

WHAT IS THERE TO CELEBRATE?

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I was recently in Washington DC. I purposely went to the Mall; to the site I knew the Smithsonian Institution was building his last museum there, the National Museum of American Indian (NMAI), directly facing The Capitol. I, like hundreds now, millions in the future, stood in awe and reverence when I faced the massive structure in front of me. The warmth of the colour of the stone - in sharp contrast with the grey limestone all around me- made me feel that I was in front of something not merely monumental, but sacred. The curves of the building - also in contrast to the sharp lines of the majority of the buildings in Washington, just reinforced a sense of belonging, a sense of timelessness and connection to Mother Earth.

As the average visitor passes through the cavern-like entrance they will be awestruck, and standing on the central gathering place, the Potomac, they will wonder who was the individual that could conceptualize such a wonder. I, of course, know, that only one person expresses his art in such a signature style. This unique style of organic architecture is the product of Douglas Cardinal's vision of the world who since his magnificent St. Mary's Church in Red Deer in Alberta (Canada), has shaped stone, brick and mortar in these types of award winning undulating graceful yet defiant, structures. Those who know his work have many times experienced the sensuous power of his buildings. The graciousness of these impressive structures wraps the individual in a sense of everlasting beauty and comfort so rare in today's society. Sadly, a society where warmth, grace, beauty, balance, proportions, even love, is so cynically unappreciated.

But only those educated in the Liberal Arts and knowledgeable in the principles of Organic Architecture and the particular sinuous style of Mr. Cardinal will notice that the monolithic structure lacks grace. Indeed, something is off balance and the proportions are not quite right. Many will not be able to discern these subtleties, but those of us who learnt the secrets of the building since its conception will know the difference. It doesn't flow harmoniously and effortlessly with the easy strokes of the creative genius. Indeed the mastery is being lost as if someone else, alien to the particular vernacular of the artist, has been forced to recreate his vision. The National Museum of the American Indian as it stands boldly on the Mall is a compromised work of art. The building is NOT the Magnum Opus it could have been. I was only able to see the outside of the building, of course, but the technical and aesthetic shortcomings were obvious, as the curves don't flow sinuously like his other buildings. Also, the detailing of the windows themselves appeared discordant, as the glass's jarring verticality fights in sharp contrast the soft intended forms of the building. The original concept of graduating the stone from a rough surface to parallel the earth, to a progressively smooth stone to mirror the sky, was also ignored. The actual layering is rigid, very monotonous and simplistic. As a result the walls seem heavy and the proportions out of sync since those who built the museum never understood the illusion of uplifting the building.

In contrast to what the Smithsonian has proclaimed until just now, the building itself is the ultimate proof that Douglas Cardinal is both the conceptual as well as Master Designer, indeed the creator, of the building's forms. The style or shaping of the structure is not the product of the collaborated efforts of the so-called Designer Architects. The forms, symbols, and imaginary present in the building are the result of Cardinal's unique organic process and architectural style as he visualized, synthesized and interpreted the programme, documents and words of all those

consulted. This can be easily corroborated with the existing data. In the future, many architectural students and historians will study the controversial process used to build this monument. It is a historical fact that the Smithsonian seized Mr. Cardinal's architectural drawings, photographs of his models, and the computerized construction documents after he made a presentation in public to the Fine Arts Commission a year after he was dismissed. It will be easy enough to walk the building with those plans to see how much, how different, and how (un) successful the changes from the original design have been.

From its conception, the Smithsonian had already an abstract vision seeing that the National Museum of the American Indian on the Mall was to be a momentous symbol and that only a unique and powerful building created by an aboriginal individual could stand for eternity in such a prestigious location. Having experienced the grandeur of the Canadian Museum of Civilization, (CMC), in Canada's Nation's Capital, the Smithsonian Institution felt compelled to cross the border of the United States and chose Douglas Cardinal (teamed with a Philadelphian firm) to give shape in a specific form to that grand abstract vision for their own national museum. Mr Cardinal, a follower of Native American spirituality himself, formed a team of native consultants and asked for a team of Elders to guide him and help him consolidate on paper what would later become mortar and stone: the wondrous images created by his gifted mind. It was a very close, very creative process, always lead by Mr. Cardinal. Everyone involved in the project knew that something larger than any particular ego was being nurtured. But once the final design was unanimously and enthusiastically approved for construction by the Fine Arts Commission with the accolades of Carter Brown and Charles Atherton, and by all other jurisdictional authorities, then the leadership role of Mr. Cardinal came to question by the Smithsonian by its new Secretary Dr. Heyman. It was an ugly manoeuvre, a Machiavellian plan unrelentingly executed. All the leaders of the Smithsonian, including the Director of NMAI Richard West being lawyers, played a game of promises and denials as they dismissed the demands of the architect to be reimbursed for the extra work the Smithsonian had requested him to produce. Once they had an original and exciting design beyond anybody's imagination in their hands, the Smithsonian started to encourage the formation of a new architectural designing team to take over the project.

A conglomerate of architectural firms worked to reinterpret Mr. Cardinals' design and yet they needed to amass even more architects and engineers to build and give concrete form to the museum. All these costly teams of architects and engineers were trying to figure out the particulars of Mr. Cardinals brilliant design ... While he, a graduate of University of Texas, hosting the profession's Gold Medal for Excellence in Architecture, bestowed with the highest honours and medals his native Canada has to offer such as the Officer of the Order of Canada, honoured with 12 Honorary Doctorates by various universities in Canada and the United States, was cynically, eagerly, and viciously dismissed and repudiated from the project and the right to build his own masterpiece. The architect of the most visited building in our Nation's Capital, the Canadian Museum of Civilization, a building four times larger and much more technically complex, was deemed technically incapable of building the National Museum of the American Indian. Yet, unfaltering in his mission of creating unique and beautiful undulating buildings, another of Cardinals' monumental stone buildings, the First Nation's University of Canada in Regina (Saskatchewan) just opened on May 2003 with great fanfare and was dedicated by Prince Edward of England, Earl of Sussex. Also a curvilinear building of singular grace, it was constructed below budget and ahead of schedule.

In Washington DC, the undeniable fact and testimony in mortar and stone is that nobody in the costly designer team or within the construction architect's team ever understood what the

building was truly about. They were in total void of the particulars governing Organic Architecture's concepts and style. Organic Architecture is not merely a fancy style; it's a concept and philosophy with a very unique and particularly creative and production process. The architects that so eagerly took the task of materializing the vision of Mr. Cardinal on the Mall have ultimately failed in deciphering the technology and wisdom planned for the NMAI. Douglas Cardinal's buildings stand unique in the history of architecture. He doesn't follow a particular trend. The vernacular created and expressed by his architecture is very personal. It is a symbiosis of his cultural, ethnic, and social upbringing. To me, it seems that his French flare marries his German boldness and its disciplined one-mindedness for flawless execution is rooted in the Native American values of love and harmony for Nature. All this mentored and cultured by the Baroque style of his Catholic education as one sees Barromini's influence on his work. It is a type of work that doesn't necessarily relate to the academic and rational trends reflected by contemporary architecture, but rather speaks to a deeper level, to one's heart and soul. Mr. Cardinal's uniqueness resides in that he designs by intuition backed by rigorously calculated harmonic proportions. He designs his buildings "inside-out" where the inside and outside are one and the same. The compositions are based on circles where the exterior shape is actually the outcome of the interior's forms. For the National Museum of the American Indian, Mr Cardinal had planed the interiors to reflect the harmonic proportions of different sacred sites of ancient cities of Native America. All this intricate geometry was absolutely discarded by the teams doing the interiors. Indeed to a great loss as the building will not have a sense of architectural cohesion and will have lost the connection to the mystical roots of the Americas. The intuitive sense of wonder and mysticism will be undoubtedly compromised if not absolutely missed, no matter how elaborately executed the interiors will be.

Thus, the leaders of the Smithsonian had forged their political will for the National Museum of the American Indian, and those swept in the controversy could not longer pursue a process of integrity and impeccability in executing the design and realization of the building. They could not comprehend, let alone defend, the need for one architectural leader, the mastermind of the concept, to lead the actual design and construction of the building in collaboration with the leadership of the director of the museum. It seemed that nobody could understand that only the creative genius can execute his own work flawlessly. There were enlightened individuals such as Ben Forgey, Lloyd Kiva Knew and Edith Crutcher who warned that the decision of the Smithsonian could only jeopardize the mastery of the building, both lowering the overall quality of the architecture and skyrocketing the cost of the museum. Amazingly, the Smithsonian, the very institution born to rigorously preserve and authenticate works of art and artefacts of material culture, was unable to comprehend the historical repercussion for such defamation to the architecture. Hence, the Smithsonian Institution reflected the sad anomaly of the 20th century, where the proliferation of Post-Industrial massed-produced objects have left individuals and society itself, void of sensitivity to appreciate and value the elements of art. Time indeed history, will judge the Smithsonian's actions as to why the architect wasn't allowed to execute his own expression of his masterpiece on the Mall. Politics aside, the building itself will speak to the hearts of the millions of individuals who will visit the National Museum of the American Indian as they will indeed wonder who was the man who created this wonder and what happened to him? As in all his buildings the spirit of his intent is strong, and thus in this museum, his legacy lives on.

There will be a Grand Opening in Washington DC on September 21st, where The National Museum of the American Indian will proudly open its doors to the millions of visitors will wander its premises. Those present will celebrate the opening of Mr. Cardinal's vision of architecture on the Mall. What is there for him to celebrate? What is for us, his family and friends to celebrate? As a summary, these are the facts as we lived them.

- 1- The Smithsonian instigated and supported the formation of a new Design Team using Mr. Cardinal's own consultants while DJC was still in Washington working for a resolution and reconciliation with the project
- 2- The Smithsonian (always with the leadership of Director Rick West and encouragement of Secretary Dr. Heyman) hired Mr. Polshek to do a "peer review" on Mr. Cardinal's work to later work on the project himself - a total conflict of interest.
- 3- While peddling for the a couple of hundreds of thousands of dollars, for extra work Mr. Cardinal had to produce, the Smithsonian did not have an issue paying several millions of dollars to Mr. Polshek to recopy Mr. Cardinal's design so that he could present his revised version to the Fine Arts Commission.
- 4- After presentation to the Fine Arts where Mr. Polshek plans for NMAI were unanimously rejected and called "Ugly", the Smithsonian seized the construction plans present by Mr. Cardinal which were developed with the funds loaned (still to be paid) by Anne Rockefeller Roberts.
- 5- The Smithsonian denied consistently all efforts by Anne Rockefeller Roberts who for months hired a conflict resolution expert to return Mr. Cardinal to the project.
- 6- Douglas Cardinal was thus forced to leave Washington D.C. in August 1998 with a million dollar deficit. Clearly a bankruptcy was sought as his reputation was tainted, as the Smithsonian's only justification for the dismissal of his services was to prove him incompetent.
- 7- By word and action, the Smithsonian discredited the person and contribution of Mr. Cardinal calling him a mere conceptual architect as well as tried to destroy his reputation inhibiting other job opportunities.
- 8- As a conclusion we have lived 5 years of hardship as we are still trying to regain the credibility lost by the scandal and recover from the financial burden while leaving the Mall a wondrous legacy for years to come.
- 9- All Americans are owed the knowledge, that due to the Smithsonian leadership, this building was grossly over budget and years behind schedule, as those who tried to interpret Mr. Cardinal's design struggle to do so. While just last May 2003 another Cardinals' monumental stone building, the First Nation's University of Canada just opened below budget and ahead of schedule.
- 10- History will testify that the Smithsonian hindered what could have been Douglas Cardinal's best work and that instead what will stand for millennia on the Mall is a poorly executed traced copy of his creative genius as one witnesses the many technical and aesthetic compromises of his vision.
- 11- No matter what the rhetoric of the Smithsonian will declare, NMAI has become the monument of the exploitation of one man of a strong Native American ascendancy. The misunderstanding of this unique and complex man whose architecture transcends all ethnicity, whose genius is based in the ability to abstract nature's elements so that universally speak to all sensitive souls.
- 12- We owe to the lack of vision of the Smithsonian Institution (again following the lead of Director Rick West and encouraged by former Secretary Dr. Heyman and endorsed by present Secretary Lawrence M. Small) the hard realization that for as long as the symbols of United States will last, what was meant to be the symbol of hope and reconciliation, the powerful building of the National Museum of the American Indian has become a compromise: an injustice done to a man and a missed opportunity for reconciliation, of harmony, grace and love.

What is there for us to celebrate?