

Chris Cornelius on embedding indigenous thinking into architecture (Part 1)

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SPEAKERS

Chris Cornelius, Olga Stella

Olga Stella 00:06

I'm Olga Stella, the executive director of Design Core Detroit and the Vice President for Strategy and Communications at the College for Creative Studies. Thank you for joining us for Season Three of the Detroit City of Design podcast. As stewards of Detroit's UNESCO city of design designation, we aim to raise your awareness of how design can create conditions for better quality of life, and economic opportunity for all. In Season Three, we will hear from thought leaders who view our world through a lens of empathy, and applying design thinking to address some of our world's most pressing issues.

Olga Stella 00:49

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Olga Stella 01:17

I'm here today with Chris Cornelius, associate professor of architecture at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, and currently the Louis Kahn Visiting Professor of architecture at Yale. Chris is a citizen of the United Nation of Wisconsin, and focuses his research and practice on the architectural translation of culture. In particular, Native American culture. He is the founding principle of Studio Indigenous, a design and consulting practice serving Native American clients that got its start with Antoine Predock on the Indian community school of Milwaukee, which won the AIA Design Excellence Award from the committee of architecture for education. Chris was among a group of indigenous architects who represented Canada and its 2018 Venice architecture Biennale. Our conversation with Chris will take place over two parts. In this first part, we will learn about indigenous architecture and how to incorporate indigenous thinking into projects. We're recording this podcast on the traditional contemporary and ancestral homelands of the Anishinaabe a council of three fires, the Ojibwe, the Ottawa, and Potawatomi. Along with their neighbors, the Seneca, Delaware, Fox, Shawnee loops Miami and Wyandotte, who maintained and continue to preserve lifeways along Detroit's riverbanks

and throughout the Great Lakes region. Through signing the Treaty of Detroit in 1807, Anishinaabe tribes ceded the land now occupied by the city we stand on. We recognize Michigan is home to 12 federally recognized tribes who continue to steward this land, in remembrance of their ancestors and thinking of future generations. Chris, we're really honored to have you on the podcast today and to help our listeners, you know, continue to deepen their understanding about what it means to for design to be a transformative agent, and to work in an inclusive way to support community goals, community aims. And so I would love to just talk to you a little bit more about your own work as an indigenous architect and professor. And if you could maybe tell our audience a little bit more about your practice of architecture and studio indigenous.

Chris Cornelius 03:31

Sure, I'm Chris Cornelius. I'm a citizen of the United Nation of Wisconsin. I'm Associate Professor of architecture at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee and principal studio indigenous. And so I started the practice in 2003, when I was asked to be a collaborating designer on the Indian community school of Milwaukee with Antoine Predock. At the time, I was living in Charlottesville, Virginia, I went to graduate school at the University of Virginia, and I'd worked there for four years after graduate school. And it was at that time when I really started to realize that there kind of had to be a better way of doing architecture for Native people. How could I make the culture experiential? You know, for me, it's a thing that architecture can do that is to make things experiential, whether they're spatial or material, they can allow people to tell stories about the culture. And I think that there for me, I see them buildings that is an architecture as cultural artifacts, I think that they are the contemporary artifacts of our culture. And so at that time, I started to develop this idea that I wasn't going to make buildings or structures that looked like animals, or, or just regular buildings that had iconography applied to them. I think either of those things don't particularly indigenize architecture. I think that again, that has to be sort of experiential And I think that we can make it spatial. And so I started the practice to to serve indigenous clients, and I exclusively wanted to be able to do that, and to put forward the culture and in a contemporary way, and to examine how was I going to do that, you know, as a as a designer, and to begin to think about how, what are the sort of ways that we should be experiencing that culture? And what role can architecture actually play in it as an artifact of that culture?

Olga Stella 05:33

So what does it mean to draw from native perspectives in architecture, and maybe if you can talk a little bit about the philosophy, the way that you work and, and even give us the context of, you know, the school project, you were just referencing, or some of your other some of your other projects?

Chris Cornelius 05:51

For me, it's a architecture for indigenous people is about translation, and how do we translate the culture through architecture, it's not just about representation, it's not like about symbolism, and this equals that, and our culture has really never completely been like that. There's a kind of wonderful and ambiguity that exists in indigenous culture. And what I mean by that is that, because the culture is conveyed through stories, as a primary means, it's up to the individual who's listening to interpret the story in the way that they think it should be interpreted, meaning, the cultural lessons, the cultural values are there for people to understand, and it's so it's not like do this or don't do that, or we shouldn't be doing this, or we shouldn't be doing that. It's more about you hear stories about perhaps

people that have done things or, and in my work, I like to use the trickster, and the trickster is a character in stories that is there to teach us about our own sort of human weaknesses, and vulnerabilities and excesses, and things like that. So I think that architecture can have that kind of role. That is to say that, if it's not a sort of symbol, meaning like, if it's not a building that looks like a turtle, what is it about the turtle? Those are the things that I'm interested in. So like, what is it about the turtle? Is it a material expression? Is it a spatial expression? Is it some other lesson that we can learn from these non human factors. And so when we were working on the unique Community School of Milwaukee, we started by identifying cultural values because we were designing a school that wasn't for one specific tribe, it was for all 11 tribes of Wisconsin. And those 11 tribes are from five major cultural groupings. And while they had cultural values that they shared, there were some distinct differences. For instance, like an animal, like the muskrat might show up in a creation story, or it might show up in a clan structure, or it might show up in some other stories that so the same animal while it has value because we're all Eastern woodland tribes, its specific role in the tribe is slightly different. So we didn't try to do things where we were so specific. And so for me, that was really interesting because it was one it was challenging, but two it was it allowed a level of sort of freedom, creative freedom, to begin to think of things a little bit more abstractly, to begin to think about how people were going to understand the culture through the building, how could we begin to convey that culture? How would we begin to translate that? So the ways that we started to work where we listed all these cultural values, and then we created images that went along with them kind of abstract images, they weren't really illustrations of things, and cultural value, so things like burrowing and dance and drum and the resonance of the music of migration patterns wind patterns. We ended up with, like 30 some odd cultural values that we created these visuals for, we call them the laminates because they, we printed them on transparency, we presented them to the community, we talked about each of those cultural values. We didn't specifically talk about how we were going to translate that into the architecture that started to happen when we started to layer these things together. And that's why we call them the laminates because we put them together and then we started to make design decisions based on them. So for instance, one other thing we also did was we stripped away all of the institutional language that goes along with the school. So for instance, we never called the place that they eat the cafeteria. The school has been open for 14 years, they still haven't they don't call it the cafeteria. We call it feast, we call the theater drum. And so we started to develop these titles and qualities early on in the project. And so when we put these laminates together, they started to answer questions for us as designers. What kind of materials will be put in, what were you sitting on? What were you touching? All of those things were coming from from those laminates. And so I like to work in a way that is trying to find those more abstract thoughts, the bigger sort of cultural thoughts, and how do I translate them as, as a designer, I think that that opens the door for interpretation. If you use a symbol in this building as a turtle, then you walk inside and you wonder, where's the rest of the turtle? And so that sort of connection to the culture is, is lost. And if we started to think about how we thought about space, how light is coming in, how much what materials are we selecting? What are you touching? What do you see, all of those things were things that we started to really think about. And so it's in that project that I really started to work through these ideas. And I had the wonderful experience of working with Antoine Predock, who's an established world renowned architect, and during that time, he won the AIA gold medal. And just learning from him was just learning the discipline of architecture, how do you execute projects of that scale, and of that sort of importance was really an important part of my sort of maturation as a designer. So I was very fortunate, I think, to have that experience. I was only three years out of graduate school when I got that project,

and I established my practice. But it's really in that way that I'm looking for, what are the bigger stories that are that I want to tell with a project? Are those specific stories that are tied to the specific cultures? Are they stories about nature? Are they stories about landscape, those, those are the kinds of things in the ways that our work, I think that the roles of like program and how things go together, those are sort of almost formulas that you can kind of figure out like, what what spaces should be adjacent to each other? And how does the building function, like, of course, those things are gonna going to happen. But I'm trying to trying to tell these bigger stories in the in the projects. And and because I think that for me, that's a way to perpetuate the culture to show that this as a contemporary artifact is tied to the culture, and that people can begin to see themselves in the architecture, because they understand those stories, and they resonate with those stories. That's that's kind of what I'm trying to do. With each project, I tried to figure out what what that sort of story is, I learned early on, it's in, especially during my graduate education, where I was working on translating my own tribes creation story into a cultural center. That one building or one project cannot fully encapsulate the culture, the culture is way too complex to be able to do that. So we have to kind of pick and choose what parts of the culture we want to, we want to want people to learn and understand and know about whether it's their culture, or their examining other cultures, or visitors are coming to learn more about indigenous culture.

Olga Stella 13:03

It's a different way of thinking about nature, that it's this idea that, you know, nature is me, not nature is mine. And so how does that express itself? You know, physically through the projects that you've worked on, or, or as people start to think about that concept, you know, nature is me, how does that express itself physically in architecture?

Chris Cornelius 13:27

Well, I'm really trying to tap into the idea, like, I think, when we, when I talk about indigenous architecture, I think I'm talking about indigeneity. As a whole, it's hard to separate like architecture out from saying, right, like, we didn't separate politics, and religion and agriculture, right, you know, commerce, and all of that was part of our culture. So, for me, it's the idea of relationality, like, really like how indigenous people see the world, that we are related to all living things, and we see stones as living things we see, you know, we see geology as a living thing, the understanding that, and knowing that it is a thing that changes over time, it's just long periods of time. And so we haven't talked about the role of buildings in that relationality. And I, I'm advocating for us to think about buildings as if we were related to them. If we thought about buildings, as if we were related to them, we would think about them very differently. And so as a designer, I think about the responsibility of putting a built thing into the environment. What are the materials that I'm using? Where do those materials come from? What will happen to them 100 years from now, will this building still be here? Am I you know, how can I specify materials that are won't end up in the landfill? Or can be recycled in an ideal situation? It's hard to do that one, you know, 100% of the time, but if I can think about that, I can begin to think about how it...how does it affect its other inhabitants? What if we, you know, we spend a lot of time as architects and designers like trying to keep birds off of buildings for instance, like there's like all kinds of products for for that... But what if our buildings were habitats? What if they were urban habitats? What if it was okay for something to nest in, in a project, if it found a project of mine as as a habitat, I would be delighted by that. Because then I'm being a good relative, I'm being a good relative to the, to the relatives that can't always fend for themselves in the world. I might get this statistic wrong, but I think

I'm probably right about it, buildings are the second number two killer of birds, behind natural predators, and most people don't realize that. So one of the reasons is because like a bird, when it's flying, when it flies into the window, it's actually seeing the reflection of the sky. And so it thinks that that's open air, and so it flies full speed at that, and ultimately, you know, might meet its end because of that. So if I started to rethink that, what if I thought about what it what the building was reflecting? Or was, how close am I to any kind of habitats in, you know, once when citing a building or beginning to think about that? So in that way, I'm trying to say, Okay, this building is a relative to these other non human relatives that I have. And also, you know, my non indigenous brothers and sisters, so people that use the building, the people that clean the building, the people that are making the materials that go into the building, not just installing it and constructing it. So I think that for me, it's thinking about that idea of relationality, that if we started thinking about buildings as being related to us, and that nature, as part of that is not just a resource or commodity for us to be using in making buildings or making architecture, which in my lectures, I talked about how architecture school, when we talk about the beginnings of architecture, we show this image of loJay's book, and it's, you know, about vitruvius, his beginnings of architecture, where trees were cut down to make this architecture. It's not that kind of relationship, where nature, we have dominion over nature in some way that we're actually stewards. Right. And I think that that's the case in both non urban situations, which the Indian community school is in very large sort of natural sight. And in natural urban situations, rather, in urban situations, we could see those cities as being living organisms, that they have systems of their own, they have rhythms, that there are still non human inhabitants of cities. And so if we began to think about how we were putting architecture into cities, how are we putting those things into those living beings, we can think about that as well. And for me, it's not just like, that's not just for indigenous people, it's just that we think about those things differently. And so I'm trying to share that. Right, right. So that things aren't categorized into different things like sustainability, or environmental responsibility, or whatever you want to call it, things aren't just for me, there aren't just called things and that's what you know, what I'm trying to advocate for is an indigenous architecture isn't just a thing, right? It's not a not a thing like that. It's a way of thinking.

Olga Stella 18:05

People like like love labels, right? You know, we're gonna put you in this little box, and you're gonna stay in this box. And, you know, so much of what you have been talking about, it really, really resonates especially in, in a city like Detroit, we 12 years ago, had a community wide planning effort called Detroit Future City. And the fundamental idea behind the effort was that we had all of this vacant land and vacant structures in our city, and there's so much need for our citizens in this idea that the land and the we could use our land to clean our air and water and, and to start to improve health outcomes and just the well being of our neighbors. And and I think just the the but then it's the how it's the how do you do that? You know, when you when we have that kind of idea, we then jump to well, it's green infrastructure is the solution, you know, you immediately jump to these very specific solutions, as opposed to maybe, you know, a more holistic way of looking at every single investment through a different lens of just a really relationality of exactly what you what you've said. I think it's hard for people, you know, I think it's hard for people to make that switch between very like object oriented solution making versus a relational thinking, do you have advice or thoughts about how to how do people start to develop that practice for themselves?

Chris Cornelius 19:37

So I think that, you know, is a big, philosophical question and so, when, for me, when faced with that particular question, I want to go to the most sort of radical idea. I want because I because it doesn't make sense for us to make tiny baby steps here, right? It doesn't make sense for us to like, make a even to make a 10 year policy. Whatever it is. So here's what I would say, I would say these vacant lands should be ceded back to the people that were indigenous to the land. Let's say you took all of these vacant properties and you ceded the land back and said, Okay, this land is now yours. And it is put into federal trust, like every other sort of thing. And you have stewardship of that. And it's not in a way to like, raise political or economic power, it's really to say, okay, you understand how this land is, and it was intended to be taken care of. So that's the most radical version, right is to say, Okay, let's give this back to the indigenous people that were part of that land. The other slightly less radical, but maybe more radical is to incorporate indigenous thinkers into the making of policy, politics, and other sorts of things that go along with it. Meaning like indigenous architects, indigenous planners, indigenous scientists, botanists, anthropologists, historians, artists, because if you have an indigenous point of view, in that mix, you will ultimately be able to understand what land stewardship really is. And for us, as indigenous people, it's hard sometimes for us to explain these larger concepts like relationality, right? It's, we're not trying to look for the formula to reclaim that land or to improve it. But what we are trying to do is to begin to understand and find the things that are genetically part of us, right? They're, they're genetically encoded in us. So we have the hardware, and we need to give the software to others, right? Meaning like, we have to help reprogram some of the ways that we think about land. And I think we can do that. Because we could begin to think and talk about how what are the best ways to deal with Detroit as a place as a thing that exists? It's not to say that the thing would we're not looking to like return it to some wild, natural frontier, right? And

Chris Cornelius 22:04

that's a that's a big misconception of this country, before Europeans came that there was some sort of wild weirdness going on. No, it was a highly managed place. There was architecture here. There were cities here, there were there was commerce here, there was, you know, there was industry here, basically, there were all kinds of things going on here. And what I'm advocating for is, what if we started to think about that? And what if we stopped to perhaps see these disciplinary silos of planner, architect, historian, scientist? What if we all got at the table and said, okay, here's how we would be thinking about it. So for instance, even for me, like, Okay, I'm Oneida. I'm from Wisconsin, my indigenous people, indigenous to New York State. But if I came into that situation, I could be able to translate that for the people that were indigenous to that area to begin to think about that. I think we're at a time in 2021, where there are more indigenous people in more disciplines, than there ever has been, right? There's more in architecture, more in urban planning, and law and medicine, in science, in history. That it's time for us to be able to have a seat at the table, I think Canada's way ahead of this, to be honest, ahead of the US in this regard, because they do take these things seriously. Canadians don't think that they do, but you know, I always tell my Canadian friends, you don't really know how good you have it. But but I think it's time for us to begin to do that right for for people that are in positions of power to begin to, to find indigenous thinkers to help with that. So the most radical version is to say, oh, we're gonna give the land back. The least radical and more, I think best plan is to have indigenous thinkers thinking about it, right to begin to think about. So even in like California, where they have the problem with wildfires, it's not to say that there weren't wildfires 10,000 years ago, indigenous

people knew how to deal with it right, then the forests were managed in a particular way. And if most of these forests are in federal land, why aren't indigenous people writing the policies for stewardship of these forests? Right, like, why aren't you going back to indigenous thinking about the land and changing that? So that's another thing that that, you know, for me, I think that I want to advocate for and all of this is, is what I would term decolonization. Because it's colonization that has like, severed this connection between indigenous people and the land. Colonization is a big sort of apparatus and system. And if we begin to dismantle that system, by trying to reconnect indigenous people with the land and landscapes and environments that they came from, we we sort of like get the virus out of the hardware, right? We get the virus out of the system, and we're able to kind of, to, to heal that system and to make it better. And so I think that you know, places in cities like Detroit, if you incorporated more indigenous people, thinkers, scholars into the conversations, then then we're starting to get somewhere, right? It's not just like finding policies and doing things and funding projects. It's like how do we how do we get that sort of thinking about the land back?

Olga Stella 25:26

Thank you for listening to part one of our two part discussion with Chris Cornelius about indigeneity and architecture. Please tune in next time for part two of the conversation, which will tackle questions of how to decolonize education and the practice of design.

Olga Stella 26:02

This has been the Detroit City of Design podcast. If you like what you just heard, please share this episode on social media via email or by any other means. For more information on Design Core Detroit, visit designcore.org or search the handle at [designcoredet](https://twitter.com/designcoredet). Keep up with the show by subscribing for free in your favorite podcast app. Just search Detroit City of Design and we hope you will join us in Detroit for Detroit month of design this September. The Detroit City of Design podcast is produced by Jessica Malouf of Design Core Detroit and edited by Robin Kinnie of Motor City Woman studios music by Kaleb Waterman courtesy of Assemble Sound. This podcast is a product of Design Core Detroit, a part of the College for Creative Studies in Detroit, Michigan.