A Case Study on Decolonizing
the Design Process and Permit Application
at the 1640 Riverside Road Housing Site

Summary

This study investigates changing relationships and ways of knowing during the architecture and landscape architecture design process in the context of designing supportive housing that is reflective of the local cultural landscape. Our research team - Architects Ron Hart and Kim Cooper, Landscape Architecets Alyssa Semczyszyn and Kristina Zalite, and Cultural Coordinator Cory Douglas (Sḵwxwú7mesh First Nation) - live/work on the unceded lands of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish), and səlilwətaɬ (Tsleil-Waututh) peoples. The purpose of this study is to reflect on our team’s design process and, perhaps more importantly, what we missed during the development permit process, and how we can do better towards an anti-colonial design process.

The case study site is a 0.5-hectare parcel owned by British Columbia Housing Management Commission (BC Housing). The land is on unceded Matsqui and Semá:th (Sumas) First Nations land, part of the larger Stó:lō Nation, and land of Halq'éméylem-speaking people located in the Coast Salish Territory of British Columbia. The site is surrounded by industrial and commercial development. It is adjacent to a regularly-inundated floodplain and channelized watercourse that connects to the Səl̓təslehōq’ (Sand Drifting) or Marshall Lonzo Creek natural watercourse, eventually connecting to the Fraser River.

The study uses grounded theory and relational research methods to illuminate ideas shared between the project designers, community members, and Host Nations. A literature review outlines concepts of decolonizing, relationality, and inclusion of local culture – the latter to be practiced only by those who hold rights. Findings show that cultural advisory services were delivered through a continuous cultural engagement which created a sense of heightened creativity, a continuum of knowledge coordination, and a compounding of values. Findings also show that building relations in the design team established trust and heightened creativity. The design team added multiple placeholders for programming the site with imagined designs to tell stories of local ethnobotanical and First Nation brothers and sisters animal spirits, and locations on site for local resident creative and cultural practices.

The case study revealed ways in which the design process fell short of decolonizing approaches. The design lacks new language across all scales (site specific using Halq'éméylem language and the larger cultural and biophysical context); voices of artists, elders, youth Host Nation; values-based language; and certainly ways of decolonizing that we have not yet considered. The research process revealed a gap in the capacity training of and between the consultant team, client, and Host Nation. Capacity, anti-colonial, and anti-racism training could help the development of all parties to become better learning organizations to make the transition from individual to organizational decolonizing practices.

The study concludes by outlining possible future research that investigates decolonizing consultant design principles, development industry process & language, and additional relationality between consultants and the development industry. As we conclude this report, we continue the case study research to find a more decolonized graphic language and additional capacity training (see Flow Chart graphic page 9). We look forward to reporting back on this in mid-2024. We are grateful to the Landscape Architecture Canada Foundation and Vancity Community Transformations for providing an opportunity for our team to do this research.
A Case Study on Decolonizing the Design Process and Permit Application at the 1640 Riverside Road Housing Site

Introduction

This study investigates changing relationships and ways of knowing during the architecture and landscape architecture design process in the context of designing supportive housing that is reflective of the local cultural landscape. Our team searched for ways to improve our design process with the design goal to provide excellent housing infrastructure, and to create a healthy and culturally supportive space for all residents.

The purpose of this study is to reflect on our team’s design process and, perhaps more importantly, what we missed during the development permit process, and how we can do better towards an anti-colonial design. We are looking to develop more inclusive, equitable, and creative strategies for our design work.

Research / Design Team

Our research team includes the following project consultants who live/work on the unceded lands of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish), and səl̓ilwətaɬ (Tsleil-Waututh) peoples. Kristina Zālīte (Senior Landscape Architect, Prospect & Refuge Landscape Architects) is of Latvian, Norwegian, and English lineage; Cory Douglas (Principal, Modern Formline Design) is Sḵwx̱wú7mesh First Nation member with Haida and Tsimshian ancestry; Alyssa Semczyszyn (Principal, Prospect & Refuge Landscape Architects) is of mixed European ancestry including Ukrainian, French and Highland Scot; Kim Cooper (Senior Architect, Ron Hart Architect); and Ron Hart (Principal, Ron Hart Architect) is mixed European ancestry.

We are grateful to the Landscape Architecture Canada Foundation and Vancity Community Transformations for providing an opportunity for our team to do this research. We are grateful to BC Housing in their willingness to investigate their own institutional change and to provide in-kind support. This article is one portion of our ongoing personal and organizational investigations and reckoning about our colonial pasts.

Site Context

British Columbia Housing Management Commission (BC Housing) is in the process of developing a 0.5-hectare housing site on Matsqui and Semá:th (Sumas) First Nations land. The Matsqui and Semá:th (Sumas) First Nations are part of the larger Stó:lō Nation, and land of Halq’eméylem-speaking people located in the Central Fraser Valley region and in the Coast Salish Territory of British Columbia. The site is on unceded (stolen) lands.

The project address is 1640 Riverside Road, Abbotsford, British Columbia. At the time that this report is being prepared the project is in the detailed design stage, moving towards Building Permit submission to the City of Abbotsford planners for their approval to proceed with construction documentation.

The site is heavily developed and is surrounded by railroad tracks, Trans-Canada highway, large commercial development, industry, and nearby residences. It is immediately adjacent to a floodplain and is regularly inundated. The uniqueness of this project is that it is a very small site with very high user needs and a restricted operational and
maintenance budget. The consultants have worked on BC Housing projects in the past and are familiar with the operation constraints and typical budgets.

The design is for a 5-storey housing facility that covers 31% of the site. The landscape design includes spaces for circulation, gathering, ceremony, indigenous plant gardens, and carving huts. The site includes a setback protected environmental area with a non-piped, channelized watercourse that connects to the Se:tslehôq’ (Sand Drifting) or Marshall Lonzo Creek, natural watercourse. Lonzo Creek feeds into the Stó:lotl (Little Creek) or Sumas River and eventually the Fraser River (Sumas First Nation website & Stó:lotl Research and Resource Management Centre).

A Case Study Approach

Research Methods: This paper uses case study methodology outlined in Landscape Architecture Research: Inquiry, Strategy, Design (Deming & Swaffield, 2011) and Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods (Wilson, 2008). The notion of ‘Research as Ceremony’ was a guiding principle during both research and design practices. While reading Wilson’s pivotal book during the rezoning/development permit process, I (Kristina) was asking myself what ‘design as ceremony’ could look like during our Riverside development permit design process.

The methods include (1) a review of literature about decolonizing practices and (2) Grounded Theory method of finding patterns in expression/language/meaning of unstructured interviews, recorded discussions, and group talk-story conversations. We followed the guiding principles of creating relationships through the research life cycle, and to let ideas develop through the formation of relationships (Quinless, 2022; Wilson, 2008). We tried to maintain a research process that was equally important as the outcome of the research.

Partner and Community Conversations: During the design and research process, our team consulted with community members, including Aliya Tajani, Project Manager at the BC Housing Development; Aleksander Petkov, Candace Lavallee, Hayden Kramp, and Kayden Bennett at the Cole Starnes and Riverside Shelter, Lookout Housing & Health Society Service Providers; Matsqui host nation Chief Alice McKay and Brenda Morgan; Sumas host nation Chief Dalton Silver and Councilor Chris Silver; Danilo Caron of Urban Systems Engineering; and Jennifer Cuthill of Lateral Agency.

Critical Decolonizing Concepts for Designers

Decolonizing as design professionals means knowing that the architectural and building industry have contributed towards the erasure of indigenous presence in our country. The field of landscape architecture studies and practice should aim to “understand not only the geopolitical power of landscape in systems of colonization, but also its underlying coloniality” (Dang, 2021, p.1005). For Tiffany Kaewen Dang, this means tackling the concept of land back through relearning approaches to the built environment which have been “naturalized through the practices of landscape professionals”, including development, conservation, management, and reclamation (2021, p.1011).

“Place-making and design have long been complicit in holding up colonial narratives of place. Colonial legacies are often celebrated … and the design of communities are often largely made by designers, architects, and developers of European ancestry, which means that only the Western worldview of place is represented.” (Sxwpilemaát Siyám (Chief Leanne Joe, Squamish Nation) and Raphael, Lily. 2022, p.136).

North American colonization brought the Doctrine of Discovery, providing legal rights to lands that were mistakenly deemed to be ‘discovered’ by white Christian immigrants; the notion that land is terra nullius, empty or unoccupied unless it was labored upon; and a spirit of conquest, hierarchy, land division & dominion (Rattray, 2020;
Decolonizing engagement can include embedding a values-based Standard of Care and stewardship practices into design processes (Caron, 2023; Desjarlais Jr, 2021; Morin, 2022) “Decolonizing the Design Process with Five Indigenous Land-Based Paradigms” invites designers to approach their process with humility and openness, to find a vision to help guide the design direction, to be guided by intuition, and to ask ourselves what gifts we can give to our community partners (Bailey, Black, & Coar, 2022). This standard of care may trickle down into how organizations are run and how meetings are conducted. This standard of care may include personal and organizational anti-racism training such as learning about systemic racism, implicit biases, and personal/collective/generational trauma. As professionals we can take small steps towards creating collaborative examples of how we can work together to make reparations on a small scale.

Another step in a decolonizing process can include activism against, and seeing alternatives to, the standard, Western ways of framing knowledge. Some new approaches to seeking knowledge may include loving, healing, replanting, retracing pathways of despair and trauma, developing indigenous economies, reorienting our reference points for knowledge, designing and engineering indigenous solutions, and more (Smith, 2021). Decolonizing the design process includes recognizing other designer’s skills, knowledge, and differences; and that we need visionaries as much as we need practical designers (Guenther, 2022). Design practitioners can change prevailing norms by learning the protocols and placenames of individual nations, and by spending time with elders and community members to learn the history and future community needs (G. Fahlgren, 2017).

Relationality is being acutely aware that “an Indigenous epistemology has systems of knowledge built upon relationships between things, rather than on the things themselves” (Wilson, 2008, p.74). Building relations includes looking for collective knowledge and transcending from ‘conflict’ to ‘paradox’, especially when there are different ways of seeing the world (O’Toole, 2023).

“If there is a movement underway that could have a profound effect, it would be the notion of relationality, and applying that and teaching that through architecture” (Della Costa, 2021).

Critical theory research paradigms such as feminist, race, and class theory consider researchers as inherently biased. Wilson takes this one step further and adds that a constructivist research paradigm sees a personal and meaningful interaction between the investigator and the subject as a key component of the research. Contrary to the standard case study methodology used in landscape architecture such as outlined in the seminal “Case Study Method for Landscape Architecture” (Francis, 2019), this research rejects the premise that researchers can be free of bias and that researchers can avoid subjectivity. Attempting to develop a world view of Relationality was also a strategy used throughout this research, which meant that forming bonds with the research and other researchers was prioritized over remaining objective and maintaining ownership over the knowledge that was sought.

Cultural Inclusion and indigenizing of projects should only be practiced by those who hold rights. As a team of mostly un-invited guest settlers, we look to our advisor and Host Nation members for practices of cultural inclusion. We support the resurgence of Indigenous knowledge, values, ways of being, and Etuaptmumk/Two-Eyed Seeing (Marshall, 2021; Sxwpilemaát & Raphael, 2022).
This inclusion has been called the ‘Transition Imaginary’, where, similar to Wakanda city in the Black Panther movie, indigenous futurism is imagined through symbols, fashion, architecture, and value systems (Dalla Costa, 2019 and 2023). For the Vancouver Mural Festival it means bolstering Indigenous visual culture through blanketing the City with Debra Sparrow’s xʷməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam) weaving murals. For Nalaine Morin, Tahltan Territory, Arrowblade Engineering Consulting Services, this means including Tahltan knowledge maps into the engineering design process, when they are deemed non-confidential (Morin, 2023). Cultural inclusion should never be limited to the design outcomes. Inclusion should affect the process.

For Colleen O’Toole, mixed-race Engineer, this means being agile and flexible during the design process and including indigenous science and language such as non-colonial place names (2023). Gerry Eckford’s has observed whilst working on landscape projects in Vancouver with indigenous participants that there is a greater sense of value given to health, such as with the garden as a place that provides food, medicine, and culture; the narrative and storytelling traditions, which inspired the formation of a central gathering space that had a powerful sense of place; and softer edges to the new building (Eckford, 2017. Pp. 5-6). Taking a critical step further, cultural inclusion in the design process should include hiring Indigenous community members to be part of the design team (Lam, 2022).

“If you look at the standard design process and not just the outcome: how many opportunities do we, as Indigenous designers, receive to lead projects? To respectfully and timely ‘consult’ with our elders? To use our language to define ‘programming’, activities, or spaces? Can you imagine a large-scale Indigenous project being designed and discussed in our language from start to finish? Concepts explained through our own interpretation in our language?” (Thomas, Griffith, Thomas, & Giesbrecht, 2019, p.32).

Furthermore, positive engagement can take direction from examples of Te Aranga Design Principles which embed Manu Whenua, or those with authority over land and natural resources, with Maori culture to impact the built environment, enabling all users to connect to and have a deeper sense of place (Maori Design Hub, n.d.).

**Findings**

We have chosen to present the research findings in the form of question-and-answer to spark other potential answers and viewpoints, and to demonstrate our continuous research inquiry.

**Question: What could we change in the development industry?**

**Answer: REFRAKE PROJECT PROCUREMENT (and find aligned values)**

BC Housing cued the consultant team for aligned values when they secured a contract for indigenous advisory services. The response by Cory Douglas and Ron Hart to reframe the project schedule was potentially the single most impactful action taken in our process of decolonizing. While the RFP allowed for a portion of fees for cultural engagement, Cory and RHA wove cultural advisory services through the entire design process. They created a project schedule that included cultural advisory services throughout the entire planning and design lifespan. In doing this, RHA was inviting a conversation to become continuous and iterative, where the consultants could touch base throughout the whole design process. This continuous cultural engagement allowed Cory Douglas to review design changes and revisions, to be available for phone calls, and to be an ongoing advocate for Indigenous inclusion during

“We want to deconstruct the RFP as a way to really value the design process”. (C. Douglas, personal communication, June 14, 2023).
necessary design revisions. Cory’s background in graphic, sculptural, and architectural design provided a critical backdrop for his project advisory and cultural coordination services.

Instead of engaging in a single, fragmented educational workshop or a meeting, Cory Douglas was continually consulting with our design team. This gave the project a sense of continued creativity, a continuum of knowledge coordination and a compounding of values. There was a reimagining of a project that is wealthy and healing, where “the creation of wealth is built on cultural knowing” (Sxwpilemaát & Raphael, 2022, p.97). Paralleling this engagement was the research literature review, which also allowed for additional time spent on learning about the site. I (Kristina) spent additional time documenting the cultural and biophysical attributes of the site as part of this research report, allowing for a better-informed site analysis.

In May 2022, the Canadian Architect Magazine describes how methods of procurement can be positioned to create wealth on local economies, and leaves us with the questions of, “Does the architectural firm hire a local Indigenous community member to be a part of the design team?” and, “How can non-Indigenous architects ally themselves with Indigenous architects in Canada in working to make the architecture, engineering, and design world a more supportive place for Indigenous and other BIPOC architects to grow their capabilities and careers?” (Lam et al, 2022, p.64). These questions were front and center during the project’s design process.

**Question: How can we steer good consultant coordination?**

**Answer: BUILD RELATIONS (and establish trust)**

This research project comes at a time where I (Kristina) had been experiencing overwhelming ‘urgency culture’ in my landscape architecture practice. Lengthening municipal processes cause clients to speed up drawing schedules and skip coordination processes. However, the Riverside project was an antidote to the feeling of prioritizing speedy deliverables over creative consultant coordination.

Cory Douglas brought his personal-self as well as his professional-self forward, giving our team cues to open sharing and trust building. This allowed us to work in an atmosphere of support, inclusion, and relationship-building. Being relational with one another was a measurement of the safety that we felt towards being creative and not being scared to make mistakes.

Another key proponents of relationship-building was Aliya Tejani, BC Housing Project Manager, who had a specific goal to create a trusting relationship where the designers felt comfortable being creative and thinking outside of the box. Although Aliya did not verbalize this goal during the design process, she revealed this later that she had this clear objective. She told us during this research study that when she saw some good energy between the designers, that she chose to give us the freedom to be creative and non-conforming.
These gestures of trust building and relationship building created a space where common interests were established and where creativity could flourish. Within the lens of Shawn Wilson’s Relationality (2008), our working relations could be described as egalitarian, inclusive and had the tone that we could disagree whilst not being disagreeable.

**Question: How can we design spaces for cultural inclusion?**

**Answer: Embed PLACEHOLDERS for imagined new futures**

Our project kicked off with Cory Douglas’s Art & Reconciliation Workshop, where he shared knowledge of Northwest Coast and Coast Salish cultural identifiers. Embedded in the workshop were teachings about protocols, storytelling as design process, and appropriate use of language. We learned to distinguish between Coast Salish and Haida design forms, and how design interventions can reinforce these forms. This workshop became the springboard for ideas such as curved walkways, a strong indoor-outdoor experience, and including visual/sensory experiences where residents can identify and feel pride in their culture and/or surroundings. Visual placeholders were added across scales, from embellishing the exterior facade with a woven homage to Coast Salish culture to surface materials with Coast Salish embossing. Because this design project is in its early stages of design, we included place markers for individual Host Nation artists, crafters, builders, and creatives to detail (and perhaps build) at a future date.

Our meeting with Matsqui host nation Chief Alice McKay and Councillor Brenda Morgan reminded us of the dire need for housing (personal communications, May 19, 2022). The Chief and Councillor helped our design team to identify significant values for the site, urging us to position ethnobotany and spirituality of animals at the core of the site design. Using ethnobotanical plant species could allow for hands-on relationships with the land and required a large, covered, outdoor plant-processing shelter which was included in the design. Specific plants and spirits of First Nation brothers and sister bears, dear and eagles were included as integrated design elements.

Our meeting with Sumas host nation Chief Dalton Silver and Councillor Christopher Silver acknowledged that this project would be housing some of the most vulnerable populations in the Abbotsford area (personal communications, April 11, 2023). The Chief and Councillor told us to advocate for more inclusion of indigenous design motifs, and to include the Skalauw (beaver), wolves which transform into humans, and maxwm (makum tea) and tammasan (wild rhubarb). The design has placeholders for indigenous motifs that can give the site an ability to tell stories to its visitors and residents.

Landscape Architect Alyssa Semejczyszyn recommended that rather than design a formal, separated veggie or healing garden, that this design could look towards the example of a First Nation food forest where medicinal and ethnobotanical plant species could co-exist throughout the entire site.

The team imagined the Riverside site as a place where residents themselves could express their creativity, where “every medium can become a cultural canvas to play on” (Douglas, 2023). For instance, in an outdoor covered space where residents could practice arts, crafts, processing plant materials, building, fixing things, etc. And a central outdoor meeting space could double as a place for ceremony, sweats, and a place where the many resident musicians could give concerts. And on an outdoor art wall where residents can show off their drawings/paintings/graphics. We received the expression of support from BC Housing, who would be looking for funding to include these cultural elements in the design.
Limitations

Question: What didn’t we do in this design process?

Answer: Include new language

Our team has not yet included new language in the design project. We learned through our research process that decolonizing should include language which introduces concepts of abundance (instead of scarcity), relationships and capacity building (instead of object-deliverables), natural infrastructure (instead of engineered infrastructure), and stewardship (instead of liability). Shifts in language can embrace people (instead of users), audience of focus (instead of target audience), co-creators (instead of beneficiaries), quality (instead of quantity), and approaches (instead of solutions) as ways to do allyship work in the design realm (Creative Reaction Lab, White Supremacy and Design oral presentation, November, 2020). We recommend that our clients shift their language focus to be inclusive of voices that represent artists, elders, and youth. We recommend that our project managers use language that sets the tone for different ways of knowing that invite intuition, dreaming, and envisioning together.

Another to decolonize the language of the drawings could have illustrated the site its larger cultural and biophysical context such as a watershed, foodshed, or cultural community ‘shed’, and to see the interconnectedness of these infrastructures. Quite literally, decolonizing the language could include illustrating the drawing set in the Halq'eméylem language. For example, inclusion of Halq'eméylem plant names identified as plants of importance by the Host Nations, such as ellá:lhp (salmonberry), th'éxth'éx (stinging nettle), sxwóosem (soapberry), skw'ólmexw (blackberry), yelyóle (wild rhubarb), mó:qwem (Labrador tea), spá:th (bear), t'élqtele (deer), sp'oq'es (eagle), sqelá:w (beaver), and stqó:ya (wolf). Halq'eméylem language for qó: (water), sxixets' (forest), xet'kw'á:ls shxweli (carving wood place), q'ép shxweli (gathering together place) or sq'éq’ó shxweli (being together place), lexwyó:qwem (place on the river), semlóthel (riverbank) and other spatial identifiers should be added to the design.

Question: What didn’t we do in this design process?

Answer: Training for capacity building

Although we had consultant educational time with cultural advisor Cory Douglas, we did not have training that was targeted to develop ourselves as learning organizations.

During our research meetings, we identified that we wanted to plant seeds for change, but that we lacked specific capacity-building knowledge and vocabulary for imagining different ways of working. Anti-colonial training should include capacity building as a team of contractors, managers, operations personnel, local Host Nation knowledge keepers/youth/elders/artists/creatives, and all consultants on the team.
In Tema Okun’s Dismantling Racism Workbook, “One characteristic of white supremacy culture is not allowing time, energy, or money to reflect on how to improve your organizational practices. This is an aspect of perfectionism, as well as not having appreciation for the work that people are doing. As an antidote to white supremacy perfectionism culture, organizations can develop a learning organization” (Okun, n.d.)

During the course of the research, we learned from Jennifer Cutbill of Lateral Agency some capacity-building exercises. Examples include (1) re-imagination of the critical infrastructures (from engineering to ecological), (2) deepening our creation of safe space by inventorying our worst ideas and other things that could go wrong, (3) a letter-writing exercise in which we dream together of a future project where we live on this site in a 20-year or 100-year timeframe, and (4) co-creating a site/building management plan that accounts for future generations, say a 100-year management planning document. We recommend trying these exercises in other design projects, and potentially finding their intersection with Architect and Professor Wanda Dalla Costa’s Indigenous Placekeeping Framework, a design method with 4 components of being community-led, relationship-led, process-based, and place-based (Fahlgren, 2019).

**Next Steps**

Future steps in this design-research path may include an analysis of construction, real-estate, and development industry process and language: procurement and its process, bid forms, maintenance plans, specifications, and other design standard forms to try to uncover embedded colonial narratives and to offer alternatives from language of liability to one of stewardship. Other discourse analysis could include rigour which is “focused upon interpreting the way that meaning is expressed through words and text” so that we can identify the patterns of expression about the design process (Deming, & Swaffield, 2011, p.161). Future research could include cross-referencing other projects and conducting a comparative study for a secondary research review. A comparative analysis between landscape architectural & architectural design principals against Indigenous aesthetic principles can include an analysis of Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s use of the Indigenous creative principles of repetition, duality, multidimensionality, abstraction, layering, reenactment, and presencing, and how these principles “disrupt the noise of colonialism” (Simpson, 2017, p. 200).

To reconcile colonial power structures, we recommend that clients include a cultural consultant / advisor / planner / designer / coordinator in design teams. We recommend that development industry clients prioritize First Nations businesses through procurement. We recommend that municipal planning & development staff approach systemic change by collaborating with designers in ways that we can disrupt the colonial approaches of the development process together. We recommend that us designers continue our ongoing decolonizing work. In the words of Rena Soutar, landscape architects need to look at our colonial lenses and to rethink past practices before we do indigenous engagement (Lypkie, 2019). Our research finds that we need to do this work as organizations as well as individuals.

As we are concluding this report, we continue with graphics, wordsmithing, and capacity training. This is shown in the graphic on the next page, where we show the transition from Part I to Part II. The graphics and wordsmithing will illustrate our findings with a visual framework. The capacity training will be a deeper decolonial learning with the Host & local First Nations. We look forward to reporting back on this in mid-2024.
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