Daniel Millette

Re-Building Memories:
On the Reconstruction
of a “Traditional” Longhouse

The disappearance of traditions is a world cultural phenomenon and not a new one. Lamenting the loss of “the old ways,” for example, goes back at least to the Roman times and probably much earlier. However, the increasing frequency and rapid acceleration of the loss of cultural mores is somewhat a more recent occurrence. This has been well documented in countries like France, where Pierre Nora, amongst others, speaks of disappearing milieux. In Canada, where there has been an ongoing decline of traditional ways at least since the arrival of Europeans, there seems to be a reluctance to recognize that occurrence. And nowhere is that more prevalent than within the world of First Nations, where customs and belief systems have, to a great extent, been forgotten. Or have they?

This paper focuses on what had been thought to be a disappearing milieu: the traditional institution of the Coast Salish longhouse. The longhouse was, or “is” rather, associated with a host of cultural practices such as naming ceremonies, family and community law dispensation, and communal actions such as weddings. I want to briefly look at the architecture that houses this institution, leaving out the cultural activities per se and simply considering the design, which—for its amalgamation of traditional and modern construction techniques alone—is worth a close look. This descriptive paper is only the beginning of a broader study that encompasses the social implications of the longhouse and provides a theoretical framework for its study and it concentrates on the Tsawwassen community, located along the shores of the Georgia Strait, approximately one hour south of Vancouver, British Columbia. A simple argument is used: traditional building designs, assumed to have disappeared at Tsawwassen, remain and, in fact, combine with present-day materials and techniques to form a new “type” that has, as of yet, not been considered by the architectural literature.

Probably the best chroniclers of North-American native architecture are Peter Nabokov and Robert Easton; their descriptive accounts of the structures erected by First Nations are brought together in their book on Native American Architecture as they link bands, tribes, and clans to geography, building ma-
Fig. 2. Tsawwassen Longhouse under construction: a traditional post-and-beam structure.
(Photo: Daniel Millette)

Fig. 3. Tsawwassen Longhouse. The post-and-beam structure is covered with plywood sheathing and asphalt shingles while the stud wall frame is covered with traditional cedar planks.
(Photo: Daniel Millette)

Details of the traditional longhouse at Tsawwassen persist in two fields: first, the ethnographic descriptions and concluding depictions of ethnographers and anthropologists, then, in archaeological records. For the purpose of this paper, I will limit myself to the interviews and conclusions of one anthropologist in particular, Homer Barnett, who worked intensely with the Tsawwassen people during the mid 1900's.

According to Barnett, the longhouse at Tsawwassen had the same basic characteristics as that of other Coast Salish peoples,
including the Musqueam, located north of the Tsawwassen village. It was a shed-roofed building, sloped towards the rear, with four main posts, the back ones lower than the front ones. Large beams—approximately 20 to 22 metres long—spanned from front to back. There may have been additional posts at intermediate distances between the front and the back, depending on the span and beam strength. Poles extended from beam to beam, and from post to post; cedar planks covered the entire outer surfaces (roof and walls) and there were partitions inside. There was little or no decoration.19

Still according to Barnett’s notes and interviews carried out in the 1930’s20 with Tsawwassen Chief Joe, the longhouse (as occupied by Chief Joe in the 1860’s) was split into two spaces, one some 55 metres long, while the other, approximately 95 metres. That was a large structure and the recollections of Chief Joe should come as no surprise that the site chosen to build the new longhouse would be located along the shore. The original site was made completely unusable as the major highway21 leading to a ferry causeway was built atop its ruins. Thus the selected area is relatively prominent, not as inconspicuous as more traditional examples.

Two frames delineate the space resulting from the design (fig. 1): one is a traditional post-and-beam structure that generally reflects the above description of a longhouse, although we are not talking about a shed-roofed structure. The second is a contemporary stud wall system that encloses, for the most part, the former. The first frame pierces the second and reaches upwards to form a 12 metres high, pitched roof (fig. 2). It is supported by large posts resting on concrete pads. The posts are some 70 centimetres in diameter and are linked together at the top by beams, about 22 metres across. The bays resulting from the post-and-beam assemblies are linked, laterally, with beams, also about 50 centimetres in width. Smaller cross-members are installed throughout. The eight posts—four on each side—define what will be the main, unobstructed space inside. The roof assembly is made up of an A-frame of 50 centimetres beams tied together with smaller cross-members. These roof “trusses” are part of the traditional frame and operate independently of the outer frame. With the outer frame, are standard “2 x 6” studs, just over 5 metres in height, anchored to a plate directly onto a concrete footing. The top of that stud wall supports the secondary section of the roof. With the exception of the latter roof section being tied to the post-and-beam structure, the outer frame works independently of the inner one.

The whole makes for an impressive set of dimensions: 45 x 22 metres in overall surface, excluding the main entrance niche, with a roof extending to, as above-mentioned, some 22 metres in height. The result of course is the juxtaposition and amalgamation of two techniques. When we consider the exterior wall and roof sheathing, the mélange becomes apparent (fig. 3): the post-and-beam structure is covered with plywood sheathing and asphalt shingles, while the stud wall frame is covered with traditional cedar planks, cut from logs specifically brought to the site for that purpose. We thus have the traditional covered with a contemporary material, and the contemporary covered with a traditional material. Once the roofing and wall sheathing is complete, the exterior appears as a single, relatively well-unified structure. The elevation drawings (fig. 4 and 5) show that there are few openings; the whole is solemn and, with the exception of two decorative posts installed to each side of the entrance—they are not on the drawings or photographs—they are no decorative features.
Moving inside, we find a well-articulated plan (fig. 6). Key is that it is the discrete disposition of the traditional frame's posts that govern the spatial delimitation where two very different spaces result. The first one corresponds to the traditional frame; the second is aligned with the more modern frame. There is thus a central, open space, surrounded by a peripheral, more confining space. There are of course secondary areas; these accommodate food, dancer and washroom requirements. One door, to the southeast, pierces the secondary space, allowing for the provision of firewood. Within the traditional space there are two fire pits, located just below the roof outlets that can be seen on the exterior elevation. The pits are slightly depressed within the earth floor. No concrete slabs or substructures lie beneath and all the traditional cultural activities take place within that central area. A cross-section gives a better view of the second space, which is filled with ascending benches for guests (fig. 7). Guests in traditional longhouses are not a recent phenomena, but celebrations undertaken as "spectator events" are a relatively newly highlighted cultural facet and thus the bleachers accommodate that new need for "seeing." The permanent benches limit circulation and once seated, it is difficult for the individual to move about without being observed; leaving becomes a conspicuous move.

The longhouse at Tsawwassen exemplifies a "new" architecture that remains overlooked. The design amalgamates traditional and contemporary materials and methods to, in turn, accommodate traditional and modern realities. It juxtaposes two moments, produces two spaces, and, in turn, generates a new architectural form.

Notes
1. The author wishes to acknowledge the Tsawwassen First Nation community members who helped bring this article to fruition. Chief Kim Baird, Helen Campbell, Laura Cassidy, and Barbara Gurniak were particularly helpful.
3. The term "longhouse" is a word that can be difficult in these nomenclature-obsessed times. It denotes the culturally organized milieux that include traditional cultural activities that have been passed down through generations over considerable periods of times. The actions have persisted in spite of having been banned some decades ago and their seeming resurgence-if it can be referred to as resurgence-only proves that they are a dynamic segment of the native cultural memory. In this paper, "longhouse" refers to what might best be understood as "the building which houses longhouse activities." Another difficulty with the word involves its use by researchers and academicians. Some mention it to denote the building used by native groups in the Northeastern and Great Lakes areas of America, while others use it for the place of cultural practice in the West. As this paper refers to the Tsawwassen people, I use their word.
5. I take the following description and measurements primarily from Nabokov and Easton, p. 233-234.
6. Some longhouses were partly excavated.
7. This may in part explain why some travellers thought villages looked abandoned.
11. Barnett, Homer, 1935-1936, Tsawwassen Field Notes, Society of British Columbia, Special Collections, University of British Columbia Main Library, Folder #1, Box #1, Book #8.
14. I refer to Highway 17 leading to the British Columbia Ferries Causeway at Tsawwassen Beach, British Columbia.