



Fig. 1. Tsawwassen Longhouse under construction : the first frame pierces the second and reaches upwards to form a 12 metres high, pitched roof.
(Photo : Daniel Millette)

Daniel Millette

Re-Building Memories: On the Reconstruction of a “Traditional” Longhouse¹

The disappearance of traditions is a world cultural phenomena 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*.² 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.³ 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;⁴ 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-

Daniel Millette completed his Ph.D. at the University of British Columbia and is now engaged in post-doctoral work at the Institut de recherche sur l'architecture antique in Aix-en-Provence.



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)

materials, and regional influences. Their work, however, seems lacking in the sections related to present-day buildings and uses. For example, the discussion of the west coast, or northwest coast, to use their terminology, is not completely representative of site realities, particularly as related to the Coast Salish of today. The "new" longhouse architecture of the Coast Salish is at once traditional, using long-established construction techniques, and contemporary, as it takes into account the needs of what could be called a modern-traditional society and an accompanying set of present-day construction constraints. That will be discussed below, but first, let us consider some of the features of traditional architecture along the west coast of British Columbia.

In 1792, when George Vancouver carried out his explorations along the coasts of what are now Washington State and British Columbia, he noted a structure that he said housed some six hundred Dwanish people. The building had a single-pitched

shed-style roof and extended to a length of about 365 metres.⁵ Along the more prominent elevation, which made up the main façade, were large columns, some six metres high and eight metres apart. In what must have been a spectacular cross-section, 19-metre long beams extended from the front posts to lower ones at the rear. That was the longhouse at North Bay in Washington State; while it could be considered large by any standard, it turned out that there were others of considerable size both on the banks of the Fraser River and the shores of the Mainland Coast.

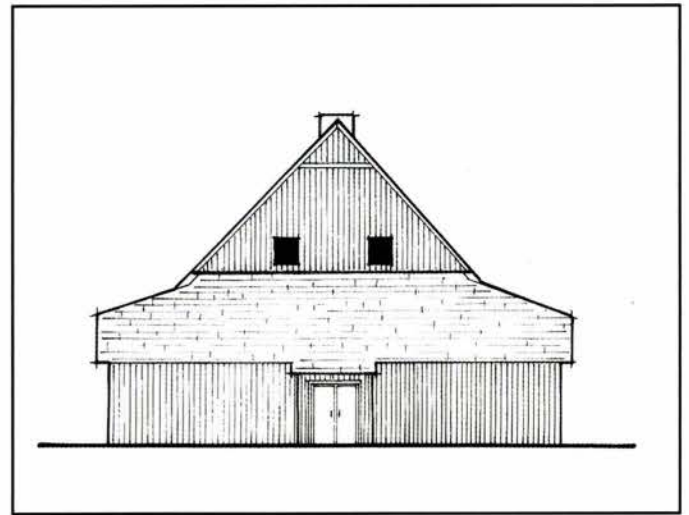
Along the Fraser River, shed-roofed and pitched-roofed longhouses were built as post-and-beam assemblies, with smaller lateral spandrels between the beams for roofing, and between the posts for partitioning. Wide planks of cedar were used as sheathing, overlapping horizontally. Along the roof, the same type of cedar planks were fixed, tightly, and stones were used to secure them. Some villages had longhouses with gable roofs while others had mansard roofs.⁶ Inside, there were partitions delimitating family or clan spaces, as well as fire pits, placed at specific locations. During the summertime, when people moved up the Fraser River, they often took the planks with them, presumably

to be utilized in conjunction with longhouse frames left during previous visits.⁷ Significantly, contrary to what can be portrayed in museums and popular drawings, these structures were only sparsely decorated on their exterior faces. The intent was in fact to make the buildings as inconspicuous as possible; they were consequently sited and decorated with that in mind. At Tsawwassen, the longhouse's architectural traits were similar.

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,⁸ the longhouse at Tsawwassen had the same basic characteristics as that of other Coast Salish peoples,

Fig. 4. Tsawwassen Longhouse – front elevation.
(Drawing : Daniel Millette)



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.⁹ There was little or no decoration.¹⁰

Still according to Barnett's notes and interviews carried out in the 1930's¹¹ 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 reflect the general observations of Nabokov and Easton. Evidence found in the course of archaeological excavations during the 1980's also confirms much of his depiction.¹² No doubt a longhouse survived at Tsawwassen and, when interviewed, today's elders have similar recollections of its features.¹³ That brings me to the present longhouse.

When in 1998 the people of Tsawwassen decided to build a new longhouse, they wanted more than a place that could be used for cultural practices. They wanted a longhouse that would, on the one hand, have features in keeping with ancient mores and practices, while on the other, they wanted a building that would consider contemporary realities: building materials, construction techniques, and fire precautions all had to be taken into account. In other words, the building would have to accommodate large traditional fire pits and a more modern food preparation area, all the while taking into account present-day fire safety concerns. It was primarily through interviews with elders and other cultural advisors, and secondarily through advice from building trades, that a design solution was found. According to cultural advisors, there are no drawings for that building, the whole having been done through verbal instructions.

"Tsawwassen," of course, translates to "facing the sea." So it 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 highway¹⁴ 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—, there are no decorative features.

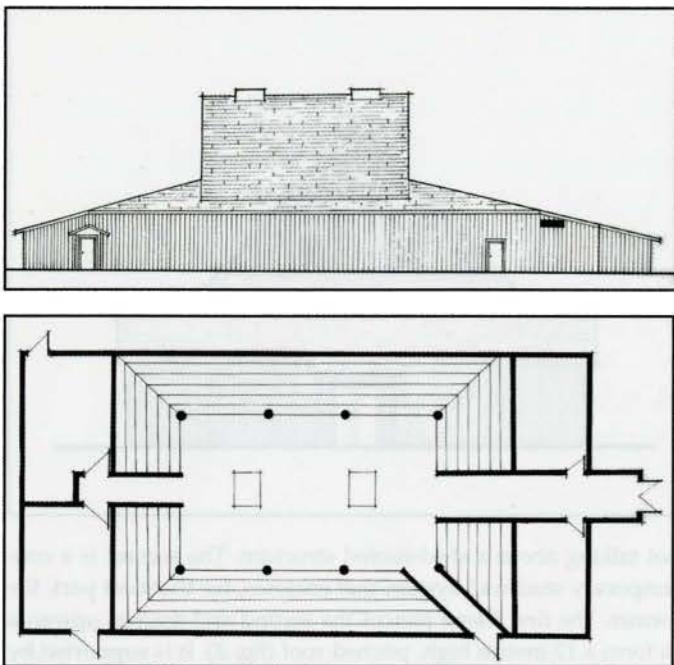


Fig. 6. Tsawwassen Longhouse – plan.
(Drawing - Daniel Millette)

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.

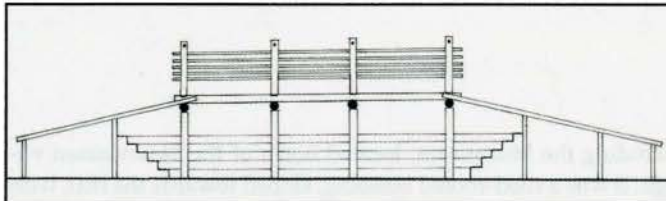
Notes

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

Fig. 5. Tsawwassen Longhouse – side elevation.
(Drawing - Daniel Millette)

Fig. 7. Tsawwassen Longhouse – section.
(Drawing - Daniel Millette)



Barbara Gurniak were particularly helpful.

2. Nora, Pierre (ed.), 1996, « The Era of Commemoration », *Realms of Memory - The Construction of the French Past*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer, New York, Columbia University Press, p. 609-637; Nora, Pierre, 1989, « Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire », In *Representations*, vol. 26, spring, p. 7-25; Nora, Pierre, 1984, « Entre mémoire et histoire - La problématique des lieux », In Pierre Nora (ed.), *Les lieux de mémoire*, Paris, Gallimard, p. xvii-xlii.
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.
4. Nabokov, Peter, and Robert Easton, 1989, *Native American Architecture*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
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.
8. Barnett, Homer, 1955, *The Coast Salish of British Columbia*, University of Oregon, University of Oregon Press, University of Oregon Monographs - Studies in Anthropology, No. 4, p. 36, 53-55.
9. A version of that description can also be found in Bouchard, Randy, and Dorothy Kennedy, 1991, « Tsawwassen Ethnography and Ethnohistory », In Arcas Consulting Archaeologists, *Archaeological Investigations at Tsawwassen, B.C.*, vol. 1, Victoria, Ministry of Transportation and Highways.
10. Wayne Suttles has similar remarks related to the shed-roofed longhouse; see his « The Shed-Roof House », in R. K. Wright (ed.), 1991, *A Time of Gathering*, Seattle, University of Washington Press, p. 212-222.
11. Barnett, Homer, 1935-1936, *Tsawwassen Field Notes*, University of British Columbia, Special Collections, University of British Columbia Main Library, Folder #1, Box #1, Book #8.
12. Arcas Consulting Archaeologists, 1991-2001, *Archaeological Investigations at Tsawwassen, B.C.*, vol. 1, 2, 3 and 4, Victoria: Ministry of Transportation and Highways.
13. Tsawwassen First Nation, 1998, *Traditional Use Study*, Victoria, Tsawwassen First Nation and British Columbia Ministry of Forests.
14. I refer to Highway 17 leading to the British Columbia Ferries Causeway at Tsawwassen Beach, British Columbia.