

Chris Cornelius

Assistant Professor, School of Architecture and Urban Planning

by Joseph S. Spencer, Sr.



The evolutionary process of life is dynamic. It stimulates inspirational growth and moves like tributaries in a river, branching veins in the body, or colorful veins in a leaf. Such dynamic stimulus invigorates the process of growth, which leads to diverse innovation of thoughts and production of greater quality of work. This is the way of life for Chris Cornelius, Assistant Professor of Architecture at UWM.

Cornelius graduated from UWM with a Bachelor of Science in Architectural Studies in 1996, and a Master of Architecture from the University of Virginia, Charlottesville (U.Va.) in 2000. He taught at U.Va. from 2001–2004 before returning to UWM, where he has been an assistant professor in the School of Architecture and Urban Planning since then.

Cornelius possesses extensive knowledge, which spans the spectrum of Native American history, and how Native designs have influenced the architectural process. He is able to articulate the history of the Anasazi civilization, which developed around 100 AD across Arizona, Colorado, and New Mexico. Their design of multi-leveled dwellings and precise alignment of residential housing structures is what we see in most neighborhoods today.

Additionally, his knowledge of the designs from the Pueblo Mesa Verde, which began around 1050 AD with the Hopi Nation, is one of the oldest North America designs lived in continuously. “There are lessons to be learned from these designs in the Southwest regions of America. They are permanent instead of just transient buildings,” says Cornelius. “One has to think about the culture, environment, people, climate, wind patterns, migration, impact of colors, Native spirituality, and what gave birth to contemporary cultures when visualizing architectural designs today,” he explains.

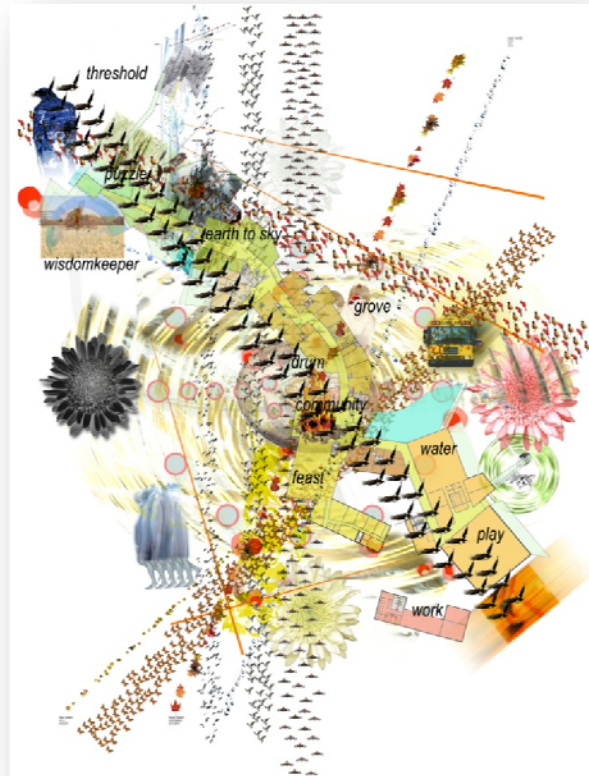
Cornelius’ beliefs regarding future building designs has potency. “The challenges for the future will be sustainability of green architecture with Native cultural value,” he visualizes. “We will have to consider the impact on the environment, such as contamination of ground water, and the devastation on landfills with hazardous materials.” He believes the future will require an interdisciplinary team working collaboratively on projects, which should not be based on just economy or the client. He also sees ecological responsibility as a vital part of the process, which he incorporates into his teaching.

To help with the reconstructing, designing, and remodeling of homes after Hurricane Katrina, Cornelius and some of his students went to New Orleans. “We spent almost five days there and it was really an eye-opening experience; it was like a war zone,” he recalls. “The students were

enthused to help and were pleased to meet the people there. They were shocked, however, by the devastation – to see houses on top of cars, and life earnings of people just floating away.” He says that their experiences were totally different from what was shown on television.

“Part of my teaching style is to assign team projects to build working relationships among students. It’s great to have internal motivation, collaboration, and extrovert personalities to work with,” he declares. “However, working with introvert personalities and those who are externally motivated requires a different teaching style.” One vital part of his teaching style is professional and personal counseling of students, which produces great results.

Helping the Native community is of vital interest to Cornelius. “I like to speak with school children about architecture and design, including students in the tribal schools,” he affirms. “I don’t, however, want them to view me as someone in an ivory tower coming to the reservations; I’d like for them to see me as a Native coming to help them, because it creates a more productive mindset and learning environment,” he adds.



Cornelius served as a consultant in designing the new Indian Community School of Milwaukee, which educates various Nations. His design reflects across their spectrum of the collective representation and inclusion of many Native Americans (see design above).

Celeste Clark, senior advisor at the American Indian Student Services (AISS), remembers Cornelius as a student. “We were both students at that time, and received counseling and guidance from the AISS staff,” she recalls. Clark also points out that Cornelius was instrumental in getting the Native American “Medicine Wheel” design installed on the floor of the office. The design illustrates Native plants, with primary colors of the sky, sea, and directions based on the compass.

Cornelius is a living legend of how inspiration invigorates innovative contemporary architectural growth, thus impacting the future positively at UWM and in the community.

###

Fall 2009