Between 1872 and 1980, the Band continually sought to regain its status as a federally recognized tribe. The Band's efforts were successful in 1980 when it became the

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<sup>1</sup> Fletcher, *The Eagle Returns: The Legal History of the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2012) ix.

<sup>2</sup> Fletcher, *The Eagle Returns*, x.

<sup>3</sup> Fletcher, *The Eagle Returns*, 84.

<sup>4</sup> Fletcher, *The Eagle Returns*, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Fletcher, *The Eagle Returns*, 2.

first tribe “acknowledged” by the Secretary of the Interior pursuant to the federal acknowledgement process.<sup>6</sup>

Once federal recognition was restored, the Band sought to create a renewed sense of community, history, and identity. At the time of the recognition, many community members were desperately poor and undereducated.<sup>7</sup> Penniless, they established modern tribal law and justice systems, along with the development of a functioning and sustainable economy.<sup>8</sup> As one of the first tribes in the United States to own and operate gaming casinos, the revenue helped make significant community improvements on their land. In 1999, nearly a mere two decades following their federal recognition, the Grand Traverse Band decided to build a civic center which would serve as the cornerstone facility within their community master plan. They turned to internationally renowned architect Douglas Cardinal. Born of Anishinaabe, Blackfoot and Metis descent, Cardinal spent his formative years at a Catholic boarding school in Red Deer, Alberta. While the experience was traumatic, he credits the Catholic church for exposing him to the arts, which in turn sparked the challenge to become an architect. Cardinal “wondered how the language of architecture could be used in a way of expressing himself through his traditions, his experiences, and his indigenous people.”<sup>9</sup>

### **Strongheart**

The planning for Strongheart began with Cardinal’s signature *Vision Sessions*, which are based on his belief that humans have the responsibility to our gift of creativity, and with that our will can be connected, making it possible to create anything.<sup>10</sup> The community wanted a place where people could follow their traditions and continue with their culture. The building would support their youth, honor their women, and help make them strong and vital as a nation and as a people.<sup>11</sup> They wanted to use materials that were long lasting, inexpensive to maintain and would endure the next seven generations. The turtle shape was chosen to represent the bond to tribal tradition and would serve as a symbol of endurance and strength. The building site, centered in a lush meadow, surrounded by deciduous hardwood forest and near Lake Michigan, was chosen for its spiritual and environmental significance. Cardinal brought their vision into reality and saw the geodesic dome’s design and technique as the ideal way for the community to take part in building the structure. The circular design allowed for a central gathering space, emulating traditional Anishinaabe dwellings such as sweat lodges and wigwams. The 150-foot 27,000 square foot geodesic dome is constructed entirely of structural steel on steel columns, clad in 13 curved metal plates honoring the lunar phases and the power of women. (Fig 2.) The structure includes a double basketball court, elevated running track, small rooms for group classes, and a kitchen facility. (Fig 3.)

Prominent symbolism is evident within the structure, with the head of the turtle facing east to meet the rising sun. The entrance welcomes members and visitors into the space with natural light supporting intricate details.<sup>12</sup> Encircling the lobby are thirteen carved wooden columns depicting the thirteen moons of the Ottawa calendar. The columns support a large wooden ring displaying the surnames of the families from the 1907 Federal Durante Roll of the Grand Traverse

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<sup>6</sup> No. 02-1679, “Grand Traverse Band v. Office of the United States Attorney, (369 F 3<sup>rd</sup> 960, 6<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Fletcher, *The Eagle Returns*, 102.

<sup>8</sup> Fletcher, *The Eagle Returns*, 166.

<sup>9</sup> Douglas Cardinal, “Strongheart”, Interview by Gretchen Carr, *Traversecityist*, November 19, 2023, audio, 1:47, <https://traversecityist.com>.

<sup>10</sup> “Douglas Cardinal Philosophy,” Douglas Cardinal Architects, Inc. accessed April 15, 2024, <https://www.djcarchitect.com/philosophy>

<sup>11</sup> Cardinal, Interview.

<sup>12</sup> Knust, “Comstock Construction” 3.

Indian population, the first federal census of the Band.<sup>13</sup> The columns and the ring of names were crafted by Fred Raphael. The tribal elders prompted this idea as they wanted those family names recognized and preserved for generations to come. Every member of the Band can trace their heritage on this list. (Fig.4.) When you enter the main portion of the building, the structural elements of the ceiling resemble a dream catcher or an *asabikeshiinh*, a protective web-like charm placed over one's bed with origins in Anishinaabe culture.<sup>14</sup> (Fig 5.)

Constructing a building that imitated the design of a living creature was no small task. The management of this project was unprecedented as each member of the team had to adhere to Anishinaabe traditions coupled with an icon of Canadian architecture, supported with French Canadian structural engineering and headed by a premier former Polish national lead structural engineer.<sup>15</sup> This environment of multi-lingual, multi-national cultural coordination relied on a constant and consistent level of communication to insure owner expectation and architectural and engineering integrity, along with strict adherence to budget. These practices were credited with the *2001 Build Michigan Award* for Best Building for its size in Michigan and America.<sup>16</sup>

As the building neared completion, the name *Zoong' de ewin*, Anishinaabemowin for strong heart, was bestowed by community's elders. According to Cardinal, they wanted their youth to "develop a strong heart so that everything they do, would come from the heart and not from the head. They wanted to make sure that they were being responsible to the creator and to our mother the earth."<sup>17</sup> In the Anishinaabe culture, the turtle or *Mikinnack* teaches Anishinaabeg healing and communication with the mystery world. While the turtle moves at a slow pace, the creature symbolizes a swift mind and are regarded as a master of communication.<sup>18</sup> The turtle is also believed to have a strong heart, and thus it was used in medicinal preparations.

Cardinal was present for the opening festivities, which included a basketball game played by members of the community and members of the National Football League's St. Louis Rams, presently known as the Los Angeles Rams.<sup>19</sup> During the ribbon cutting ceremony, Cardinal offered remarks and sang a song in his native language learned from his elders. Steve Feringa, tribal architect for the Grand Traverse Band, recalled interacting with Cardinal. "He (Cardinal) embraced our entire community, and he listened to us."<sup>20</sup> Feringa stated that Cardinal's experience at the Catholic boarding school made an impression on him because his own mother was also brought up in a boarding school and then an orphanage. As a young architect, the opportunity to observe and work with Cardinal had a profound effect on his own philosophy and practice. Feringa's current projects include the completion of the tribe's Master Plan which include a net zero carbon footprint on the land.<sup>21</sup> In turn, Cardinal was affected by the members of the Grand Traverse Band and the land they dwelled upon. "To me, it was an honor serving that community because they taught me a lot. It was an opportunity for me to further our knowledge

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<sup>13</sup> Knust, "Comstock Construction" 5.

<sup>14</sup> The Ojibwe People's Dictionary, "asabikeshiinh," <https://ojibwe.lib.umn.edu/main-entry/asabikeshiinh-na>

<sup>15</sup> Knust, "Comstock Construction"4.

<sup>16</sup> Knust, "Comstock Construction" 2.

<sup>17</sup> Cardinal, Interview.

<sup>18</sup> Zhaawan Art: Stories and Teachers from the Earth, Part 3, Turtle and Bear, Guardians of the Shaking Tent.

<https://www.zhaawanart.com/post/stories-and-teachings-from-the-earth-part-3-turtle-and-bear-guardians-of-the-shaking-tent>

<sup>19</sup> "St. Louis Rams Plays Strongheart Center, Peshawbestown, MI," Grand Traverse Band News, Vol. No. 1 April 2001, 1.

<sup>20</sup> Steve Feringa, "Strongheart", Interview by Gretchen Carr, *Traversecityist*, November 19, 2023, audio, 26:32, <https://traversecityist.com>.

<sup>21</sup> Feringa, Interview.

and education about our own indigenous people, mine included.”<sup>22</sup> Cardinal believes that architects have an opportunity to make a difference on the planet. “Let’s not produce a heritage of junk for the next generation, but a heritage of beauty and a heritage of creativity and a heritage of belonging on this beautiful planet.”<sup>23</sup>



Figure 1. Zoong' de ewin/Strongheart Civic Center, Peshawbestown, Leelanau Peninsula, Michigan, Douglas Cardinal Architects

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<sup>22</sup> Cardinal, Interview.

<sup>23</sup> Cardinal, Interview.

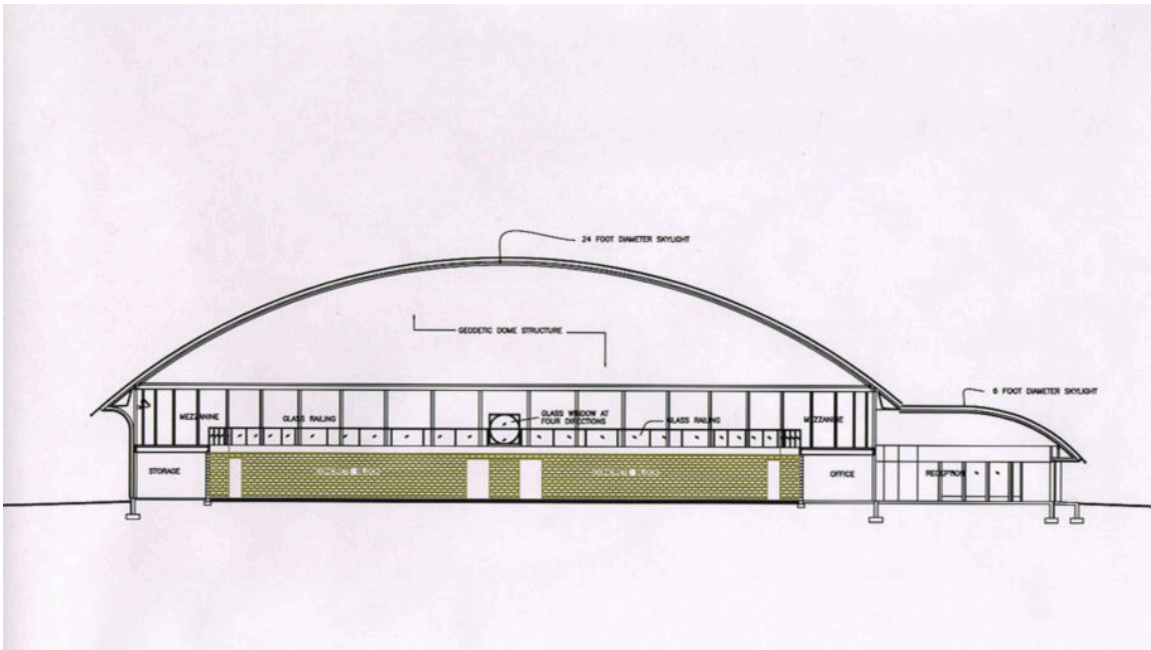


Figure 2. Strongheart Civic Center, Douglas Cardinal Architects (sideview)

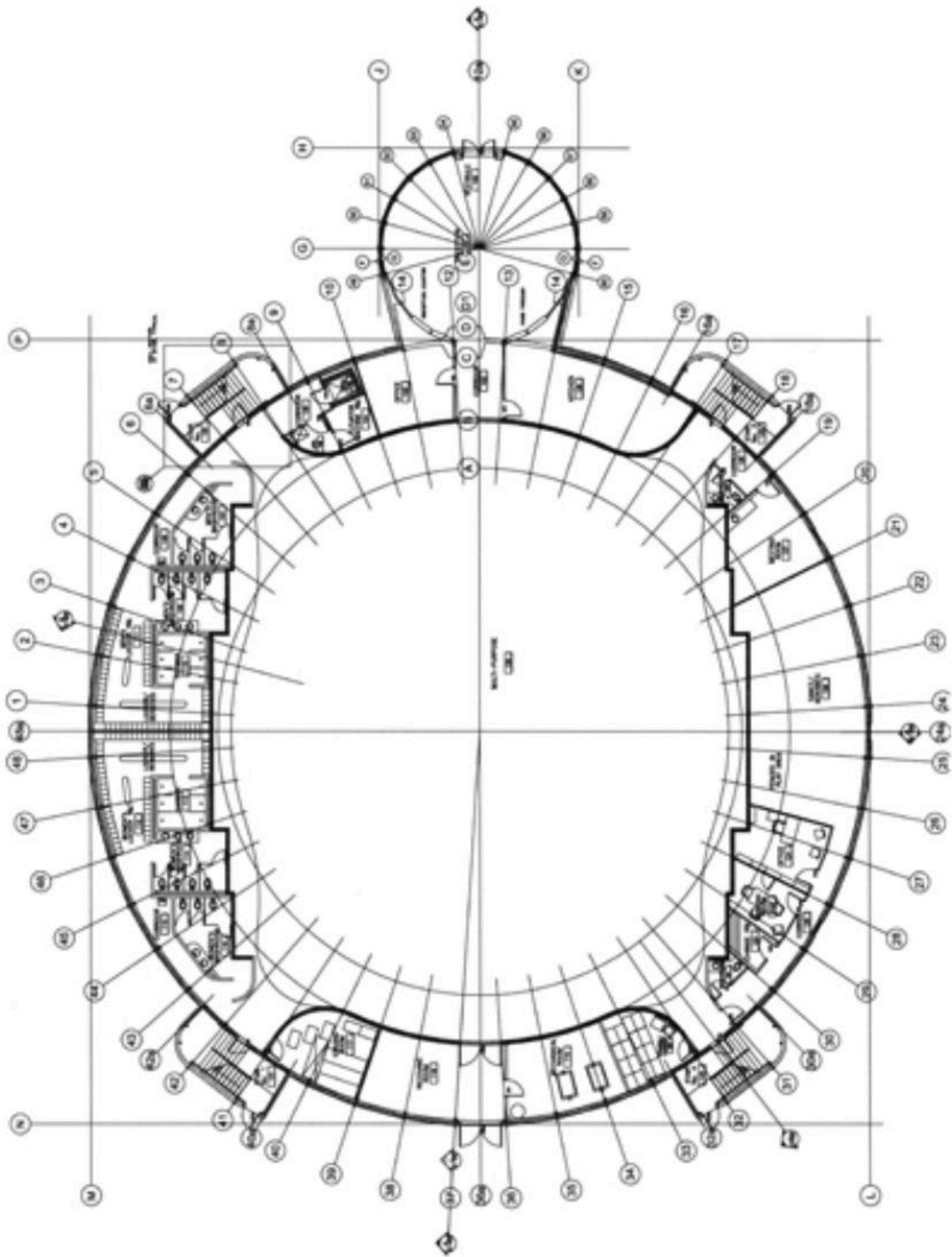


Figure 3. Aerial View, Strongheart Center, Douglas Cardinal Architects (aerial view)



Figure 4. Carved Columns by Fred Raphael, Strongheart Center, Gretchen Carr



*Figure 5. Strongheart Center Interior, Douglas Cardinal Architects*