



# *Design for First Nations' Schools — Learning in Four Directions*

By Vivian Manasc

**F**irst Nations' school design is first about retrieving the forms and ways of sharing knowledge and images that exist in the community and its families. The connection between storytelling and how aboriginal students learn is important and must be reflected in the design and construction of First Nations' schools. This article explores the many lessons Manasc Isaac Architects has learned – from the importance of storytelling, to the value of engaging community members in design, to the essential value of involving local people in the construction of the schools. We look to a future when First Nations' schools are designed by First Nations' architects, who bring their own culture and language to bear on school design and apply the lessons learned about values, culture and community involvement to the design of public and private school facilities across the country.

Storytelling. The importance of stories. Memory in stories. Memory that is told from elder to youth. Memory that engages and enchants. Stories that are visual more than they are verbal. Stories told when they are asked for. Teaching in the teachable moments. This is what we learned. That is what we were taught.

*But how can architects design schools that are bound by structured educational rules, Department of Indian Affairs space standards, and curriculum established outside of the cultural context? How can architects design learning environments that are suitable for students who need to learn differently?*

# Design for First Nations' Schools



**Saddle Lake School**

Schools have been built for decades in reserve communities – standard schools without meaning and without context, residential schools, day schools, vandalized and abandoned schools. These schools acquired meaning very different than what was intended – perhaps not for all the students, but for many. Little learning and much hatred grew in these schools – hatred of teachers, of structure and of the whole idea of school. Many of these students are now parents and still see little purpose in encouraging formal education.

First Nations' school design is about retrieving the love of learning, of teaching and of sharing knowledge and images that exist in the community and its families. It is about stories that are told when they are asked for and expressing the connection between these stories and the desire to learn in new containers. How do we find the connection? How does it express itself?



**Saddle Lake School - hallway**

## *Lessons learned*

Over the past twenty years Manasc Isaac Architects has designed over 20 First Nations' community facilities including schools, community centres, healing centres and other buildings and has learned a few things about what works and, perhaps more, about what doesn't. We have designed buildings that are iconic and inspirational, as well as buildings that are more modest in their aspirations.

### *Lesson 1: Engaging the community*

The key to learning is exploring ideas as a community and capturing images that are evocative of the collective imagination. Community members, elders, teachers, parents and children, who are engaged in the vision for the new school, define the context of that facility. Images explored through workshops, collages and visioning sessions resonate with the community. Architects become the facilitators of the inspiration and the "mediums" or "shaman", who transform the community's vision into a building that still somehow meets all the "rules of engagement". Architects are the translators between the worlds of conventional educational facilities design and traditional styles of learning and teaching.



**Driftpile School - feather-like corridor space**

We also learned that the translation sometimes fails. Some schools in reserve communities, however iconic, still struggle to attract students, parents and teachers. Politics within the community is a factor. Often, those who are involved in building the school contribute significantly to its success. Building is an act of creative collaboration. When community members are involved in construction, the building takes on a place of pride. Carpenters, electricians, plumbers and general laborers can be trained in most reserve communities. Sometimes apprenticeship programs are put into place or a construction manager is engaged who hires local trades and labor to complete much of the project. Often, funding agencies require outside general contractors to take on much of the risk of construction.

### *Lesson 2: Build with local labor and businesses*

Projects built with local labor leave the strongest legacy. Over 90 percent of the construction on a number of the First Nations' school projects was completed by local workers. These people,



**Driftpile School - multi-purpose room with circular ceiling**

who continue to live in the community, tell stories of the building of the school and share in its purpose and vision. When this happens, there is less vandalism and higher student enrollment. There are, of course, uncounted economic benefits from the construction dollars remaining in the local economy.

### **Lesson 3: Build a vision**

Identifying and exploring the community's vision, and translating both the religious and the formal elements of its meaning into architecture are critical to designing schools for indigenous peoples. There are many layers of meaning to be explored in every community and many First Nations' communities have conflicting visions and values. The school must be healing, safe and nurturing. It must be vibrant and robust. It must be recognizable but respectful. It may be literal or it may be more abstract; but it has to be a story-carrier.

The following schools designed between 1985 and 2005 illustrate the ideas of community vision and community involvement.

### **First Nations' Schools**

#### **Saddle Lake School**

At Saddle Lake in Alberta, we learned about the "four directions" and about the eagle child story and the traditional way that stories are "asked for". We were invited to ask for a sacred story for the building. The design of the school at Saddle Lake embodies these early learnings with its ceremonial entrance and a story-telling amphitheatre in the east, its colors of the four directions, and the

eagle child story abstracted in the pattern of the linoleum and legible only to those who know. The Saddle Lake School is built of wood to create warmth and strength, and has a strong teepee-like roof over the circular gathering space. All the millwork was built in the community in a millwork shop that was started for this project. Architects were retained to prepare shop drawings instead of just reviewing them.

#### **Driftpile School**

At Driftpile, a Cree community located on Lesser Slave Lake in Alberta, the school reflects the shape of a feather. Eagles nesting on the lakeshore are seen to bring strength and vision to the students. Eagle feathers, twirling gently earthward, are represented in the form of the school. This K-12 school includes classrooms, a large community gymnasium, spaces for industrial arts and home economics and other typical school facilities. Many of these have been adapted to the community's purposes, enabling the teaching of traditional crafts and art-forms.

#### **O'Chiese School**

The school at O'Chiese, in the Rocky Mountains, was designed to re-interpret an older school building. Adding teepee-shaped central spaces created a place for a local artist to paint a mural and reclaim learning for the community. The central multipurpose room is round, encouraging dancing, drumming and story-telling. The home economics room is set up to let girls and boys make jingle-dresses and regalia, respectively, for the summer pow-wow season.



**O'Chiese School - interior view**

#### **Peguis School**

At Peguis, north of Winnipeg in Manitoba, a more complex picture



**O'Chiese School - column detail**

emerged. A clear desire for a robust masonry school challenged the community to initiate a masonry trades training program. A number of journeymen masons emerged with effective skills. Many of the teachers live in community, which adds a level of commitment to the success of both the building and the on-going process of learning and teaching. The integration of color and pattern was an integral part of the vision for Peguis School. Community members, who participated in a series of design workshops, expressed the need for light-filled, vibrant environments to stimulate learning and cultural identity. Using the bright red, green and yellow colors of Peguis' flag, the patterns of star blankets and the footprints of animals found in the area, we identified the unique character of each classroom, and by extension, each student.

## *Amiskwaciy Academy*

The Amiskwaciy Academy is Edmonton Public School District's foray into aboriginal education. Adapting a former air terminal building to the needs of a dynamic learning environment was a significant challenge but one made easier by the integration of teachers and students in the design process. This urban aboriginal high school focuses on academic excellence as well as traditional culture and crafts to revive language and culture. Language is a key component of all First Nations' schools. Some students are taking Cree or Dene or Saulteaux "immersion" programs where many courses in early grades are taught in the traditional language. This requires more than just language labs; the architecture must respond to a different understanding of the world.

## *Reflections*

Are we making progress? To some extent, we have created schools that are more meaningful, more evocative and clearly different from the schools that exist in the neighboring communities. In some cases, these schools are effective – although it is often the quality of teaching and educational leadership that are key to the ongoing retention and success of students. In other cases, the success is attributed to the quality or spirit of the school – the light, the shapes and proportions of the spaces, the colors and the textures. There is still a long way to go though the time will come when First Nations' communities will re-imagine teaching and learning methods, and create new learning environments to support these methods for many of their children.

Architects who work with Aboriginal communities continue to become more effective facilitators of design process, take the time to engage the community and seek the images and feelings that emerge from the "vision quest". Perhaps there's an opportunity to learn from the community – and recognize that those values and traditions are in fact sacred and respected. Reflecting the elders' stories and the spirit of the place, and applying outstanding design skill will result in the on-going variety of design and construction of schools for aboriginal students and their parents and grandparents. Perhaps the students who are going through these schools today will design even more responsive and reflective learning environments in the future. Perhaps some of those lessons and some of those Architects will reach our public and private schools as well.

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**Vivian Manasc** is Principal of Manasc Isaac Architects, a 30-person architectural firm based in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Vivian has led the integrated design workshops of many of the firm's notable projects, including the Saddle Lake School, the Driftpile School, the Athabasca Health and Healing Centre, the O'Chiese School and the Amiskwaciy Academy. Vivian completed an Architectural degree at McGill University and an MBA at the University of Alberta. She is a director of the Canada Green Building Council, a member of the LEED Faculty, and a director and vice-president of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada. Manasc Isaac Architects ([www.miarch.com](http://www.miarch.com)) has been recognized with a number of Architectural Awards, including the Alberta Association of Architects Awards of Excellence (Saddle Lake School, Driftpile School), CEFPI Awards (WP Wagner School), the Prairie Design Awards (Bushe Gas Bar), and the Governor General's Award in Architecture (Yukon Visitor Centre). Vivian is also an Adjunct Professor of Architecture at the University of Calgary, and a founding member of the Innovative Practice Group in Architecture. She is the co-author, with Cheryl Mahaffy, of "Agora Borealis, engaging in sustainable architecture". Author's address: Manasc Isaac Architects Ltd, 10225 100th Avenue, Edmonton, Alberta, T5J0A1, Canada; [Vivian@miarch.com](mailto:Vivian@miarch.com).