
THE HIDDEN GROUND: NATIVE AMERICAN INTERCULTURAL RELATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Over the last two decades, a trend has been developing in the design community to promote social equity and emphasize the ethical responsibility of design. Community participation, programming, and post-occupancy evaluations have cemented a more democratic design process in which users, clients, and community members are given a voice to affect the final architecture product through a process called participatory design. This *modus operandi* becomes more vital when dealing with subcultures that historically have felt marginalized from the dominant culture. In the United States, there is great diversity among Native Americans, but our mainstream culture tends to see them as a homogeneous group, focusing on their commonalities rather than discovering and understanding individual tribal values. With the blind acceptance of generalizations about any subculture, we may miss the critical details that shape the opportunity to showcase their uniqueness and celebrate their differences.

Within the studio context, what learning modalities are best to implement a participatory and constructivist learning experience? Traditionally, studio teaching with project-based design focuses on students learning formal considerations of design such as theory, environmental/structural performance, and implementation of regulatory measures. The participatory design methodology (PDM) differs in its approach by focusing on a process that emerges from all players. It does not dictate design but creates an environment that allows it to emerge through the process and interactions. The PDM process prioritizes collective synergy and creativity using participation techniques to allow for alternative solutions.

In response to an inquiry by the Pawnee Native American Tribe, which invited us to investigate a proper approach to conduct design propositions within their land, this paper will report the lessons learned from the process and will exhibit alternate ways of implementing design ideas, using methodologies that expand the boundaries of academia while reaching out to native communities.

Keywords: Design, Native Americans, Participatory, Pedagogy

INTRODUCTION

Teamwork is the critical organizational format that designers can use to address the complexity and challenges that architecture projects inherently contain. The strength of any

team is their ability to collaborate effectively. In the fourth-year architectural studio at Oklahoma State University (OSU), a required student learning outcome is that students must demonstrate evidence of understanding the implications that arise when designing for a diverse cultural and social context, in addition to learning how to effectively collaborate within multidisciplinary teams and interact with different stakeholders within the project context. This paper narrates the experience of teaching a course that introduced the concept of participatory design aimed at exploring how to reframe the hierarchy and power between clients, students, and faculty. The empirical data on which this paper is based were collected through the practice of teaching.

1. CRAFTING THE STUDIO

Teaching a design studio is always a creative endeavor. The challenge to give students a multicultural experience without traveling abroad is always a predicament. Furthermore, students must recognize that any design they conceive is as much about the people involved in conceiving and developing their social construct, environment, and culture as their own creative talents. The question of design ownership and the ability of any design to integrate the local inconspicuous dimensions that make up any particular culture is a valuable lesson, especially within the current contemporary design culture of students and young designers infatuated with influential and incessant image culture that follows international design trends. Modus vivendi and local culture have the unique power to inform the lifestyle, sensibilities, and values of a project that seeks to represent it. In addition, it is essential to understand the particulars of local how-to culture, as it has a significant impact on the desired level of craftsmanship and construction typology that could be achieved.

In the fall of 2019, the author coordinated a design studio that sought to collaborate on a cross-cultural adventure with a local Native American tribe in response to an inquiry by the Pawnee Native American Tribe to investigate a proper approach for conducting design propositions within their land. In this process, the design studio partnered with two community organizations, the Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries, and Museums (ATALM) and the Museum of the Pawnee Nation Advisory Board, to design a cultural center for the Pawnee Tribe on a site located in Pawnee, Oklahoma.

2. OPPORTUNITY TO WORK WITH THE COMMUNITY

In 2018, ATALM conducted a survey across the US Native American nations and tribal communities that revealed that only 195 tribes out of 474 Indian nations had a cultural center or a museum. Many of the tribal artifacts are housed in large national institutions such as the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian. For the Pawnee tribe, it is the Field Museum in Chicago that conserves an extensive collection of artifacts. The survey revived the strong sentiment among Native Americans that tribal cultural heritage artifacts should belong in the hands of the tribal community and should not be separated from their original tribe. ATALM received special funds from the National Leadership Grant, Institute of Museum and Library Services, to start a yearlong program to help Native communities plan their cultural facilities. The program is called "Culture Builds Community." A core value among Native Americans is sovereignty and self-governance. To sustain Indigenous culture and its legacy, it is vital that they regain authority over their cultural patrimony. However,

many of these tribes lack the resources to build viable facilities, or if they have an existing facility, it may not meet the standard criteria to house or exhibit many of these artifacts.

Native Americans have had a tumultuous history within the United States. It began with the premise that European settlers would impose new conceptions of power, sovereignty, and social control (Szeman and Kaposy 2010, 2). Because of the settlers' social Darwinism and discriminatory attitudes, the Native Americans were disenfranchised and marginalized, and in the words of Marianne O. Nielsen and Linda Robyn (2003, 33), "marginalization is a direct result of colonialism." European settlers, believing themselves to be a superior civilization and race, considered the Native Americans to be ignorant and irrational. Therefore, white settlers sought to acculturate them and forced them into boarding schools to provide them with a "formal education" and then stripped them of their land, language, and culture (Nielsen and Robyn 2003, 36–37). When working with a subculture that has historically felt marginalized and has cultivated throughout generations a sense of distrust for the host and mainstream culture, the organizational structure of the collaboration needs to acknowledge and be empathetic to their perception of power and be sensitive to these issues.

The Pawnee tribe has a history that spans more than seven hundred years. They originated from the plains along the North Platt River in Nebraska. In 1875, they were removed from Nebraska and replanted to what we know today as Pawnee County in northern Oklahoma. After taking their ancestral sacred land at the beginning of 1887, the federal government forced the Native Americans' cultural assimilation by mandatory attendance at Indian boarding schools in their attempt to "civilize" the "savages" (Reyhner and Oyawin Eder 2004, 37). Today, the Pawnee tribe is 3,200 members strong, and many of them reside in the vicinity of Pawnee, Oklahoma, as well as across the United States. A point of pride in their society is that they have been supporting American freedom efforts through many wars. The Pawnee warrior traditions have allowed them to distinguish themselves in many of the US Armed Forces but especially in the US Army (Pawnee Nation 2012).

3. VALUE OF THE PARTICIPATORY DESIGN METHOD

Once the university-community partnership got started, we felt that the traditional architecture studio organization would not be the best vehicle to explore the design process of such a project. Our students' design approach is in line with the thinking that they design "for" the client rather than "with" the client. The distinction between "for" and "with" is an essential one for the students to learn, particularly at this time in their careers. Once understood, they can become better designers and shift the hierarchy of power and sense of ownership of the design to the people who will inhabit it. The participatory design method (PDM) facilitated this shift in perception over the dominion of the final design, since the "with" was established from the beginning and reinforced throughout collaborative interactions. During my eleven years in academia, I have observed the "for the client" mode in students' design approaches. In fact, they constantly assumed full ownership of their designs, referring to them as "my design" and not necessarily a design that serves a client or one that arose from desk critiques. Additionally, many times students resist making necessary changes to their designs because they do not understand the (fictitious) client's position inscribed in the program within the collaborative faculty-student environment.

Michel de Certeau examines in *The Practice of Everyday Life* the distinction between Design Participation and Participation Design in the way people operate within these two frameworks. Typically, designers need to create an exchange space using one of these two

frameworks, either consciously or unconsciously, as they practice design. According to de Certeau, the first one deals with strategies, and strategies are methods of a dominant institution or entity with power. At the other end, tactics are the actions of those involved without autonomy or power (de Certeau 2011, 34), and we experience an analogous situation in academic scenarios (faculty vs. students). In contrast, PDM differs in its approach by focusing on a *modus operandi* that emerges in a horizontally oriented hierarchy, one that considers all the users or “players” involved. The PDM builds ownership of the outcome, acknowledges the value of self-reliance by boosting the confidence of its participants to get involved in the decision-making, and reduces the risk of the users having unrealistic expectations for the building use and performance. In our case, faculty, students, the Pawnee Tribe, and all legitimate stakeholders were involved in the decision-making process from the beginning. The PDM seemed like an appropriate approach. The faculty, a selected group of students, the Pawnee Tribe, and its different subgroups, such as the tribe elders, veterans group, women's group, were all involved in the PDM decision-making process. The students' PDM subgroup explored opportunities in how to engage the client and evaluated different modalities that ranged from active to passive, informal to formal. In the end, students favored the more casual and social interactions, along with formal online surveys, face-to-face interviews, and cultural activities like tribal dances.

Giving people a voice and creating an environment where ideas can easily float to the surface, be evaluated, and synthesized toward a shared vision was the primary design process. Therefore, our results could only be as good as the decision and the development process. Having a horizontal hierarchy and sharing power was not always an easy landscape to navigate. A structured system needed to be established. Those having more in-depth or extensive knowledge on a specific topic, acquired by experience or proven research, were allowed to create the reviewing criteria or “unspoken” rule of respect toward that knowledge base but still allow all participants, including those with maybe a naïve or plainly divergent view on the topic, to participate in the discussions and decision-making process.

Not all decisions were made in a participatory manner. Depending on how these decisions or choices affected the players, and taking into account the limitations of working within an academic calendar, the studio faculty felt the need to define the level and depth of participation. It can be argued that it may not have been a “true” participatory model, but working within an academic environment and this being my first time implementing PDM in the studio brought its challenges. In the end, the students still benefited from being exposed to this type of exercise even with the limitations.

When committed to using a PDM, it is imperative to establish democratic values, equality, and empathy toward all the participants involved. It is important to find common ground and mutually learn from one another (Kohls and Knight 1994). In working with the Pawnees, students needed to understand their societal values and the critical cultural influence that shapes them. The students did preliminary research to inform themselves of these early in the process. However, when it came to direct interactions with the tribe, it was difficult for them to navigate aspects of the cultural differences. Some of the tribe's traditional values challenged some students' intercultural sensitivity. For example, the Pawnee perception of time is not linear but more relative, relative to the “right time.” Furthermore, the tribe's relationship with the environment and nature seeks to align with the natural flow, so time is associated with those flows.

The close web of social relationships that the tribe establishes with colleagues and others not related to members of the tribe, who are seen as extended family, confused some

students. For the Pawnees, there is a clear awareness that community needs come before “self” needs. Another example of cultural differences occurred when the tribe clashed with the architectural studio culture of critique or criticism. Criticizing, even if it was in a constructive way, was burdensome for some of the tribal members. Another main cultural difference related to topics of spiritual life and sacred objects, which the tribe was very secretive about despite the students’ need to know more about them to inform the design better. It was challenging for students to witness that their inquisitiveness would go unanswered, as they needed clarity in the specifications for exhibiting artifacts and storing them properly. This issue made the students fully aware of their own cultural conditioning. The issue struck a chord with a few students who showed frustration at the tribe’s perceived lack of trust. We realized that we did not have the right mechanisms to navigate these divides.

The PDM has four phases throughout the design process, which are connect, understand, create, and deliver:

—“Connecting,” the first step in the process, involves building a relationship with the community, stakeholders, neighbors, grassroots leaders, local vendors, and others. We needed to identify the right people and the opportunities they could offer for the success of the design. Setting up this initial step was also a critical step toward designing “with” people.

—During the “understand” phase, we proceeded to unearth and explore the knowledge about the local context, such as the place, people, and resources available. Throughout this process, the community’s needs, resources, and assets were examined, and opportunities identified. Having the right tools and asking the right and sometimes the misguided questions throughout this phase were important to constructing the right scenarios and delivering tailored design solutions.

—Once the needs and wants were identified, students began the “create” phase by breaking down the design process into smaller pieces while identifying ways for the community to be involved as active participants of the iterative design process. This phase was quite challenging because of the time needed so that ideas and viable solutions could be discussed while allowing for open feedback loops for their refinement. How the community was approached in this phase directly contributed to the outcomes. At the heart of the PDM, creativity and engagement are key to gaining a sense of communal ownership for the design solution. Implementing the design solutions and developing activities to sustain interest in the project as well as capacities to care for and maintain the project over its long-term life were, however, outside our academic realm.

—Lastly, within the academic environment, we found out that the “delivery” phase presented many challenges; undergraduate students’ schedules are at full capacity; many students work outside the studio environment to supplement their income. The first and last phases needed lots of fieldwork and time that were difficult to fit into students’ schedules outside the studio time. In our specific environment, students in the fourth-year undergraduate studio need to expand their technical skills as well as their interpersonal skills. An essential soft skill to develop in the design process is “how to relate and collaborate with people from all walks of life.” While conducting PDM research, besides participating in many outside classroom engagements, much time was needed to process and analyze the knowledge and in-

sights so that they could be implemented in the design. One student's comment and observation was, "Many times I design solutions from the information given by the program but rarely on research from the 'ground' or the people's perspective and context. After this experience of designing 'with' the people involved, I will seriously consider the implications that my design has in a much wider spectrum."

4. WHAT TOOLS COULD HELP US UNCOVER CULTURAL VALUES?

When talking about culture, just like an iceberg, some things can easily be observed on the surface, such as different music, language, food, and so on. More important, though, is to discover the things that are hidden underneath this iceberg, less visible but deeply rooted and ingrained in the cultural values. These values are vital because they unconsciously control behaviors. We felt that we needed to have the right tools to uncover these hidden cultural perspectives and values. While doing research, the author discovered a cross-cultural exercise developed by Paula Chu called the Culture Compass, which was adapted to be used not only to uncover the tribe values but students' values and biases so that common ground(s) could be found (Seelye 1996, 22). There are critical issues within the cross-cultural collaboration that need to be uncovered and grasped, the most basic of which is the concept of individualism, which is the way that the individual relates to others. According to Geert Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, which is a standard framework used for cross-cultural communication, the United States highly values the individual within its society, in contrast to the Pawnees, whose ideologies fall under the notion of collectivism, where the interests and claims of the people as a group overrule those of the individuals (Hofstede Centre 2018). The concept of Hofstede's cultural dimensions is a framework to classify and explain the influence of culture on their particular object of study (Hofstede 1994, 258). It is structured from the analysis of five specific dimensions each culture possesses that portray their communal behavior. Hofstede's original cultural dimensions were power distance, small/large; collectivism vs. individualism; femininity vs. masculinity; uncertainty avoidance, weak/strong; long-term orientation vs. short-term orientation (1994, 240), but later he added a sixth dimension, indulgence vs. restraint, in the third edition of *Cultures and Organizations* that he co-authored with Gert Jan Hofstede and Michael Minkov in 2010 (see also The Hofstede Centre n.d., "National Culture"). Knowing how the participants value these dimensions helps understand one another's positions.

Power Distance

The first of these considerations is the power distance, which explains the extent to which a community accepts and endorses authoritative power differences and the status of privilege. How comfortable is the individual at challenging authority when there is a perceived injustice?

First, we looked at the classroom and then at the interactions with the tribe and community. In a traditional academic environment, professors are seen as experts who impact students' knowledge. However, in this case, faculty came into the process having the same base knowledge about the history and culture of the Pawnee Tribe. We saw our role as facilitators and arbitrators who helped establish a positive cross-cultural rapport with the tribe. Therefore, new knowledge acquired through the exploration of academic readings and personal interactions (interviews, surveys, and participation in cultural events) with the tribe was examined and validated with group consensus as our collective findings surfaced.

Collectivism vs. Individualism

The PDM framework embraces the iterative design process that involves creative action with critical analysis and then consensus. One important aspect is for all the participants to become aware of the “self” while participating but to engage in a collaborative way on the collective action. Deconstruction of traditional academic hierarchical pedagogy forms of distributing knowledge was necessary to support the PDM creative process.

Femininity vs. Masculinity

Gender relations do have a major influence on cross-cultural affairs. According to the Plains Anthropological Society journal, the Pawnee Tribe was a matriarchal society, but in our interactions, we observed that both genders had equally active roles with different perspectives, which many times facilitated our understanding of the building needs and the specifics of the use of space.

Uncertainty Avoidance

The art of making and creating needs time and curiosity to explore. When working within practical or professional work scenarios, there are elements of unpredictability; not everything can be anticipated or planned for. This is when flexibility and resilience are needed to manage the unforeseen setbacks. Students struggled with these issues. Unlike academic projects, “real-world” projects often require changes to correct their course of direction in the unexplored “uncharted waters.” PDM takes more time and resources, as it follows a nonlinear path. Therefore, as new findings and decisions emerged through the participation and interactions, initial designs were challenged and continually reframed to accommodate new information. PDM does not dictate a specific design process or course of action, but it prioritizes an environment that allows for uncertainty to surface. This feeling of uncertainty frustrated some students who had been conditioned to have access from the beginning to quantitative and qualitative data to explore their design ideas.

The Pawnee Tribe sees themselves as a collective and in harmony with the universe. They position themselves as part of a broader ecosystem, starting with the belief that their ancestors are stars in heaven. Their concept of time is more in flow with the rhythms of life, so they are more inclined to live in the moment and not be bound by the artificial time restraints that Anglo-Saxon culture runs on.

Students’ decision-making process started by defining the problem and the tribe needs. To achieve this task, the class was asked to self-organize into smaller groups that would investigate a preselected list of case studies of Native American cultural centers across the nation. They were asked to investigate the main formal and spatial elements that characterize the buildings, create analytic diagrams, and make an educated guess regarding the impact of these findings on the design through the exploration of photos, plans, drawings, and Google Earth or other map materials. The idea behind these “Special Reports” was to start comparing their findings across the studio to recognize if there were emerging patterns or themes that are common among Native Americans that could be written into the prototype design guidelines. Making the formal entry be from the east as a connection to the Morning Star and symbolic of new beginnings, for instance, emerged as a crucial organizing element in many of the case studies. Parallel to this exercise, they were asked to read a list of papers and books that dealt with the history and contemporary issues specifically about

Native American art and the Pawnee Tribe. All students had direct access to all the stakeholders during this process.

Long-Term Orientation vs. Short-Term Orientation

Time orientation is different across the world. Working on PDM and dealing with a different conception of time frames could create a challenging environment. Aside from our previous observations of tribal notions of time, real-life problems do not follow an academic semester. Managing and coordinating with different organizations, community partners, faculty, and students within a PDM framework created an extra workload that needed to be considered, as well as the need to embrace a more serendipitous time frame.

The author further subcategorized the long vs. short orientation to a “being vs. doing” dimension. How a culture fits within their natural and socially constructed environment reflects their attitude toward the being or doing dimension. The philosophy or aspiration to “conquer” their environment by changing its nature expresses the doing dimension, while wanting to “flow” with its rhythms embodies the being dimension. This is at the root of the resulting physical environment morphology. Around the world, millennia-old Indigenous groups have exhibited a thriving symbiosis with nature. Their knowledge of local context informs their ingenuity and resourcefulness. The Pawnees have a strong connection to the land and a reverence for Mother Earth and her natural flows. Students who understood the difference between these two and operated with the “flow” took on the challenge of understanding the traditional roots of the tribe to come up with innovative solutions that combined traditional knowledge with modern designs. To Native Americans, the circle has been an important symbol that represents the sun, the moon, seasons, and life-to-death cycles. Many students attempted to translate the meaning and symbolism that the tribe attributes to sacred geometry such as the circle by proposing contemporary adaptations.

Indulgence vs. Restraint

The last cultural dimension deals with the way society encourages the pursuit of pleasure or indulgence. What is considered particularly shameful or selfish? Several reasons, including the lack of time, prevented us from investigating this cultural dimension, so we will not address it here.

CONCLUSIONS

The PDM turned out to be the proper pedagogic method for students to become more actively engaged in defining their own learning experience and more present throughout the design process. The selected PDM group produced consistently critical knowledge that the group at large benefited from. Moreover, students quickly incorporated the knowledge they helped uncover. These same students demonstrated a willingness to participate in the extracurricular activities offered sporadically throughout their interactions with the Pawnee Tribe, such as honor dances and other cultural activities. The PDM opened up more activities for students to learn from beyond the typical classroom setting and structure by engaging and challenging students with different levels of participatory activities and in role-changing scenarios where they were responsible for the dissemination of reliable information in a sort of collaborative teaching. The faculty role shifted at points to support and facilitate those interactions. The PDM was a valuable platform to help uncover the

critical details that influenced the design and allowed the designers to showcase their uniqueness within this subculture by celebrating their differences.

In my recent experience with PDM, we learned to take our students' points of view into consideration and to transform the traditional academic hierarchy by adopting, in many instances, a more even distribution of power. Students are motivated when they are involved in the course design and development, as well as in the interplay of seeing themselves as true project collaborators. The divergent backgrounds of all the participants brought a richness and depth to the discussions that contributed to a successful outcome. In contrast to the one-sided academic approach, our tactics needed to keep a level of fluidity to accommodate the dynamics raised by the different stakeholders involved and the need to adapt to developing situations, which were ever changing. In retrospect, it would have been worthwhile to dedicate an entire academic year to the experiment rather than the time dictated by stringent (and perhaps outdated) academic calendars.

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