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ACCULTURATION BY DESIGN

ARCHITECTURAL DETERMINISM AND THE MONTANA INDIAN RESERVATIONS, 1870-1930

CARROLL VAN WEST

Everything the Power of the World does is done in a circle. The sky is round like a ball, and I have heard that the earth is round like a ball, and so are all the stars. The wind in its greatest power, whirls. Birds make their nests in circles, for theirs is the same religion as ours. The sun comes forth and goes down again in a circle. The moon does the same, and both are round. Even the seasons form a great circle from childhood to childhood, and so it is in everything where power moves. Our teepees were round like the nests of birds, and these were always set in a circle, the nation’s hoop, a nest of many nests, where the Great Spirit meant for us to hatch our children. But the Wasichus have put us in these square boxes.—Black Elk Speaks

This interpretation of the meaning of space and structure in traditional plains culture cuts right to the heart of the struggle over cultural assimilation on the northern Plains in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Black Elk’s words do more than underscore the different cultural values of the plains people; as verbal evidence of the architectural orientation of past plains culture, they remind us that the introduction of squared and rectangular structures on the landscape was a disturbing intrusion to the shape of the built environment as envisioned by plains people.

In their studies of the acculturation process on the northern Plains, scholars have rarely looked at the architecture of the reservation missions, designed and constructed by well-intentioned missionaries and often funded by federal dollars. The buildings and structures that constituted the early missions, however, were significant weapons in the struggle to “civilize” the Native American. For many Indian reformers, the adoption of new concepts of space, building form, and building arrangement became an important test of the willingness and ability of the Plains Indian to accept the gifts of a “superior” culture.¹

A close look at the built environment of
the Blackfeet missions of the late nineteenth century and of the Northern Cheyenne villages laid out in the early twentieth century shows how the Jesuits and then federal officials hoped to use deliberately designed space to prepare the Montana Indians for the world outside the reservation. This overview also uncovers how changing perceptions about the ultimate fate of the Plains Indians often determined the designed environments the Indians faced.

THE BLACKFEET MISSIONS

Jesuit priests, led by Pierre DeSmet, proselytized among the native peoples of present-day Montana as early as the mid-nineteenth century, and their efforts among the Flathead and other Salish people met with substantial success. The Jesuits’ experience with the Blackfeet, however, was another matter. The priests believed that converting this northern plains tribe to Christianity would be extremely difficult. DeSmet wrote that the Blackfeet “are the most treacherous and wily set of savages among all the nations of the American desert.” To reverse the intransigence of the Blackfeet, DeSmet and the Jesuits turned to an acculturation strategy that had already proven successful in South America. They adopted a process of education, conversion, and assimilation that scholars describe as the Paraguay Reduction System. 2

In Paraguay, the Jesuits’ program for converting the native was grounded in a deliberate arrangement of space. A central feature of the Paraguay system was the mission compound, where the Indians would live and work on a year-round basis, continually supervised by the priests and physically segregated from the influence of traditional native culture. Here, placed in a setting of enclosed workshops, fenced-in fields, barns, dormitories, and ceremonial buildings, the Jesuits could constantly indoctrinate the Indians, both in the classroom and through the physical constraints of the built environment. If the Indians were exposed to a more constrained sense of space, the Jesuits assumed, then eventually they would be eased into a more sedentary, agricultural culture. 3

What the Jesuits attempted in Paraguay was not new. For centuries reformers have tried to manipulate the built environment in order to encourage the correct behavior dictated by the dominant cultural values of the age. In our own time, “model” housing projects can be found in our larger cities. When they were opened for occupation, reformers, politicians, and the press praised these new buildings as a quick-fix design to end urban plight and poverty. A different arrangement of space, they assumed, would uplift the aspirations of the slum dwellers and soon lead to new and more socially acceptable patterns of behavior. But too many of these carefully planned built environments, complete with parks and recreation areas, become the slums of a new generation. 4

Why do these projects so often fail? One important reason lies in the assumptions of their designers, who have believed that a properly planned environment would overwhelm the occupants’ cultural legacy and help them behave in more socially acceptable ways. This belief, in effect, amounts to “architectural determinism,” a variation of environmental determinism. In the history of the built environment of the Native American reservations on the northern Plains, architectural determinism is a constant. It helps to explain why missionaries and reservation officials encouraged (or even ordered) the Indians to exchange their tipis for square dwellings, to live in the same place on a permanent basis, and to worship in church buildings rather than practice “heathen” services in open structures such as the medicine lodge. Many reformers believed that if Native Americans would merely live like white people—by residing in a house that stood on a village street—they would take a giant step towards their assimilation into the “human race.”

Faith in the power of the environment to transform a people’s culture helps to explain the optimism of late nineteenth-century Indian
reformers who believed that the Indians could be fully assimilated. Scholars such as Lewis Morgan, John Wesley Powell, and, later, Otis T. Mason, along with the reformers Alice Fletcher and Thomas J. Morgan, stressed the importance of environment as a cultural determinant. The Native Americans, in the view of many American intellectuals, behaved like "savages" because their environment dictated such a way of life. This view combined with the Peace Policy of the Grant administration and initiatives in Indian education to introduce a new approach to Indian affairs, one based on the assumption that the Indians possessed untapped intellectual potential that, once unleashed in the confines of the proper environment, would allow them to evolve into acculturated members of society.  

Pierre DeSmet's adaptation of the Paraguay Reduction System to the Blackfeet reservation was a classic example of architectural determinism, as envisioned and practiced in nineteenth-century America. DeSmet's initial acculturation strategy became the basic Jesuit blueprint for their Montana missions. His faith in the transforming power of the built environment, however, was not put into practice until the 1870s, when the Catholic Church adopted more aggressive education programs, largely in reaction to Protestant gains among the Indians during Grant's Peace Policy and to the federal government's renewed interest in Indian education. Over the next generation, the Jesuits on the Blackfeet reservation, in hopes of uplifting the Indians to civilization, established a built environment that introduced radical changes in that reservation's landscape.

In 1874, the Catholic Church established the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions, a step that marked "a new surge in Catholic activity" in Montana and throughout the country. That year, the Jesuits permanently established St. Peter's Mission among the Blackfeet. But also in 1874, the federal government relocated the southern boundary of the Blackfeet reservation about sixty miles to the north, isolating the Jesuits from the center of the Blackfeet population and making their missionary efforts rather difficult. St. Peter's mission began with rudimentary facilities, which primarily served the twenty-five Canadian métis families living in the vicinity. The chapel was a one-story rectangular, hand-hewn log building, which the priests soon expanded with a log addition that roughly doubled its size. For their residences, the priests also constructed several unadorned log cabins, attaching them to the west end of the expanded chapel and creating an L-shaped mission complex with courtyard.  

In 1882 the Jesuits separated the log cabins from the chapel and attached a clapboard residence for the priests and male students to the west end of the chapel. They also placed a free-standing clapboard bell tower at the right angle where the new residence and chapel met. In December 1883, Louis Riel became the mission's teacher, and his first twenty-two students were almost exclusively métis.  

In June 1884, Riel left St. Peter's to assume the leadership of the métis community of the Canadian Plains. That October, five Ursuline nuns arrived at the mission and changed the direction of its educational program. In 1885 the sisters opened the St. Peter's Industrial School for Girls with eleven Blackfeet students.  

The establishment of a boarding school reflected not only the influence of Jesuit tradition but also mirrored a common assumption of missionaries, Indian reformers, and educators. As the federal Indian school superintendent remarked in 1886, "Only by complete isolation of the Indian child from his savage antecedents can he satisfactorily be educated." Federal policy in the mid-1880s strongly supported boarding school programs for the Native Americans. This endorsement largely resulted from the success of Richard Henry Pratt's Carlisle Indian School, where students were sent from the western reservations for a crash course in "civilization."  

At the boarding schools the children would be taught the industrial, agricultural, and domestic skills appropriate for their sex and future place in society. In Montana the Jesuits desired to establish an environment
that would uplift the Indians and, by combining the proper environment with a broad education, the priests hoped to show the Blackfeet "the white man's road" to civilization. They also planned for the boarding school experience to infiltrate all native culture eventually. Once basic skills had been achieved, a young adult could select a classmate as a spouse and the couple would be given farmland near the mission. There, the young couple would serve as a model of Jesuit success to Indians and whites alike, and their physical proximity to the mission would protect the converts from the temptation of native culture. In time, this vital community of acculturated Indians would expand until the reservation's built environment was in harmony with Christian values. As Father L. B. Palladino argued in 1892, the mission boarding school and the Indian tipi village brought "civilization and uncivilization face to face—the former with its home and dwelling, its food, its industries, its manner, its cleanliness, its field and garden, its stock, its ease, its comfort and its plenty, and the latter with the whole train of its wretched contrasts." Physically separated from native culture, the schools would force the Indians "to see, hear, smell, touch, taste, and compare the blessings of the one with the wretchedness of the other."

By 1887 enough funding had been secured through the federal "contract school" program and private sources to allow the Jesuits to implement fully their mission blueprint. They constructed the boys' school and dormitory, a large multistory stone building with a mansard roof and dormer windows and a central, square gable cupola (fig. 1). Here the Jesuits subjected the pupils to a highly structured educational regime. Most instruction took place within the building, with classwork and lectures in the morning and industrial shop-

work in the afternoon. The building contained both a blacksmith and cobbler shop, together with areas for training in carpentry skills, where the Blackfeet could learn to construct buildings in the accepted patterns. The Jesuits also set aside enough space in the building to provide sleeping quarters and a dining room. Much of a typical day for the Blackfeet male at St. Peter's was spent indoors. The boys, however, did experience some structured outdoor activities. The mission had a garden, a small stock of cattle, and a herd of forty-eight milk cows. The boys had the responsibility of managing the garden and livestock, so a part of each day took place in an outdoor setting carefully defined by fences, gates, and outbuildings.¹

A large donation of money allowed the Ursuline sisters to open a girls' school and dormitory in 1892 (fig. 2). This massive building mixed Queen Anne and Second Empire detailing in its mansard roof, dormer windows, and central four-sided domed tower. Inside, the Blackfeet girls learned domestic skills such as sewing, washing, housecleaning, and cooking. Some students learned how to bake, with one of the old residence cabins serving as the bakery. Like the boys, the girls slept, ate, and studied in the same building. To expand the educational program, the Ursuline sisters in 1896 built the "Opera House," where they taught instrumental music, dancing, painting, wood carving, and embroidery. The Opera House also had an auditorium for musical concerts.²

But in 1896 the federal government began to phase out its support of sectarian schools nationwide. The missionary effort at St. Peter's was an immediate victim, and the end of federal support forced the closing of both the
boys' and girls' schools for Indians. The closing of St. Peter's allowed the Jesuits and Ursulines to concentrate their missionary efforts among the Blackfeet at the Holy Family Mission, initially established in 1886 and located some one hundred miles to the north, well within the reservation's boundaries. The mission soon represented a second Jesuit response to the federal policy encouraging educational efforts, sectarian if need be, on the Native American reservations. Holy Family's boarding school dates to 1890, when the Jesuits opened a two-and-a-half-story wood-frame school and dormitory, with physically separate wings for boys and girls. Five years later, the Jesuits established a more permanent presence when they built an impressive new boys' school, using sandstone taken from adjacent river bluffs (fig. 3). Like its counterparts at St. Peter's, the new school featured some Second Empire detailing in its mansard roof and dormer windows. In this building, most of the boys' daily activities would take place. The basement served as a recreation room while the first floor held the superior's office, a classroom, the library-sitting room, the mission post office, and a chapel. On the second floor, space was allocated for an additional classroom and dormitory rooms for both the Jesuits and the Blackfeet boys.

In 1898 the Jesuit priests and Ursuline sisters opened the new girls' school and dormitory. Also built from sandstone blocks taken from the river bluffs, the first floor contained a classroom, a kitchen, and separate dining rooms for the priests, nuns, boys and

girls. The Ursulines used the second floor for a chapel, classrooms, and dormitory rooms.

Although the two schools and dormitories largely defined the physical constrictions the Blackfeet children daily faced at Holy Family, the children also worked in other segregated surroundings. Located adjacent to the girls’ school (and finally attached to it in 1937) was the mission bakery. A large brick oven stood nearby. The girls also worked in the preserve cellar, where vegetables from the mission’s garden were stored. Several outbuildings defined the boys’ outdoor work space. In 1892 the priests directed the construction of an irrigation ditch. The boys tended the cow and hay barns, the hog and chicken houses, tool shed, and grain elevator; learned to manage a herd of between two hundred and four hundred cattle; and milked between two and nine milk cows. The distinct spheres of work assigned to the boys and girls were mirrored in the mission’s arrangement of space. Rarely did the girls and boys meet each other. Their educational activities were carefully segregated into two distinct physical spaces. They ate dinner in separate rooms; they sat at separate sides of the chapel; and, with a board fence and shed defining the recreation area, they even played in separate physical spaces.

The formal architectural detailing found at both Holy Family and St. Peter’s missions was a significant component of the designed environment. Buildings such as the ornate girls’ school at St. Peter’s, when compared to the quite different rustic surroundings, were more or less visual absurdities. But although clearly intrusions on the landscape, these buildings also reflected the idealism of the Catholic missionary effort. The Jesuits and Ursulines, along with a significant number of Indian reformers in the 1880s and 1890s, believed that there was hope for the Indians, that they could be fully assimilated. Their faith in progress suggested that Indians could emerge as Indian Americans, full participants in American society. Education was the key and the proper learning environment was very important, for it would convince the Indians, as Father Palladino commented, of the superior beauty, cleanliness, and comfort of the American way of life. Consequently, the elaborate, sometimes even striking, school buildings and dormitories at both missions had a double “meaning”: they reflected the missionaries’ faith in human progress and their belief in the shaping power of the environment while, at the same time, they allegedly convinced Blackfeet children of the superiority of Christianity and white civilization.

For the Blackfeet certainly, the missions’ buildings and their architecture represented a radical alteration in their traditional built environment. The cultural conflict inherent in the different ways that Indians and Euroamericans ordered and shaped their environment helps to explain why the Indians so often refused to walk the “white man’s road.” The tipi was the basic Plains Indian dwelling. Its size depended on the number in the family, but on the average, this conical-shaped structure, made of thin pine poles and buffalo skins, measured about sixteen feet in diameter and was large enough to house a family of eight and their belongings. There were no inside partitions in a tipi, although the Blackfeet, like all Plains Indians, carefully delineated space within the lodge for each family member. Within the tipi, the family would sleep, eat, and entertain most visitors—a strikingly different spatial arrangement than that of the mission boarding schools, where there were separate rooms for eating and sleeping and the sexes were segregated.

Tipis, in stark contrast to Euroamerican dwellings, also were very portable structures. At times, the tipi might stay in one place for several weeks; at other times, it might be moved almost every day. This trait of Plains Indian lifeways made the Euroamerican tradition of a permanent homesite quite alien. Even after the establishment of the Montana reservations, the Native Americans preferred to live in their tipis or wickiups and would sooner use army tents as dwellings than cabins or frame houses.

That religious ceremonies at the missions
always took place at the enclosed chapel was another disorienting experience for the Blackfeet. Plains cultures utilized several separate structures for religious ceremonies, ranging from the shelters that individuals constructed for the vision quest to the sweat lodge to the much more elaborate and communally used and constructed medicine lodge. Only the sweat lodge was an entirely closed space.  

But the arrangement of work space was perhaps the most radical aspect of the built environment that Blackfeet children encountered at the St. Peter's and Holy Family missions. The girls discovered that almost all of their work took place inside the schools and dormitories or in separate bakeries, washhouses, and cellars. The same was true for the boys, for even those who worked “outside” in the gardens or with the livestock found their work space defined by barns, fences, and gates, and by the amount of land watered by irrigation ditches. Rather than exploiting resources in a seasonal pattern, the Blackfeet children returned to the same workplace day after day. In terms of Blackfeet notions of space, the children lived in a very constricted physical environment at the mission boarding schools. For the Jesuits and Ursulines who administered the schools, that confinement was the natural and desired result of the boarding school experience.

By the turn of the century, the Blackfeet, who hated the confined spaces of the boarding schools no matter how “beautiful” their surroundings were, might have been surprised to know that many federal officials and Indian reformers were having doubts about the whole boarding school program. In 1895 William M. Moss, reporting to his superiors in Washington about St. Peter's Mission, sensed the abrupt and overwhelming changes the Blackfeet faced at the school's dormitories. He remarked that “everything here is so very fine and nice that when [the children] go home the contrast will be too great for them to bear.” This observation soon became dogma among federal officials. In an era of budget cutting, officials questioned why the boarding schools had to be so attractive when the homes of the Native Americans seemed to them so squalid. In 1901 Commissioner of Indian Affairs William A. Jones reported that “the methods of education which have been pursued for the past generation have not produced the results anticipated,” and in time he became convinced that the primary culprit was the boarding school. As Jones observed in 1904, boarding schools wasted money because they were grounded in “the fallacious idea of ‘bringing the Indian into civilization and keeping him there.’ ” How could the schools succeed, wondered Jones, when they taught the Indian “that his reservation home is a hell on earth,” but a hell to which “inevitably he must and does return.” Jones was not alone in his criticism of the nation's boarding schools. Congressman Theodore Burton with unconscious irony reminded his colleagues that the true American boy “loves to spend his time in the clear sunlight and is not penned up within the walls of a boarding school... If we do our duty to the Indian we will give something of the self-same reliance.” By 1904, Richard Pratt had closed Carlisle; a new era in Indian education had begun.

This new era witnessed quite different assumptions about the fate of the Native Americans. No longer did reformers, Christian missionaries, and federal officials believe that the proper education and environment would raise the Indian to “civilization.” Social scientists at the turn of the century insisted that Indians were hopelessly primitive and lacked the mental abilities to receive a liberal education; the specter of genetic inferiority raised its ugly head. Those entrusted with the Indian’s education agreed; a practical education was for the best. In 1900, Superintendent of Indian Schools Estelle Reel observed that the Indian student must know how to read and write, “but it is not wise to spend years over subjects for which he will have no use in later life and for which he has but little taste now, when the time could be more wisely employed in acquiring skill in the industrial arts.”
DAY SCHOOLS ON THE NORTHERN CHEYENNE RESERVATION

In the public schools of America during the early twentieth century, educators increasingly turned to vocational education as a progressive solution to the need for pliant, but skilled, workers. Literature and history were reserved for middle and upper-class children; learning a skill furnished working-class children a way to earn a living. Francis Leupp, who became the commissioner of Indian Affairs in 1905, “attempted a thorough-going reconstruction” of the federal government’s Indian education programs, “based on a belief in Indian backwardness.” Leupp, in particular, embraced the new curriculum of vocational education. Disapproving of the idea of the federally supported boarding school, he placed his faith in the day school, where Indian children would go to school during the day and return home every night. Leupp and others did not believe that the Indians could be assimilated; at best, they only could be absorbed into society as manual laborers.

This change in direction at the federal level manifested itself on the Blackfeet reservation. With St. Peter’s Mission closed, the Jesuits and Ursulines concentrated their efforts at Holy Family Mission and kept the boarding school in operation until the Second World War. In keeping with national trends, the missionaries developed a more vocational program so that children would “learn the attitudes, habits and skills [they] would learn in a Christian rural home” and would “accept the fact that daily hard work is the common lot of Montana ranchers.”

But the best place to study how early twentieth-century attitudes about Indian education became physically represented in the built environment of the Native American reservations of Montana is the Birney Day School Village on the Northern Cheyenne reservation. Established between 1907 and 1910, Birney Village was an ambitious federal attempt to create planned Indian communities out of the scattered settlement patterns traditional to the Northern Cheyennes.

By 1900, 350 Northern Cheyenne families resided in log houses, but five years later most tribal members still lived in tipis or tents, individually located throughout the reservation. U.S. Indian Service officials considered this arrangement of domestic dwellings to be intolerable. The creation of reservation towns became the Indian Service’s new tool of acculturation. In 1907 agency officials decided to combine two recent policy initiatives to change conditions on the reservation. In keeping with federal programs that encouraged the irrigation of tribal land, they directed the construction of the Birney irrigation ditch. At the same time, they approved plans to build the Birney Day School. The agency officials set aside forty acres of the irrigated land for the school’s instructional program and allotted some of the remaining land to selected Northern Cheyennes, who would be required to move to Birney Village and to enroll their children in the day school. The Indian Service hoped that the establishment of Birney Village would centralize government services, provide better farming opportunities for the Northern Cheyennes, and create a better educational environment for the Indian children.

In the eyes of federal officials, Birney Village was an ideal planned community. By 1910 the day school, large enough to house forty-seven students, was in operation. Within a short walk of the school stood the teacher’s residence, a model U.S. Indian Service cottage of the Craftsman style. The village contained a Mennonite Church, which served as the religious center of Birney Village. It also had a granary, blacksmith shop, barn, storage shed, ice house, and Indian police headquarters (fig. 4).

The log cabin homes of the Northern Cheyennes constituted the majority of the village’s buildings. The dwellings of Gordon Strange Owl, Holy Wolf, Clarence Medicine Top, Clubfoot, and Josephine Limpy were one-story, one-room log cabins with mud chinking, wood-board roofs, and wood-framed windows and doors. These starkly unadorned
dwellings, while sharing the single open space of a tipi, differed from the tipi in several significant ways. The cabins defined space in terms of a square rather than a cone. Compared to the tipi flap, which could be raised or lowered to improve ventilation, the cabin windows were stationary and could not be adjusted to the wind direction. Poor cabin ventilation and high interior temperatures were often the result. Most important, the cabin was a permanent dwelling; it could not be easily moved from one place to another. Consequently, the Northern Cheyennes found themselves physically tied to one particular location within the village. The cabins also determined the future architectural character of the town's built environment. Cabins built thirty years later were almost identical in appearance to the first dwellings in Birney Village.

There was nothing in the buildings at Birney intended to uplift the soul or enliven the quest for knowledge. The buildings were largely unadorned, even drab. When compared to the buildings at St. Peter's and Holy Family missions, the "meaning" of Birney's log cabins is evident. They were physical artifacts representing the pessimism of Indian reformers and educators in the early twentieth century. Birney Day School Village reflected the assumptions of educators who believed that Indians could not be trained in the higher intellectual skills. The children, so reasoned federal officials and educators, lacked the necessary mental capacity. The day school village only required an environment in which the Native Americans could learn to be steady and dependable workers. So its dwellings were simple domiciles for manual laborers. Birney Village did not pretend to create an environment that would uplift Indian children and encourage them to become cultured Americans; rather its built environment was a reminder that the reformers and educators of that time merely hoped that the Indians could become good workers.

Conclusion

No matter the form that architectural determinism took on the northern Plains, the Blackfeet and the Northern Cheyennes retained much of their traditional culture. The built environment, whether high style or vernacular, failed to transform the Native Americans. Their values remained defined by traditional Indian values and not by the assumptions and beliefs of the average middle-class white American or even by those of the average working-class American. Like the previous efforts among the Blackfeet at St. Peter's and Holy Family missions, the Birney Village experiment, although skillfully combining educational and religious indoctrina-
tion with a conscious manipulation of the Indians’ built environment, had failed in its purpose of absorbing the Native Americans into the way of life of industrial America.

Efforts are still being made to shape the reservation environment into patterns that, in the eyes of our dominant culture, are sensible, orderly, and acceptable. But the past history of acculturation by design on the Montana Indian reservations suggests that such planned environments reflect more the attitudes and assumptions of their builders than the real needs of the Native Americans. The Montana experience calls into question the value of “architectural determinism” as a tool of acculturation.

NOTES

1. The same test held true for immigrants and other minorities of the era. In the late nineteenth century and during the progressive period, reformers believed strongly in the transforming power of a properly designed environment. They believed that all minorities and working-class Americans could be encouraged to become “true Americans” if only they lived in the right type of dwelling. Architects such as Calvert Vaux and Ernest Flagg urged designs that would “ordain a certain kind of family life,” that of middle-class America. Educators of the period perceived the boarding school as an ideal environment for both Indians and working-class whites. By educating students away from the vice of urban America, they believed, the problems of urban poverty and crime could be solved. See Gwendolyn Wright, Building the Dream (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1981), pp. 125, 73–134.


5. Gutman, People and Buildings, pp. 170–84.


13. “St. Peter’s Mission Church,” Montana SHPO.


29. Listing of separate dwellings in “Birney Day School Village Inventory,” Montana SHPO.