I, Adam McGuire, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Master of Architecture in Architecture.

It is entitled:
Designing for Diaspora: Interpreting the Cherokee Tradition

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Designing for Diaspora: 
Interpreting the Cherokee Tradition

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Abstract

In the public’s collective attempts to neatly decide upon and organize our cultural memory, many groups continue to have their history and cultures overlooked and underrepresented within the national consciousness. This results in part from a biased prioritization of which physical and intangible artefacts are worth preserving through repeated generations, and in this sense the fields of architecture and historic preservation are partially complicit in this injustice. This phenomenon particularly affects America’s many minority groups, and perhaps no such group has faced as much oversight in the public consciousness as the American Indian. This thesis explores means through which minority cultural memory can be better presented in a wider scale and to a broader audience, and what roles architecture and its designers can take in increasing the scope of cultural narrative. The Cherokee tribe in North Carolina provides particularly valuable insight and opportunity for the study of promoting local culture, in part due to the tribe’s unique geographic position, heavy degree of surviving intangible tradition, and especially long and storied role within American history. The use of contemporary community architecture comprises an especially large component of this study, with an emphasis on how to best address the nationwide Cherokee diaspora’s renewing interest in the tribe’s cultural memory, how contemporary construction can most eloquently respond to built environments which no longer survive in abundance, and how architecture can be better utilized to communicate local narrative.
A special thanks to Jeff Tilman, Davy Arch, and the Museum of the Cherokee Indian for their assistance with this thesis.
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Introduction

Of all the many efforts the United States has made to improve social equality and justice among its population, one of the most overlooked struggles has been that of the country’s indigenous peoples. This is a complex problem which results from many factors, including social, economic, political, and cultural forces. Equally complicit in this injustice, however, has been the role of design, and the ways in which designers have failed to improve the living conditions of Native Americans.

In this thesis, I attempt to address these issues by examining the historical and present-day design conditions facing one particular indigenous group: the Cherokee tribe, and more specifically, the Eastern Band of the Cherokee in North Carolina. The Cherokee hold a unique place among America’s indigenous tribes; as one of the first tribes contacted in the eastern United States, the Cherokee have developed an especially complex history and relationship with “white America”. Due to the tribe’s heavy level of integration with white American society, the Cherokee have managed to maintain a strong minority population within the United States, yet have also experienced an especially large amount of cultural erosion, very much in part due to deliberation actions the United States has taken.

Throughout this study, I will identify some of the greatest forces the Cherokee has faced in its struggle for cultural self-determination, examining elements of the tribe’s history and its relationship with white America. I will also examine the issues specific to my site, the Qualla Reservation in North Carolina, itself holding a unique place in the United States today as one of the largest reservations in the eastern half of the country. I will also describe other literature which have addressed these issues, and which have played an especially large role in my research. Finally, I will set forth my own proposal, a cultural center located across two sites in the Qualla Reservation. Designed primarily for the Cherokee tribe’s considerable nationwide diaspora, the complex would place a focus on presenting the tribe’s history, culture, and folklore in an immersive design environment. Elements of the complex are diverse, with...
some addressing out-of-town visitors with lodging facilities, and others designed for locals seeking community functions, so that all visitors could find meaning and inspiration within the architecture of the site. Ultimately, it is my hope that this center could serve as a future template for contemporary design which seeks to preserve intangible culture, highlight valuable history in a modern environment, and interpret cultural memory.
Part 1: An Understanding

For all its strengths and all its faults, the United States has developed very complex relationships with its ethnic minorities – and perhaps no ethnic group has faced as much hardship, burden, and pressure to assimilate as the American Indian. From the era of the conquistadors, to the continuing hardships indigenous groups face on reservations today (the recent headlines regarding the Dakota oil pipeline providing a particularly timely reminder), it is a credit to the resilience and tenacity of the various Native American groups that they have persevered with such endurance to the present. Yet to be sure, the challenges Native Americans face in regards how best to continue to preserve indigenous culture and heritage is an ongoing struggle. Uniquely positioned in this debate, and perhaps even among Native American tribes as a whole, are the Cherokee.

As a result of their history, geography, and various cultural forces, the Cherokee hold a special place among Native American tribes in the struggle for cultural self-determination. Because of their residence amongst the Appalachian Mountains, the Cherokee were one the first tribes which European settlers encountered in their push toward the interior of the American continent. The English encountered the Cherokee in 1654, and termed them one of the “Five Civilized Tribes” of North America due to the speed with which they adapted European customs1. Other tribes within this rather distasteful designation included the Creek, Chickasaw, Choctaw, and the Seminole, and all were noted for their quick acceptance of European conventions such as formal government, written language, Christianity, and for some, even slavery2.

Perhaps because of this speedy cultural assimilation, the Cherokee enjoyed a particularly favorable place in American attitudes toward Indian tribes in the early decades of the new country, with

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even a high rate of intermarriage with white Americans. Yet despite such a favorable first impression, relationships between the Cherokee and white Americans quickly soured. As the Americans moved westward, or natural resources were found on tribal lands, treaties with the tribe were re-interpreted, reworded, or simply ignored\(^3\). Time and again, the Cherokee were forced ever westward as they gave up their land to the encroaching settlers. The relationship between the two civilizations reached their lowest point following the 1828 election of President Andrew Jackson, for whom Native American removal was a cornerstone of his national policy. In 1838, the Jackson-approved Indian Removal Act called for the Cherokee to be forcibly gathered and marched westward, forced to resettle in the “Indian Territory” in what is now known as Oklahoma. Now known as the Trail of Tears, or alternatively the Removal, this process was responsible for the deaths of some four thousand members of the Cherokee tribe, and is considered by some to be an early example of ethnic cleansing\(^4\).

Despite the horrors of the Trail of Tears, the Cherokee nation did not disappear. Even in the radically different climate and geological landscape of their new environment, the Oklahoma Cherokee were quick to adapt: they founded schools, businesses, churches, and the first-ever Native American-language newspaper\(^5\).

And with the relocation of the Cherokee to Indian Territories, another unexpected phenomenon occurred: the creation of the Cherokee diaspora. Some Cherokee chose to ignore the promises by the American government of yet another designated tribal land in the west, and instead settled in other locations. Many stopped at locations near to the path of the Trail of Tears or elsewhere in the East, such as Arkansas, Tennessee, or Alabama. Others settled in locations closer to the territories in Oklahoma, including Kansas and Texas. Some left the United States entirely and moved north to Canada, or south to

Mexico or Cuba. A particularly large number moved west to California during the 1849 Gold Rush in pursuit of financial prosperity. And with each resettlement, the Cherokee nation became more assimilated into the fabric of white American society⁶.

![Figure 1. The Smoky Mountains, near the Cherokee tribe’s traditional Appalachian home⁷.](image)

And yet as the Cherokee people scattered to the corners of the country, some persistent members of the tribe had remained in hiding among the Appalachians during the Removal, most of whom represented a more radical faction of the tribe which sought to continue indigenous customs and lifestyle. Others managed to remain in the area by pursuing legal means of settlement. As decades passed, they collectively attempted to regain recognition, and eventually even sovereignty, in the Cherokee homeland. At last, in 1870, after years of political wrangling assisted in no small part by the legal expertise of American senator William Thomas (who would eventually become the only ever white

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Cherokee chief), the Cherokee achieved just that. Three decades after the Trail of Tears, the eastern Cherokee tribe gained federal recognition, forming what is today known as the *Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians*, and alternatively as the *Qualla Reservation*. Although not a reservation in the purest sense (as the land was purchased and then subsequently granted federal protection as a land trust), and indeed only a fraction in size of their once-massive former domain, the Cherokee had at last reclaimed a piece of their homeland.

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Part 2: The Qualla Reservation, and Opportunities for Growth

The Qualla Reservation today straddles the Swain and Jackson counties near the western border of North Carolina, and spans some eighty-two square miles, or 56,000 acres. Roughly thirteen thousand people proclaim themselves a member of the Eastern Band of Cherokee, with about eight thousand living on the reservation itself. About two thousand live in the reservation’s largest city and headquarters, itself also named Cherokee, and many others live in the reservation’s smaller towns and settlements. Due to its location bordering the Great Smoky Mountain National Park, and to its proximity to cities such as Asheville, Pigeon Forge, and Gatlinburg, the reservation is now something of a crossroads of the Appalachians, intersected by major interstates and highways such as the famous Blue Ridge Parkway.

These many geographical and social factors have left a profound influence on the Qualla’s development. Yet, despite having what may seem to be an advantageous position for growth, the region has endured an often-tumultuous history. Originally, the newly-founded reservation residents were able to live a lifestyle very similar to the manner of traditional Cherokee, with an economy based primarily in agriculture. However, over time, and especially following the designation of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, the reservation transitioned to a commercial and tourism-based economy9. With very few regulations in place, residents quickly noticed a sharp increase in gaudy attractions, cheaply constructed buildings, and businesses which often contained stereotypical or offensive depictions of Native Americans10 – too many of which still exist today. Chain businesses were the next to arrive, with a particularly rapid increase in fast food restaurants, which was likely correlated to the reservation’s concurrent rise in obesity and diabetes, a phenomenon which still plagues the reservation today11.

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Despite such unprecedented development, the lives of local residents saw little improvement. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, government-mandated boarding schools forced children to attend school off-reservation, where they were forced to adapt a European-American lifestyle, including abandoning the Cherokee language, religion, attire, and even personal names.\(^\text{12}\) Although the practice had ended by the mid-twentieth century, the cultural damage was palpable, and lives had hardly improved. Indeed, Cherokee historian Davy Arch noted that even by the 1960s, most Cherokee were still living in “third world conditions” with little access to plumbing or heating, and many still cooking only on wood fires. Observing this, the federal government again attempted to take action, and with efforts by both the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Department of Housing and Urban Development, federal housing was supplied, and living conditions at last started to improve. And yet despite the increased access to plumbing and kitchens, problems were apparent. Subsidized homes were cheaply constructed and were often built for temporary use, and due to lack of indigenous input in the design process, were frequently disruptive to traditional lifestyle: Cherokee had traditionally lived together in larger family groups, but the small homes required that families live separately in smaller units, and often far apart.\(^\text{13}\)

Qualla’s prospects took a drastic turn in 1997, with the construction of Harrah’s Cherokee Casino. By 2005, the casino had attracted nearly four million customers, and the tourism on the reservation had skyrocketed. At last, residents of the reservation could see financial benefit from the success of local tourism, with an increase of about $8000 in per capita income. Healthcare, housing, education, and other conditions have seen great improvement since the construction of the casino.\(^\text{14}\) However, the Qualla’s cultural fabric continues to be problematic, with the reservation’s depiction of indigenous culture

\(^{13}\) Arch, Davy. "Interview with Davy Arch." Interview by Adam McGuire. 16 Sept. 2016.

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tailoring first and foremost to tourist expectations. Because most visitors passing through are only doing so for the day, and have merely a shallow (at best) interest in Native American culture, there is much competition to provide the most stereotypical “Indian” experience to the day guest. Common experiences include “Grasshopper chiefs” who dress as Plains-style Indian chiefs with large feathered headdresses and pose with tourists for tips, roadside craft shops disguised as wooden tepees, and gift shop owners who greet guests with “How” and “Ugh”. The conflict between educating tourists and meeting their expectations is considerable. By being forced to accommodate uninformed preconceptions for what a trip to a Native American reservation “should” include, the Cherokee find that their economy is reliant on stereotypes and the judgment of tourists, at the additional expense of local indigenous culture.\textsuperscript{15}

It is amidst this difficult backdrop in which the battle to preserve Cherokee culture takes place today. The struggle for political sovereignty has shifted instead to a battle of a cultural self-determination. With the Cherokee tribe split between multiple reservations across a huge distance, and with both reservations having a broken connection to their past, the issue of how best to integrate indigenous heritage into modern day life is a considerable challenge. This struggle is particularly great for the Qualla Reservation, because despite successfully reclaiming sovereignty near the Cherokee’s Appalachian origins, it is arguable that much greater cultural and political authority has been granted to the older and larger Oklahoma Cherokee Nation\textsuperscript{16}. Indeed, being located in the more populated eastern United States has come at the Qualla’s expense of privacy, insularity, and autonomy.

Despite these challenges, I believe the opportunity for more cultural expression on the Qualla Reservation is very great – and that an architectural intervention would be a tremendous means of doing

\textsuperscript{16} Arch, Davy. "Interview with Davy Arch." Interview by Adam McGuire. 16 Sept. 2016.
so. There is certainly no shortage of history, and no lack of indigenous tradition which make the Cherokee tribe culturally distinct. And critically, there is great potential for the financial sustainability of such an endeavor: the location near the Smoky Mountains and along major tourist routes are sure to attract an audience. And most importantly of all, there are the people: with the huge Cherokee diaspora across the United States, and with thousands of people living in Qualla with Cherokee heritage, there is undoubtedly great opportunity to build a center of culture and knowledge in the Cherokee tradition.
Part 3: Interpreting Existing Literature

There is no shortage of information on any of the individual topics which this thesis explores. Less common, though, is material which examines how many of these topics can synthesize and combine in a sensible way. I shall begin by studying the best available research in each individual topic, before moving onto resources which examine multiple topics in a single work.

The history of the Cherokee is relatively well-documented subject matter compared to that of many other Native American tribes, a result of both the early contact between Cherokee and Europeans, and of the early development of a written Cherokee language. First-person written accounts of Cherokee customs before their assimilation into white American society are still, however, generally rare. It is for this reason that the Historical Sketch of the Cherokee, written by James Mooney (1861-1921), is a treasure trove of information for anyone studying traditional Cherokee culture. A self-taught expert on American Indian tribes, Mooney entered the employment of the Bureau of American Ethnology, and began the first comprehensive attempt to catalogue all of the United States’ tribes and aspects of their heritage, eventually reaching a list of some three thousand tribes. To support his studies, Mooney underwent a long-term residence living among the Cherokee, carefully observing and recording their traditions and lifestyles. From this effort, we have the only first-person and non-indigenous accounts of many historic Cherokee traditions which would become lost to cultural assimilation, such as historic Cherokee costume and recreation. He also managed to witness major events in Cherokee history, such as battles with other tribes, and the first contact between the Oklahoma and North Carolina Cherokee following the Trail of Tears17.

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More recent catalogues of Cherokee history are easier to come by, if not as rich in first-hand observation. Of these, *The Qualla Cherokee: Surviving in Two Worlds* may be the most relevant to my topic. Written by Laurence Armand French, the book focuses especially on the history and challenges of North Carolina’s Qualla reservation, from its mythological origin stories through the Trail of Tears, and takes a particular interest in the many struggles the reservation faced in the twentieth century as the Qualla sought to regain political and cultural sovereignty. The eponymous “Two Worlds” refers to the dual aspects of traditional Cherokee lifestyle vs. the twentieth century expectations of life amongst white east coast America. French succeeds greatly in illustrating how this struggle is not a recent phenomenon, and in fact has been the defining struggle for the Cherokee tribe (a tribe which quite possibly has, more than any other, cooperated and assimilated with European-American culture) for the past four centuries18.

Other texts have examined more individual aspects of Cherokee lifestyle. Sarah H. Hill’s *Weaving New Worlds* focuses specifically on the basketry of eastern Cherokee, and how the history of the craft reflects the changes in Cherokee society through its history. Changes in local materials and social forces all left an impact on the craftsmanship of basket-making, passing through four materials across a variety of regions (rivercane, white oak, honeysuckle, and maple), effectively allowing the baskets themselves to become vessels of the Cherokee narrative19. Margaret Bender’s *Signs of Cherokee Culture: Sequoyah’s Syllabary* took a similar approach, but focused instead on the evolving language of the Qualla reservation. Bender catalogues the history of the Cherokee language, or *Tsali*, with an emphasis on the history of its written form, following its invention by the pen of Chief Sequoyah. She primarily examines the reservation’s signage, but also the educational curriculums and documents written within the reservation,

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and ultimately notes that, like basketry or the history of the Cherokee itself, the reservation’s language is shaped by a conflict between the Cherokee and European-American cultural forces.

While these previously mentioned works have best described Cherokee history, additional texts provide invaluable information of other sorts to a layperson approaching this topic. Robert J. Conley’s *A Cherokee Encyclopedia*, true to its name, provides a useful and alphabetical guide to navigating Cherokee terminology, place names, and historical figures. In addition to outlining terms, the encyclopedia provides useful historical context and insight into the deeper concepts behind Cherokee customs. *Building One Fire*, a collaborative work by Chief Chadwick Smith, Rennard Strickland, and Benny Smith, documents hundreds of examples of Cherokee art, and presents pieces through the lens of the tribe’s spirituality. The authors sort pieces of art, unconventionally, by their relationship to the four navigational directions, and intersperses the collection with prayers, poetry, and parables from the Cherokee mythology. Finally, Robert Conley compiled a series of humorous essays and personal anecdotes into a collection called *Cherokee Thoughts: Honest & Uncensored*. With all the free-flowing narrative and brutal honesty of a standup comedy routine, Conley provides the reader with a peek into the lifestyle and sometimes self-contradicting experiences of a modern Cherokee person. The book is a reminder of how indigenous cultural issues have shifted over the decades, from treaties and boarding schools to issues like casinos and Hollywood casting.

The next-largest topic surrounding this project is, of course, architecture. The field of vernacular architecture is perhaps the most closely related to this project, and is clearly a topic which has been

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comprehensively studied across countless books and articles. Principal among my research was *Built to Meet Needs: Cultural Issues in Vernacular Architecture*, by vernacular architecture specialist Paul Oliver. In this dense read, Oliver comprehensively examines vernacular architecture in every continent of the world, with a wide range of typologies and case studies. The book succeeds beautifully in outlining the many cultural forces which shape vernacular architecture, including climate, technology, needs, beliefs, and social and family structures24. A similar, if shorter read is *The Cultural Role of Architecture: Contemporary and Historical Perspectives*, a collaboration by Paul Emmons, John Hendrix, and Jane Lomholt. Here, the authors examine the interplay between a region and its architecture, and how the two can change or evolve concurrently, particularly in relation to cultural shifts and outside forces25.

Continuing this study, one realizes that while understanding the historical and traditional influences which shape vernacular architecture is indeed important, the greater issue facing such design is its continued relevance in the present and future. Examining this problem more thoroughly is *Vernacular Architecture in the Twenty-First Century: Theory, Education and Practice*, by Lindsay Asquith and Marcel Vellinga. In this work, the authors study the significant challenges which traditional vernacular architecture often face today, including the rapid onset of globalization and ever-faster technological change. Then, they reflect on how vernacular design techniques can adapt to the future for their continued survival, including by influencing contemporary design26. Finally, author Steven Semes brings this question of interpreting the past to the broader field of historic, non-vernacular architecture, in his landmark work *The Future of the Past*. Semes examines the many different ways historic design can be interpreted in the modern era, whether through merely legally protective and preservation-focused

efforts, by advanced technological means for sensitive projects, or even by assimilation into modern
design. In the end, Semes argues that contemporary architecture is ultimately responsible for engaging
and forming a dialogue with the architecture of the past27 – a viewpoint I agree with, and intend to
advocate and utilize in my own proposal.

Finally, one can examine the texts which consider these issues together, and how American
Indians have previously adapted their built tradition into contemporary architecture. One source on this
subject is Contemporary Native American Architecture: Cultural Regeneration and Creativity, by Carol
Herselle Krinsky. Published in 1996, the Krinsky’s compilation of buildings are no longer quite as
contemporary as the title suggests, and her perspectives at times reveal themselves to stem from a
different era. However, her descriptions of tacky roadside attractions are no less scathing, and her studies
of the federal housing created for Native Americans remain thought-provoking and revealing of their
various successes and failures28. Finally, one of my most useful resources for this project has been the
more recently published New Architecture on Indigenous Lands, by Joy Monice Malnar and Frank
Vodvarka. The authors examine recently constructed buildings of various typologies in different
reservations across the country, and note how indigenous tradition has (and often has not) impacted
their design. The featured buildings seem to be beautifully designed and very respectful of tribal history,
and hold valuable lessons for my project29. Tellingly, however, few of the buildings are located east of the
plains states – revealing that the idea of how best to interpret eastern indigenous heritage in modern
architecture remains, perhaps, an open frontier.

28 Krinsky, Carol Herselle. Contemporary Native American Architecture: Cultural Regeneration and Creativity. New
Part 4: Building a New Vernacular

How best to express and preserve indigenous tradition has been a major question for tribes across the country for decades, and one that still has not been entirely resolved. In the field of architecture, specifically, many tribes have questioned how to bring elements of historic and vernacular design to contemporary construction on reservations, and how to ensure that indigenous tradition continues to be expressed in modern building. Nonetheless, these efforts have faced a series of challenges. Notably, most successful architectural attempts to incorporate tribal tradition have taken place in the larger, more culturally unscathed reservations of the Southwest and Pacific Northwest. As noted previously, relatively few attempts at creating a contemporary Native American vernacular have taken place east of the Mississippi River.

Figure 2. A diagram of my creation examining the different influences on vernacular architecture.

This may be related to another challenge: that the historic architecture of the eastern tribes has been significantly more difficult to preserve in its original state. One reason may be because eastern tribes had a historic tendency to build with more temporary materials (for example, wood, mud, or thatch) than tribes of the west. Further, eastern tribes were more likely to make early contact with destructive European settlers, with settlements resulting in destruction, relocation, or rapid depopulation due to disease. For these and other reasons, very few structures from the pre-European era remain.31

Likely as a result, contemporary architecture on eastern tribal lands have rarely drawn from vernacular tradition. Instead, buildings on eastern reservations often rely on construction with the most economic means available, or are simply built in typical “Western” American fashion, particularly as so many buildings have been provided and constructed for the reservations by the federal government.32 The impact of this can be profound. Much of a civilization’s heritage and beliefs can be expressed in its architecture, and when those architectural traditions fade, many cultural beliefs expressed in the architecture can be lost as well.33 Additionally, some Native Americans note that inexperienced architects and authors can often erroneously treat all Native American tribes as if they were a single entity, with uniform needs and beliefs, acting as if a uniform design decision can adequately meet the design needs of all tribes.34 It is likely that eastern reservations have suffered from this phenomenon the most: as western tribes’ existing traditions and vernacular have been more resilient through the centuries, and are

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therefore more visible to the layman, the eastern tribal culture has witnessed greater cultural erosion as they are forced to adapt more western Native American stereotypes and conventions.\textsuperscript{35}

By now, the impacts of such design inconsideration on the tribes they are intended to be built for should be obvious. A secondary concern, and yet one that is not insignificant, is the impact of such bland architecture on outsiders and visitors. Architecture has tremendous ability to impart cultural beliefs such as narrative, historic context, and social values.\textsuperscript{7} When a building fails to provide those perspectives, there is a loss not only to those who inhabit the vicinity, but to visitors, who may come to the area in search of such perspective. In a larger sense, by failing to provide cultural understanding to visitors through the reservation’s architecture, tribes may lose the chance to express their heritage at all. And given the unique social and political challenges facing the Cherokee both historically and today, there is clearly ample opportunity to communicate a meaningful message through the built environment.

New contemporary architecture in Qualla has clear potential to enhance cultural expression on the reservation, for both residents and tourists alike. Yet in addition, the architect has another unique opportunity: to take an assistive role in the effort to maintain Cherokee intangible culture. Intangible culture, or portions of heritage which cannot be touched or merely preserved as objects in a museum, is an increasingly important topic in historic preservation fields, and one which has arguably not seen sufficient preservation effort worldwide (a topic we will examine later). Items of intangible culture commonly expressed in buildings might include mythological narrative, history, and religious belief\textsuperscript{36}, all of which should be major priorities in any significant buildings designed for Native American reservations. However, the opportunity to design for further types of intangible culture has likely not been fully explored. The Cherokee tribe, specifically, has many elements of indigenous tradition which are

\textsuperscript{35} Arch, Davy. "Interview with Davy Arch." Interview by Adam McGuire. 16 Sept. 2016.
increasingly threatened, such as dance, language, music, and recreational customs. A cultural facility
designed for the Qualla Reservation would have the unique opportunity, and possibly even the obligation,
to ensure these customs are adequately represented and preserved for future generations of Cherokee
and visitors alike.
Part 5: A Decision of Site

Figure 3. A survey of potential site locations.

From here, we may begin to collect ideas for how to create an architectural intervention to address these issues. But first, we must first examine the issue of site. Despite a large number of potential sites which captured my attention through this semester, including within the reservation’s urban areas and amongst its mountains, two sites ultimately revealed themselves as the best for a project of this type. The first is within the city of Cherokee itself, at the intersection of two major roads: Tsalagi Road (or Highway 19) and Tsali Boulevard (or Highway 441). Despite the seemingly significant nature of this intersection, and the prominent location within the center of the Cherokee community, this site feels vastly underutilized, presently featuring only an empty grass field and, occasionally, some unused shipping containers. On the other hand, the site has some great neighbors, situated directly adjacent to the city’s riverfront park, and merely a block away from the Museum of the Cherokee Indian, the city’s...
greatest institutional insight into the tribe’s history. Given the location, this site seems like a prime opportunity to create a valuable cultural resource for the Cherokee community.

The second site is quite possibly even more significant, if not as conveniently located. About 15 minutes down Highway 19, in the considerably more rural region near the border of Qualla, is the site referred to as Kituwah. Kituwah (or Kituwa or “the Mother Town”) is home of the now heavily-eroded Kituwah mounds, and at nearly ten-thousand years old, is a heavily sacred site believed to be the location of the very first Cherokee village. The Cherokee lost Kituwah to the United States in 1820s, and did not reacquire it during the formation of the Qualla Boundary, leading to the site’s degradation through commercial farming in the following century\(^\text{37}\). From 1996 through 2010, however, the Cherokee tribe managed to reacquire Kituwah through a series of land deals, and today uses the site for a number of cultural purposes, including traditional dances and gentle archaeological study. How best to preserve and

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interpret Kituwah, however, is an ongoing debate, with many advocating that more should be done to increase awareness and visitor interpretation of the mounds.

Taking both sites and their many differences into consideration, it has recently become clear that the best solution is to use both to some degree, with a split of function and program across the two. With its central location and easy access to the people and amenities within the town of Cherokee, it would make sense to use the downtown site for a kind of center or cultural exposition grounds for the town. This site could include some artistic and recreational opportunities which would be useful to the reservation’s residents, some accommodation capabilities which would be useful to visiting tourists or members of the diaspora, and educational and cultural amenities which could be appealing to both. Meanwhile, a site near Kituwah could function as a kind of “satellite location”, providing further cultural context regarding the significance of the mounds and the history of the Cherokee, while also providing more accessible amenities for anyone wishing to make a day trip to the site. Although spread across two different locations, the two sites could be unified through a similar design language and the use of recurring architectural motifs, rooted in the tradition of Cherokee design. To do so, however, requires an understanding of the Cherokee culture and its traditions.

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Part 6: Proposing a Program

To adequately create a program for the site, we must first gather an understanding of the culture who will use it, and its lifestyle and customs. Central to traditional Cherokee social structure, first and foremost, is its clan system. Cherokee society is matriarchal, meaning that members of the tribe trace their heritage through their mother, and assume the mother’s clan once born, or the wife’s clan upon marriage. There are seven dominant clans, although historical records indicate there may once have been as many as fourteen.\textsuperscript{39} Historically, members of clan had unique skills and responsibilities which supported the well-being of the tribe.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{clans.png}
\caption{Graphic representations of the seven clans.}
\end{figure}

In addition to the number of clans, the Cherokee also believe in seven key directions, each associated with a separate color, with the four cardinal directions chief among these.\textsuperscript{40} The key importance of both the seven clans and the four directions shares a close relationship with the Cherokee numerology system, in which the numbers seven and four are sacred. As a result, it is apparent (to me, and members of the tribe with whom I’ve communicated) that this numerology would play an important role in any potential building design. Specifically, the use of numbers four and seven should be recurring themes in some way, perhaps through the number of walls or buildings, or the placement of key points


around the site. Additionally, certain aspects of the site should be oriented around the Cherokee system of navigation, perhaps most importantly the west and east cardinal directions, with a relationship to the linear path of the sun.

An architectural form can also be developed through the understanding of traditional Cherokee construction. Prior to European contact, most families lived independently in round, domed houses constructed of a material called “wattle and daub.” “Wattle” refers to a kind of weaving frame consisting of wooden posts and sticks, then covered in mud or “daub” for insulation and protection.

Figure 6. Section diagram of wattle and daub construction.
Other Cherokee kept multiple buildings for different seasons: they might keep a winter house or “hot house” not unlike a sauna: similar to the previously mentioned waddle-and-daub home, but with fewer openings for ventilation, and a heating system of hot coals. The summer houses would be larger and more open, with more windows or with an open façade entirely, for the purposes of increasing ventilation\(^43\). Regardless of which homes families kept, almost all Cherokee towns featured a central meeting house or council space, which would be very large and seven-sided, or alternatively round, and always with a hearth in its center\(^44\). Clearly, with this rich architectural tradition, there is much which can be gleaned or re-interpreted for modern Cherokee design: the use of round and seven-sided construction, the feature of a central gathering space, the idea of separate spaces or tectonics for different seasons, and of a construction assembly inspired by weaving or the synthesis of two separate materials. Any or all of these would allow a form of modern construction that draws clear inspiration from tradition Cherokee design.

\(\text{Figures and 7-1 and 7-2. Left, a Cherokee summer house}^45. \text{ Right, an example of a round council house}^46.\)

Another programmatic element which I hope to capture in this proposal is the idea of Cherokee intangible culture, an increasingly endangered element of indigenous groups worldwide, and one which this facility could take part in preserving. According to UNESCO, intangible culture includes “traditions or living expressions,” usually passed down between generations by instruction, demonstration, or repetition. Such culture may include “oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices,” as well the knowledge or skills required to produce physical culture, such as visual arts or construction. Because intangible culture can be difficult to preserve by the physical protections afforded to art or buildings, and relies instead on verbal or physical demonstration, these customs can be much more easily lost or forgotten with the passing of generations which hold this knowledge47.

Indigenous language, for instance, is one of the most clearly endangered examples of intangible culture. The Linguistic Society of America noted that while the United States once hosted nearly a thousand indigenous languages simultaneously, only 194 are in use today. Of these, 73 are spoken only by people over 50, 49 are spoken by people over 70, and five are possibly already extinct. Only 33 American indigenous languages have enough young speakers for ensured survival through the near future48. The Cherokee language, or *Tsalagi*, has the historic advantage of being one of the first written and recorded indigenous languages, and is thankfully still spoken by several thousand people today, although most are older and speak it as a second language. Subdivided into North Carolina and Oklahoma dialects, *Tsalagi* is enjoying a small revival as schools on Cherokee reservations teach the language to young students49. It is my hope that a cultural facility would play an active role in continuing this *Tsalagi*

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renaissance, perhaps using the language within activities or encouraging its use at some events, or hosting Cherokee language films or dramas.

Another valuable aspect of Cherokee intangible culture is dance. Like language, dance plays a vital role in communicating the mythology and history of indigenous people, and relies heavily on demonstration for its continued survival. This cultural facility could include indoor or outdoor stages for traditional dance, whether for traditional purposes, public demonstration, or both. Additionally, I hope that the facility could feature amenities for the Cherokee visual arts and craftsmanship. There are many traditional art forms which could be demonstrated, showcased, or even taught in classrooms, including mask-making, woodworking, pottery, and the famous double-weaved basketry. That said, I also hope that modern and contemporary Cherokee visual art could be displayed, with galleries that could flexibly display a variety of exhibits and artists, and demonstrate that Cherokee art is and always will be evolving.

Cuisine is yet another valuable aspect of Cherokee tradition, and yet one which is regretfully underrepresented on the Qualla Reservation. Surprisingly, the reservation has no restaurants selling Cherokee or any other indigenous food on its daily menu, with indigenous cuisine only sometimes available during pow-wows or other major events. Traditionally, Cherokee cuisine relied heavily on agriculture and produce, with the “Three Sisters,” or corn, beans, and squash, being the most widely used of these. Other heavily utilized foods included deer, birds, rabbit, potatoes, berries, and wild greens. Today, the definition of Cherokee cuisine has broadened to include traditional “Pan-Indian” foods such as frybread, chili, and Indian tacos, as well as European-influenced foods and techniques such as chicken and

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McGuire 28. It is my hope that restaurants featuring both traditional and contemporary styles of Cherokee cuisine could be featured, and in a variety of service methods, including quick service and fine dining.

Figure 8. An outline of possible cultural amenities and offerings within the complex.

Finally, it is my hope that such a cultural center would also feature the potential for recreation and interaction with nature, given both the many recreational activities unique to Cherokee tradition, as well as the deep connection with beautiful nature which the Cherokee historically enjoyed (and in many ways still do) in the Appalachian Mountains. Perhaps the greatest such opportunity would be a playing field for a stickball. A fiercely competitive team sport not unlike lacrosse, stickball is an ancient Cherokee game which has seen a revival in recent years. However, most games are adjusted to take place on existing football fields, and purpose-built stickball amenities are very few. Another obvious opportunity would be grounds for archery, another long Cherokee tradition (as well, of course, as a means of hunting and warfare). Other recreational opportunities could include amenities for “Marbles”, or a game similar to bocce ball or a sort of large-scale, outdoor billiards, as well as Chunkey (or Gatayuski), a game somewhat like horseshoes or shuffleboard, where players try to preemptively throw sticks as close as possible to the stopping point of a rolling stone disc.

Opportunities for interacting with nature could be slightly more difficult to program; however, both sites border a river’s edge, allowing the opportunity for swimming or other water recreation. Additionally, the Kituwah site borders a forest preserve, possibly allowing the potential for trails, or guided tours into the forest for the purposes of education, perhaps demonstrating wayfinding techniques or the identification of flora and fauna. Further, Cherokee have a long history of horse breeding and riding, even having bred a unique breed of horse known as the Cherokee Horse, believed to be closely related to the horses originally brought to the Americas by conquistadors such as Hernando de Soto.

Today, less than 300 such horses remain\textsuperscript{58}, and a sanctuary or designated grounds for such horses might allow for the preservation of an especially unique aspect of Cherokee heritage, while also allowing activities such as horseback riding or feeding. Together, with the historic, artistic, and recreational aspects of the program, these sites can help provide a more complete insight into Cherokee heritage and lifestyle, in both its contemporary and historical contexts.

Part 7: Design Proposal

Having established a program and a general sense of design intent, we may begin to examine more specific architectural strategies for the Qualla Reservation proposal. Previously, I suggested that both the sites in downtown Cherokee and near the Kituwah Mounds should be incorporated into this project. It is my hope that not only should both sites be utilized, but that they should be unified by an overarching design scheme and a kind of linear architectural narrative, which would allow visitors to both sites to appreciate that each complex represents two parts of a larger design idea.

Interestingly, the two sites can be connected not merely by architectural suggestion, but even by physical axis. I learned when studying possible relationships between the two sites that one can draw a single straight line which passes through no less than four sites: the original Kituwah mound site, the hilltop site overlooking the Kituwah complex, the urban site at the center of downtown Cherokee, and lastly, the center of the Oconaluftee Island Park, one of the most popular and central public parks in the Qualla Reservation today. Given both the interesting geographical connections and the potential for

Figure 9. This map demonstrates the discussed axis, with the Kituwah mounds and site in the southwest and the downtown and Oconaluftee site in the northeast.
design opportunities, it is only logical to use the axis as a source of geometric inspiration (akin to Kahn’s Salk Institute in La Jolla), or even as a kind of timeline representing the Cherokee narrative. Perhaps such a design would allow visitors to study the relationship between the Cherokee past, as represented by the site overlooking the Kituwah mounds, and the present, signified by the center of downtown Cherokee.

Exploring this idea of a linear architectural narrative, I turned once again to Sarah Hill’s *Weaving New Worlds*, her study of the art of Cherokee basketry, and the relationship between its evolution and concurrent events in Cherokee history. As one of the most enduring and popular forms of Cherokee handcraft, with a long additional history of practical use in hunting and agriculture, the arts of basketry and hand-weaving seemed an appropriate and promising starting point for creating a new form of indigenous modern architecture. Hill argued that each of the four Cherokee basketry traditions aligned with a phase of the tribe’s history. The first, river cane, is the plant most traditionally associated with Cherokee basketry, and which grew in the waterways of the Southeast United States, where the Cherokee originally dwelled\(^59\). The second, white oak, tends to grow on dryer mountain slopes, and became preferred as the Cherokee began to move inland following colonization by European settlers. The Cherokee also began to value white oak as a food source, learning from the Europeans how to convert

*Figure 10. The four weaving materials as described by Sarah Hill.*

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the roots into flour, and for this reason Hill argues that white oak represents the adaptation of new ideas upon contact with Europeans, as well as the onset of change\textsuperscript{60}. The next material to emerge, honeysuckle, was initially totally foreign to the Cherokee, and resulted from invasive honeysuckle trees introduced by Europeans. As the plant was not featured in Cherokee mythology, medicine, or agriculture, and because of its quickly invasive nature, the Cherokee referred to honeysuckle as a “weed” and saw little use for it outside of the raw function of utilitarian handcrafts. For this reason, Hill argues that honeysuckle represents the invasiveness, disruption, and involuntary assimilation forced upon the Cherokee by white Americans\textsuperscript{61}. Finally, the red maple tree emerged as a more preferred alternative due to its natural origins in the eastern United States, and due to the diminishing availability of the other basketry materials. Tourists in particular have demonstrated a strong interest in red maple basketry for its bright color and ease of crafting ornamental detail, and for this reason Hill states that red maple signifies adaptation, and specifically the Cherokee’s willingness to adapt to contemporary economic conditions\textsuperscript{62}.

I found each of these materials to be a compelling metaphor for the various phases of Cherokee history, and intend to use each of them in appropriate locations across both sites to further the architectural narrative. My goal is that four buildings with similar geometric forms should be split across each site, with a single rivercane-clad building overlooking the Kituwah mounds, and three buildings featuring white oak, honeysuckle, and red maple populating the downtown site, each containing a core feature of the complex, and each situated along the axis in a sort of linear progression.

Figure 11. A site plan overview, demonstrating the axial line (diagonal through center), surrounded by the two circular pavilions, and terminating with the seven-sided theater.

A second theme which I seek to incorporate into the site is the idea of fire. Fire is one of the most central aspects to Cherokee folklore, with one of the most important stories describing how fire was delivered to mankind from a burning tree upon the back of a water spider. Even the Cherokee name for the tribe, *Tsalagi*, likely derives from a phrase meaning “fire men” or “red fire men”⁶³. For this reason, my correspondent Davy Arch suggested that one of the most central aspects of a Cherokee cultural development should be a prominently located fire. My proposal would feature a burning torch at the focus of a centrally located outdoor landscape, around which other buildings would be radially located (in addition to acknowledging the axis which bisects the site).

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This central landscape space would be a significant place of reflection, solace, and gathering within the downtown site. Near the center of the space and at the foot of the torch, a small amphitheater would allow for outdoor dance demonstrations, storytelling, and small productions. This combination of stage and torch would form the “sacred center” of the complex, and would be radiate outwardly through gardens and outdoor displays, eventually reaching the more profane edge demarcated by a “weaving wall”. Continuing the study of weaving tectonic, this wall would consist of double-weaved horizontal slats around digitally fabricated vertical components, which together would wrap and enclose the central gardens, and allowing visitors to follow the wall for a more intimate architectural experience.

The largest building on the complex would also be the only of the downtown site’s building to rest directly on the axis. A large, open building with seven sides, this would house the site’s main theater and indoor gathering space. This suggestion borrows from the traditional Cherokee practice of having a
large seven-sided “town hall” type space, in which each of the seven clans would assemble (sitting against each wall) to discuss issues pertinent to the tribe. In this site, this building would serve as a space for theatrical productions, lectures and presentations, dance and musical performances, and for community events. Granite pillars would support a large, seven-sided dome, with curtain walls filling the remaining walls and allowing views into the surrounding gardens. Wooden features crafted from red maple, such as exterior skin or a roof support system, would visually connect the theater to the other round buildings and suggest that this grand space is merely the latest in contemporary Cherokee craft.

Figures 13-1 and 13-2. The theater’s seven sides draws inspiration from traditional Cherokee meeting halls.
Finally, smaller buildings on the site would house the complex’s other features, such as the dining, educational and community spaces, and the lobby and check-in spaces for the complex’s lodging. While being distinctly modern in assembly and appearance, these buildings would take some architectural inspiration from traditional Cherokee construction. For example, many of the buildings I designed took cues from the lean-to construction of the Cherokee summer homes, whether through tectonic (with the shops using a similar construction style) or through form (with the community center’s sloping roofs). The galleries building, showcasing Cherokee art and historical displays, integrates itself into the landscape in a manner recalling mounds, much like those of the Kituwah site just a few miles away. Taken together, it is my hope that this complex would provide all of its visitors a deeper insight into the Cherokee cultural and historical context through its architectural narrative.

Figures 14-1 and 14-2. Many of the complex’s buildings feature tectonics inspired by Cherokee lean-to construction.
Conclusion

Certainly, the goals of this project are extensive in their scope and challenging in their ambition. With the simultaneous of goals of creating a more responsible and sustainable tourism, developing new architectural language with minimal surviving vernacular construction, and preserving elements both physical and intangible of a rich indigenous culture, it has at times been difficult to produce a design which succeeds in all of its aims at once. Nonetheless, having heavily researched the topic and existing literature at hand, assessed the many opportunities available within the Qualla site, and established solid program and design strategies, I believe that my project would have enormous benefit to the public – whether locals, tourists, or members of the Cherokee diaspora. Ultimately, this project would help play a role in drawing attention to a group which has been too often overlooked in the American narrative.
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