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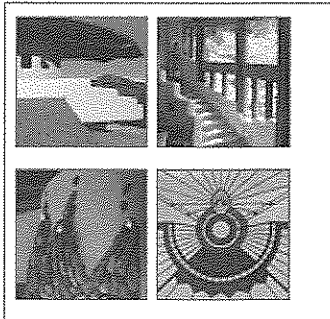
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San Francisco Chronicle

Follow the sun Berkeley architect Craig Henritz takes his inspiration from American Indian structures

Eve Kushner, Special to The Chronicle
Wednesday, November 19, 2003

Five years ago, Berkeley architect Craig Henritz bought an undistinguished 1950s modernist bungalow that he didn't much like. Though he likes curves, he chose a boxy house largely because it borders Indian Rock Park. Of course, real estate sales are all about location, location, location, but Henritz's reasoning is different. He wants to live near a massive boulder of historic and spiritual importance to the Ohlone Indians.



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Intent on immersing himself in the culture, Henritz attends American Indian gatherings, contributes to an indigenous history project on Berkeley's Ohlone Greenway and volunteers services to the California Indian Basketweavers Association.



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Henritz isn't Native American, but this 44-year-old reared in Michigan has felt drawn to the culture for 20 years. He has even identified Native American origins for names and locales in Star Wars movies, figuring, for instance, that "Ewok" came from "Miwok."

His attraction has culminated in a practice in which he designs contemporary houses inspired by American Indian architecture and culture. Blending several of those traditions, Henritz insists he's "not trying to create traditional Native American buildings." When it

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comes to copying the original architecture, "Native Americans today are doing that, re-creating their buildings in many places around this country."

Over the past 15 years, Henritz has completed about a dozen houses or additions reflecting his intentions. Three built since 1996 particularly capture his philosophy: Napo-cha in Napa, SunHawk in Hopland (Mendocino County) and an unnamed house on a Central Coast ridge.

Round, multi-tiered structures with conical roofs, the houses feature central hearths, up to six central timber posts and open, flowing floor plans that make the buildings seem larger than they are.

Most of those aspects come directly from Native American design, but Henritz also works on a metaphoric level, using animal totems as inspirations.

John Schaeffer, who founded Real Goods Solar Living Center, strikes Henritz as a man of vision. Because some Native Americans associate hawks with innovation, he designed Schaeffer a house featuring the hawk totem. From the air, SunHawk roughly resembles a bird, with two wings spreading from a circular center. Hawk imagery dominates the living room, including the tail-feather pattern of the wooden ceiling decking.

Much as the Anasazis of the Southwest did, Henritz designs with the sun in mind, orienting houses and their windows to the south for maximum solar penetration in the winter. This not only makes for the best passive solar design but also gives the sun's cycles primacy, just as they've had in Native American culture.

Henritz's houses even function as sundials and calendars. In Napo-cha at solar noon on clear days, the sun hits an extended rafter tail and a pronged metal sculpture over south-facing french doors. The resulting shadow aligns with triangular stone pieces in the floor, showing the time of year. Homeowners can install markers to be illuminated on birthdays and anniversaries, though equinoxes and solstices are perhaps even more special in these houses.

As the sun rises and sets on those four days, it aligns with certain objects that Henritz and homeowners have selected (and rapidly positioned during solar events), including six lines of rock at the coastal ridgetop house owned by Bradley Brown and Julia Zaslou. Lying in the floor at 30-degree intervals, these lines run from central posts to the circumference of the house. From above, they resemble half a wagon wheel. Indeed, the array was inspired by Native American "medicine wheels," ancient stone arrangements with meaningful astronomical alignments.

Why all this fuss about solar patterns? Henritz feels it's worthwhile to acknowledge the "passing of the seasons," thereby establishing a "strong relationship to the natural world." Historically, solar events gave indigenous people specific information. Henritz says the winter solstice reassured them that the sun wasn't dying and would return a little more each day. And according to Brown, when the sun penetrated a house and hit certain points, they knew to plant crops or perform other seasonal tasks and ceremonies.

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"The sun drives so much that we do," including farming, says Brown. He observes that when you live in a valley and work in an office building, as he and Zaslow once did, "You're not aware of the sun. It doesn't have the same meaning." That's no longer true for the couple, who retired from the dot-com life to build their home and establish Big Basin Vineyards. Zaslow notes, "With this house, you're always involved with the sun. You know which tree the sun will be behind. The house tuned us in to the movement of the sun."

Designing with the sun in mind places Henritz in the company of the greenest of architects. In fact, when it comes to environmentally friendly building, he goes way beyond passive solar design. His houses feature reclaimed, sustainable and certified woods; earth-cooling tubes; solar shading provided by trellises; and considerable thermal mass (like concrete floors stained to look like Kandinsky paintings). SunHawk is off the electrical grid, relying entirely on hydroelectric power and solar panels.

A strong proponent of Rastra, an insulated concrete form made of 85 percent reclaimed polystyrene beads and 15 percent cement, Henritz frequently uses this material in place of wood framing. He delights in how easy Rastra is to sculpt, enabling him to build round structures, as Native Americans often did.

When discussing ways in which American Indian architecture and green design can intersect like this, the soft-spoken, low-key Henritz becomes animated. He emphasizes, for instance, that because Native American structures used resources with extreme efficiency, most would make excellent solar houses if you added glass to the south-facing sides.

Henritz first thought of combining green and Native American technologies 20 years ago. Having just graduated from architecture school at the Pratt Institute in New York City, he was bicycling across the country, trying to realize an ardent vision of creating a national American Indian cultural center. As he went from tribe to tribe (eventually about 100 on that trip), seeking input and collecting letters of support from tribal chiefs, he saw numerous Native American buildings, as well as structures by Frank Lloyd Wright, whom he admires. Henritz also happened upon a North Carolina eco-village employing alternative technologies. By the time he reached the West Coast, he resolved that the cultural center would combine green innovations with indigenous architecture.

By making such a visible project eco-friendly, he hoped to boost the green movement. And by creating a center that educated people about indigenous culture, he thought he could help "bring back what was lost." In his view, "our future could have more of a Native American base to it. One of the biggest losses in the history of our country is that we did not incorporate more Native American culture into what we are and who we are" today.

In Los Angeles he presented his idea to his former boss at Disney, wanting the company to embrace and pursue the vision. No go. Undeterred, Henritz figured he hadn't visited enough tribes, so he biked to Seattle and throughout Alaska.

He then settled in Berkeley because of the university's terrific collection of Native American books and resources. He studied

those for six months while refining his concept, which he sent to Robert Redford. The Sundance creator responded enthusiastically but took no action.

Henritz felt the problem lay with his own lack of credibility as an architect and decided to "refocus into architecture," hoping people would take his idea more seriously someday. As he immerses himself in his profession, he has largely neglected his idea.

Feeling that he has been on a "20-year vision quest," Henritz says his passion about Native American culture serves as a foundation from which his "architecture comes very, very slowly." He laughs self-deprecatingly about the pace, because his choices and methods have kept commissions to a minimum. "I could design and draw a square house in six hours. It'll take me months to design an indigenous house," notes Henritz, whose creations require considerable "energy, soul searching and historical investigation" into how Native Americans once lived in particular regions.

Before designing a home, he consults books and even visits local museums. He explains, "If you want to live efficiently and in tune with the land, you could learn a lot from studying the Native American people who were here."

Aware that he is often "treading on sacred ground," he then makes designs less authentic for fear of offending American Indian groups. He particularly shies away from anything "too closely associated with tribal ceremonies," explaining that because he's not Native American and because his clients usually aren't either, a resemblance would be "inappropriate."

Such cautiousness is vital, according to Wanbli Franklin, a physician who has hired Henritz to design a house in Mendocino. Franklin, who is part Lakota, says, "Native people's architecture is more than a hut or house or hogan but also incorporates our spiritual beliefs, our emotional beliefs, and a lot of history and culture." He adds, "Native people have had a lot of things taken from us. To have our ceremonies taken away as well would be yet one more thing that had been co-opted by the larger society."

He finds it "refreshing" that Henritz takes pains "not to disrespect, not to co-opt, not to offend native people," particularly in the ceremonial aspects of his designs.

Though Henritz labors under these constraints, his work has met with acclaim. Sunset magazine, several "green architecture" books and HD Television's "Home and Garden" show have featured his houses. At the San Francisco Academy of Art, students requested that administrators hire Henritz.

He now teaches there, also lecturing at the San Francisco Institute of Architecture. People have asked him to design houses as far away as Hawaii, Mexico and Australia.

He still feels he lacks the credibility to sell someone on his cultural center idea, but doesn't think he wasted time on the project, viewing that past research as inspiration for his current designs. Pointing to his drawing for the center, which hangs on his office wall, he says,

"Those archetypes are the same designs I've explored with my clients."

Henritz insists he could serve only as consultant to the project, which ultimately "has to be defined by Native American people." He feels the "missing ingredient is a Native American who believes in the project as much as I do. That person will take it from me and make it happen."

Resources

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- E.K.

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