

Arch 498H

Syllabus Outline - Amerindian Architecture (3 cr)

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Thousands of years of occupancy on their lands taught tribal peoples the sacred landscapes for which they were responsible and gradually the structure of ceremonial reality became clear. It was not what people believed to be true that was important but what they experienced as true. Hence revelation was seen as a continuous process of adjustment to the natural surroundings and not as a specific message valid for all times and places.

Vine Deloria



INTRODUCTION

By understanding something of the intent of Amerindian architectures we can become aware of a connection and understanding of place and land that is original with the American landscape. This understanding can bring an awareness of how land and place can have a intentional relationship.

Course discussion will focus on mythic connections to the building of Amerindian architecture. Amerindian architecture is often cosmogonic, that is it re-creates the world through the act of architectural crafting. Being cosmogonic, elements of Amerindian architecture often have direct correspondences to the mythic world. For example, the easterly orientation of many Amerindian dwellings, like those of the Navajo and Natchez intentionally recognize the sun as a culturally significant appearance every morning. The dome of a Algonquin wigwam mimics the dome of the sky. Certain rituals reveal the smoke hole to be a passage to upper spirit worlds and what is below the floor to be an underworld. To obtain reeds for the winter mats of a Kickapoo dwelling tobacco is offered to the snake that guards the reeds. In Navajo architecture, the pole or poles at the entry of the hogan are the Earth Worlds legs, and are personified as women. From Earth Woman and Mountain Woman come building materials and from Water Woman come the food and sustenance by which the inhabitants of the hogan thrive.

These mythic correspondences between architectural elements and materials make it clear that a thing built, this dwelling, is simply an extension of the world. To craft a dwelling in this context is to establish a relationship to the world.