



# **NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURAL DESIGN ELEMENTS FOR TRIBAL JUSTICE FACILITIES**

## ***I. CULTURAL DESIGN ELEMENTS TO CONSIDER FOR TRIBAL FACILITIES***

Culture is the wisdom, traditions, and transmitted values that bind people together from one generation to the next. Programs that are solely modeled on Western theories may not work for individuals whose cultures differ from Western outlooks. Many Tribal communities traditionally have seen the proper response to crime as healing which leads to the successful return of reentrant to the community. It is important that these traditions and values be reflected within the structural environments that house programs and service providers who work with tribal justice system involved individuals.

When planning and designing a new structure, or an addition to an existing one, cultural elements are an important aspect of conceptualization. There is some evidence-based information confirming that interior environments may improve individual attitudes and behaviors. For this reason, paying attention to both exterior and interior elements can play an important role for tribal justice system providers when working with incarcerated or court-involved individuals. Interior environments that provide an abundance of natural light through windows, doors or skylights is a good example of structural choices that can

### **CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS:**

*B.J. JONES, DIRECTOR, TRIBAL JUDICIAL INSTITUTE, UND SCHOOL OF LAW*

*MICHELLE RIVARD PARKS, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR, TRIBAL JUDICIAL INSTITUTE, UND SCHOOL OF LAW*

*PETER KRASNOW, FAIA, ARCHITECT*

*DANIEL RYAN, ATTORNEY*

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support an environment conducive to the intended use of the space. In addition, the use of normative building materials and colors are very important to the overall environment created within the space.

Collaborations that utilize federal, tribal, state, and local partners to design facilities that integrate programs integrating adversarial and culturally relevant modalities are recommended. Designing facilities for programs that reflect the criminal response process from custody through eventual re-entry into the community is essential. As part of these programs criminal justice facility planners should consider and be mindful of the benefits of including cultural elements into the design process for the project. In the next section, we will explore the various ways that cultural elements might be considered and included in the design process.

## **II. DEMONSTRATING AN APPRECIATION FOR NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURE IN THE DESIGN PROCESS**

Native American culture can be incorporated into the design process in several ways, namely:

- Native American Imagery
  - Animals
  - Shapes and specific imagery
  - Textiles, artifacts and colors
- Traditional and Restorative Justice

## **A. NATIVE AMERICAN IMAGERY**

### **i. NATURE AND ANIMALS**

Incorporation of cultural images relating to animals and nature can produce culturally dynamic environments. Whether it is nature elements such as water, greenery, animals that reflect spirituality, origin stories and important aspects of tribal ways of life, these elements can be crucial to conceptualizing a structure that reflects the culture of the tribe and even more importantly provides an environment that supports changes in behaviors and healing. These cultural elements may be incorporated into the interior or exterior design through artwork, in the names assigned to the various rooms within a building or even the shape of the overall structure. Nature and animals in particular are of critical importance to consider as they often represent important cultural values and traditions such as connections to the world and protection for tribal community members.



Eagle: a cultural symbol often representing protection for tribal community members..



Turtle: For some tribes the turtle represents mother earth and may signify health and wellness.



Bear: For some tribal cultures the bear signifies leadership, strength and courage.

## ii. SHAPES AND SPECIFIC IMAGERY

There are many shapes that may be of significance in Native American culture, and one of the most significant shapes is the circle. The circle may signify important cultural values such equality, respect, family ties and protection and for some tribes the circle is viewed as a foundation for life itself. Circles can be incorporated into conceptual building designs to reflect these important cultural values and beliefs. Many buildings incorporate circles as a structural element while others may incorporate circles as interior design elements.

However, the circle is not the only shape to consider. For example, rectangles may be of significance to tribes if that shape reflects upon historical building designs (i.e. tribes that historically utilized longhouses for dwellings or communal gathering spaces). When beginning the design process, it is important to consider how shapes are reflected in the customs and traditions of the tribe so that those shapes can ultimately be incorporated into the final exterior and/or interior design.

Beyond exterior or interior design elements, it is also important to consider that shapes can be reflective of spiritual or cultural symbols. For example, many tribes embrace the circular medicine wheel as essential to understanding the cultural significance of the four directions and the teachings of the four directions. The Medicine Wheel has a different significance for many Tribes. Each of the Four Directions (East, South, West and North) is typically represented by a distinctive color, such as

black, red, yellow, and white, which to many Tribes represent the colors of the human race. The directions can also represent stages of life, seasons of the year, aspects of life or elements of nature. There are many different lessons and teachings related to the medicine wheel; however, the medicine wheel is always represented in a circular shape as all things are connected, there is no beginning or ending to any *concept*. Every component is divided equally in four sections. Balance is the key, and every element must be represented equally.



*medicine wheel light fixture*



*medicine wheel inlay in flooring and on wall*

## iii. TEXTILES, ARTIFACTS and COLORS

Textiles and artifacts may serve as an excellent source of inspiration for exterior and interior design elements that reflect culture of the tribe. Different artifacts and

textiles are significant to different tribes. An important aspect of culturally relevant designs is to consider how textiles and artifacts represent a community. Examples to consider:

- Drums
- Blankets, Tapestries and Star quilts
- Baskets
- Pottery
- Beadwork

Color may also be of great significance to native cultures. For example, for the Navajo people, the colors black, white, blue and yellow have connections to culture and spirituality representing the four sacred mountains.<sup>1</sup> For tribes such as the Lakota the colors red, white, black and yellow are commonly reflected in the medicine wheel.<sup>2</sup> When conceptualizing a design, colors that are of particular significance to a tribal community is an important consideration.

## **B. TRADITIONAL AND RESTORATIVE JUSTICE CONSIDERATIONS**

Many tribal justice systems incorporate restorative practices into tribal courts, detention programs and reentry programs with a primary goal of helping incarcerated community members successfully transition back to their communities and families. Programs that focus on substance use disorder and domestic violence counseling are among the types of critical programming that many tribes are incorporating into tribal justice systems as a means to

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.discovernavajo.com/navajo-culture.aspx>

modify negative behaviors while restoring a person's dignity and purpose. Additionally, reentry programs and services that help to transition individuals from time spent in detention to their communities and families are essential to reducing recidivism. It is important that these types of services and programs be paid particular attention when designing tribal facilities. When approaching design be sure to consider how the space will be used by the various programs and adapt the shape and size of the designated spaces accordingly. The BJA has an excellent guide for Tribes on tribal reentry projects that may prove helpful.

<https://nationalreentryresourcecenter.org/sites/default/files/inline-files/culturalResponsiveEvalBrief.pdf>

## **III. EXAMPLES OF CULTURAL ELEMENTS IN CONCEPTUAL DESIGNS**

*shapes and colors used for exterior and interior*



*shapes used in exterior design reflects image consistent with star quilt*

<sup>2</sup> <http://aktalakota.stjo.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=8593>



*building design representing Eagle*

