THE SOVEREIGN TABLE: Embedding Knowledge Infrastructure within a Tribal Homeland

A Thesis Submitted to the Department of Landscape Architecture
Harvard University Graduate School of Design
by
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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER IN LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE

MAY 2022

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The Sovereign Table

Embedding Knowledge Infrastructure within a Tribal Homeland

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Advised By Pablo Perez-Ramos and Diane Davis
My sincere gratitude to:

My patient and steadfast advisors Pablo Perez-Ramos and Diane Davis, as well the larger thesis team, in particular Charles Waldheim, Kira Clingen, and Tiffany Ye;

Members of the GSD Indigenous Design Collective, in particular, Zoe Toledo, for her wisdom and patience in helping me craft the foundation of this project, and Elsa Hoover, for her guidance in constructing the Graduate School of Design Call to Action;

My incredibly supportive cohort, who never ceased to make me laugh no matter how little we slept, and who rallied around one another in spite of every obstacle;

My family and friends, in Cambridge, Chicago, North Carolina, Maine, California, and across the globe, who cheered me on and provided indispensable insight, not only for this project, but throughout my experience at the GSD;

and finally, Josh Norris, canoe manager for the Yurok Tribe, who was generous in sharing his stories and inspired me to explore ways in which the discipline of Landscape Architecture can, and must, work to decolonize ‘public’ land.
What is the role of landscape architecture in decolonizing ‘public’ land?
Harvard Graduate School of Design Call to Action

The Graduate School of Design is located on the traditional and ancestral land of the Massachusett Nation. We are un-invited guests on Massachusett land and are currently benefiting from this unearned privilege. The Massachusett people and their land cannot be separated. Harvard could lead the way in institutional accountability for its past and the recent Report and Recommendations of the Presidential Committee on Harvard and the Legacy of Slavery is an important step. This work toward justice must respect and strengthen tribal sovereignty and self-determination. This includes returning power to the Massachusett Nation and Indigenous nations globally:

1. Give land back
2. Ensure knowledge sovereignty
3. Support opportunities for mutually beneficial co-stewardship
4. Hire indigenous faculty
5. Support indigenous students


Critical practice in the discipline of landscape architecture helped structure the current federal public land system. This system was intended to protect millions of acres of land from exploitation, but was built upon the genocide, forced-displacement, and oppression of Indigenous nations. Indirectly, the suppression of Indigenous land stewardship practices, and resulting ecological degradation, has resulted in a far-reaching eco-ethnocide: the simultaneous destruction of ecologies and intrinsically intertwined cultures. Landscape architects must now develop a new critical practice— a practice which decolonizes public land through the design of systems and sites which return land to Indigenous nations, honor indigenous knowledge sovereignty, and support mutually beneficial land co-stewardship.

1. Stop appropriating Indigenous knowledge - center knowledge holders alongside TEK
2. Nothing for Indigenous nations without Indigenous nations
3. Seek projects that work to return power to Indigenous communities
4. ???

**Disciplinary Call to Action**
TEK (traditional ecological knowledge), LEK (local ecological knowledge), and WEK (western ecological knowledge) holders walk onto a Klamath River bar at the base of The Sovereign Table.
5:30am, April 2032
The Klamath River Basin is located on the border of northern California and southern Oregon. Around 12,000 mi², the Klamath basin is larger than the state of Massachusetts, with ~1/40th of the population. 2/3rds of the basin is federally owned.

* data from California State Geoportal, ESRI, BLM, & USGS
In the Klamath Basin, Indigenous nations have been developing traditional ecological knowledge for over 10,000 years...

these Indigenous nations and their knowledge continue despite both direct federal policies of oppression (genocide, forced relocation, forced assimilation) and indirect (under-the-table) efforts to suppress Indigenous land stewardship practices...

... suppression of Indigenous land stewardship practices, and simultaneous federal land mismanagement, has resulted in a eco-ethnocide: the simultaneous oppression of Klamath Basin Indigenous nations, and the ecologies in which they are intrinsically intertwined.

In a state of environmental catastrophe, basin stakeholders are looking to TEK as a means to ensure a more balanced future for the Basin...
Humans are a keystone species within the rich and complex ecosystems of the Klamath Basin. Since colonization, many infrastructure interventions, most notably dams, have been implemented in an attempt to order this complexity and harness the energy it offers...

with millions of federal dollars heading towards the basin in hope of restoring ecological health, difficult decisions are being made as to where to intervene.

This project acknowledges the beautiful complexity of Basin ecology, and thus proposes that highly organized, site-specific interventions alone will not have a great enough impact to change the trajectory of the basin. This thesis thus considers the process through which land and resource management decisions are made and argues that strong knowledge infrastructure, infrastructure that allows for the sharing, understanding, and creation of diverse knowledges, must preface significant systemic changes to land stewardship, and thus the landscape itself.

PARADIGM SHIFT: recentering decision making and knowledge negotiation on tribal land

non-inclusive decision making → cultural exploitation → strengthened tribal sovereignty → collaborative governance
It is the in-between space that carries the burden of the meaning of culture, and by exploring this Third Space, we may evade the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves.

Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*
TEK is stories that were passed down for ten-thousand years from our ancestors. These stories traditionally teach botany, science, and things that are necessary, but we didn’t learn these in universities. These were things that were taught by people who practiced them for centuries... these aren’t just guesses - they are proven techniques that have been passed down for thousands of years.

~Yurok Tribal Member, PBS “Tending the Wild!”
When we center traditional ecological knowledge without centering the communities behind it, we are appropriating.

—Sanereth Makau, JI HLS for Warpupong to attend HRB (conservation)

Indigenous knowledge can no longer be considered a raw-resource from which others benefit. Indigenous people are asking for their cultural systems and ways of governing knowledge access and use to be recognized as legitimate, and to be respected as custodians/owners/nurturers of knowledge that is valuable within and beyond indigenous contexts.

—Dalai University Law Center for Public Domain: Indigenous Traditional Knowledge and Intellectual Property Rights
The Committee organized to promote the preservation of beautiful and historic places in Massachusetts, requests your presence at the hearing on their petition for the accompanying Act of Incorporation to be held on Tuesday, March 13th at 10 A.M. at Room A, State House.

For the Committee,

CHARLES ELIOT
March 9th, 1891.

[Handwritten note at the bottom of the page:]

Dear Sirs,

On behalf of the Committee, organized to promote the preservation of beautiful and historic places in Massachusetts, I respectfully request permission to meet you on the 13th at 10 A.M. for the hearing on the Act of Incorporation. I trust this will not be inconvenient.

Yours truly,

Charles Eliot
February 11th.
Works Cites:


