Chris Cornelius is a citizen of the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin, focuses his research and practice on the architectural translation of culture; in particular, American Indian culture. He is the founding principal of studio:indigenous, a design and consulting practice serving American Indian clients. Cornelius holds a Master of Architecture degree from the University of Virginia and a Bachelor of Science in Architectural Studies from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, where he is now an Associate Professor. He has previously taught at the University of Virginia. Chris is the recipient of numerous awards and honors. He received the inaugural J. Irwin and Xenia S. Miller Prize, an Artist in Residence Fellowship from the National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, and multiple wins in the Ken Roberts Architectural Delineation Competition (KRob). Cornelius teaches at the undergraduate and graduate levels including a seminar course on visual thinking and mapping. Chris was among a group of indigenous architects who represented Canada in the 2018 Venice Architecture Biennale.

James Miller is an Assistant Professor in Environmental Design at OCAD University in Toronto, Canada within the Faculty of Design. James's research focuses on traditional and indigenous knowledge systems in the production of sustainable and resilient environments; his work engages indigeneity and decolonialization. James's current research investigates indigenous placemaking within the climate diaspora and Hawaiian architectural design epistemologies. James holds a PhD and M.Arch. from the University of Oregon and a B.Arch from the University of Notre Dame. He has worked in architecture offices in Hawaii, Indiana, and Oregon and currently holds his own practice; current projects include primary schools in the Republic of the Marshall Islands and Hawaii that are based on collaborative and indigenous design approaches. As a Kanaka Maoli, James collaborates with other indigenous educators on guidelines for decolonizing curriculum, and he sits on an Indigenous advisory committee for renovations and new construction of Hawaiian charter schools.

Eric Nay is an Associate Professor at OCAD University in Toronto, Canada within the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences. Eric teaches architecture and design histories and theories, environmental design studios and advises graduate students. Eric's educational background includes PhD, Toronto; M.Arch, Cornell; B.Arch, Kentucky and postgraduate studies in law, Hamline. Eric has worked in architecture offices in New York City, Chicago and California, including SOM. Eric's research centers on critical heritage studies, indigenous design and multiple modernities. His teaching experience includes the University of California, the University of North Carolina, Cornell University, and others. He has also taught at universities in the Middle East and Asia. Eric has published broadly across academic and popular media in numerous articles, book reviews and digital formats. He has held positions as Associate Dean, Program Director and Grievance Chair, while also serving on the provincial level in a number of positions supporting positive university/government relations.

CONTINUUMS OF DRAWING AND BUILDING

CHRIS CORNELIUS INTERVIEWED BY MICHAEL ABRAHAMSON

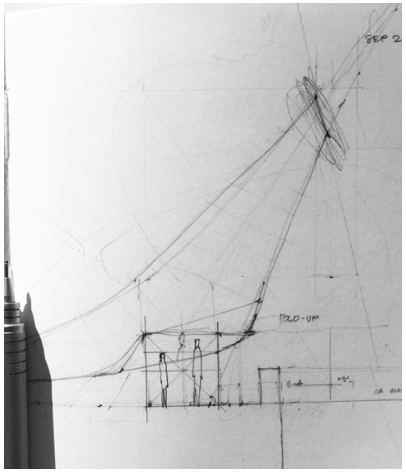
The following is a transcription of an interview conducted by editor Michael Abrahamson with Chris Cornelius of studio:indigenous on January 17, 2020. Cornelius gave a lecture during the School of Architecture's Fall 2019 lecture series, and participated in a workshop with faculty on decolonizing architectural pedagogy. Each question posed below frames a different way in which his work might be considered subversive. Among them are: subverting the linearity and finality of the design process by placing both drawing and building on a continuum that stretches beyond the conventional phases of the architectural process; subverting the conventional divide between elite and popular cultures and between design and research; subverting the discipline's conventional ignorance of indigenous issues, spaces, and practices; and subverting the expectation of originality within architectural work by repeating the same design methods in series.

The interview is illustrated by a selection of Cornelius's Radio Free Alcatraz drawings, which explore the historical, geological, and cultural context of the 1969–71 Occupation of Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay. Through collage, tracing, juxtaposition, and deconstruction, this drawing series shows the ways that this occupation by the Indians of All Tribes organization indexed indigenous spatialities and architectures, makes proposals for the process of land decolonization, and derives formal potentials for a decolonized architecture. As Cornelius mentions in the interview, this series continues to evolve and develop both toward and against a more concrete architectural proposal, and should therefore be considered one among several examples of Cornelius's continuums of drawing and building.

MICHAEL ABRAHAMSON (MA): Drawing and modeling are essential to your practice. In these media, you seem intent on recontextualizing techniques of collage, appropriation, and chance that have a long history in both elite and popular culture; in other words, your work draws as much from modernist avant-gardes as it does from more contemporary youth- and counter-cultures like hip-hop and graffiti. In using these formal and compositional techniques, how do you see your relationship to the various histories that they evoke—histories of our discipline, histories of the professional work of architects, and your heritage as an indigenous person?

CHRIS CORNELIUS (CC): I would say that's absolutely true about the work, the way that I think, and also the way that I teach. For me, it's really about not drawing any specific conclusions, both literally and figuratively, when starting projects. The drawing and modeling are really instrumental in the beginnings of projects when starting to gather ideas. Collage, appropriation, recontextualizing, it's a kind of syntax, or a way of putting things back together. I do look at other people that were doing this, like Duchamp, Schwitters, Rauschenberg, who I think perhaps were trying to break out of what people saw as high art in their time, and advocating for something else while being activist and radical.

When I look at things like hip-hop, and when I teach it in architecture studios, it's about sampling and how the entire genre, the culture, the artistic expression, built something from nothing by assembling things together. For me, the early drawings were trying to assemble thoughts in a way where you're not quite sure what the conclusion is, but you do know that in the end you'll draw one or more conclusions from the piece.



Figures 1–3: Initial sketch, scale model, and built installation of Wiikiaami, Exhibit Columbus, First Christian Church, Columbus, Indiana, 2016–17
Courtesy: studio:indigenous

The basic principle in those drawings was not to censor myself or try to edit or parse what it was I was putting on the page. Really, if it came into my brain it went on the page.

But the Radio Free Alcatraz drawings are thematic, so it's not just anything can be put into the drawing. The things that fit into the theme are the things that end up in the drawing. I do think that as a culture, as creative people, we should be pulling in more than just what we know, we should be thinking about the larger culture. The ways that images are consumed and thought about can be unpacked in the collage or reassembly manner.

MA: In terms of your relationship to the history of architecture as an academic discipline, would you say that your work is about the way we open ourselves to influences outside that discipline?

CC: I think that's partially true, but part of it is a matter of what we've seen and known in architecture previously, and to reassemble those things. The way that I would describe it is that it's kind of a way of dreaming. Our brains pull in information while we're conscious during the day—people we meet, situations, spaces—and then our brain re-sorts them while we're sleeping, in ways that we don't even understand sometimes. That's the kind of thing that I'm trying to use as a creative tool to generate ideas, this dreamlike re-sorting. It might be flipping something, mirroring something, tracing something, doing something else to it. I'm trying to get into the cognitive parts of my brain that don't judge things or rely on taste. Those parts that really just don't censor or edit things too much.

MA: You sometimes label your drawings and models "design research." Can you describe how you personally understand that phrase, and how you understand the relationship between design and research? Is the kind of work you do somewhere in between? And how do you see the relationship between your drawings and your completed buildings? Do your drawings point toward building designs, or do they stand alone as records of a thought process?

CC: Like most people that have been educated in the way that we've been educated as architects, I used to think of it going from idea, then representation, then drawings, a model maybe, then a building. There's supposed to be a high fidelity between all of those things. Each one is a scaled representation of the building. Now, I'm much more interested in these things being a continuum that fluctuates. For me, the design research part of it isn't something you do before the project starts, and then you start designing the project later. They're actually part of a larger continuum. What are all of the things that I want to pull into a project—ideas, concepts, influences, references? All of those things start to get pulled into the design research for me.

The trajectory of my work has gone from doing these kinds of drawings, making some of the models that I've made, and then, finally, building these temporary installations as the full-scale versions. I'm interested in asking if I can make an installation like the way that I drew it. When I make these installations, to be honest, it's harder for me than it is to draw it. And I am interested, now, in how I can continue that trajectory—can I get things back into a drawing? How would I draw what I built? Everything's not intended to be instructive.

For instance, in the Columbus project [Wiikiaami, for Miller Prize 2017] I didn't do any drawings, per se, in the sense of construction drawings, because I was constructing it. We worked, basically, off of a 3D model, and if we needed a measurement we just pulled it off the 3D model. Even when we worked with the structural engineers, we handed them that 3D model and they did all of their analysis based on that. We didn't have drawings to hand to them. So that kind of broke open the idea of this continuum for me. That particular project started with a sketch and a physical model. That physical model was based on a series of other models I had done four or five years before. I was really interested in how I could now take this old thing and make it full-scale.

The relationship between design and research, and drawings and buildings, is one that is continuous. It's not a process where you do one thing and then you do the next thing. It's not that you do research and then you design. The research is actually part of all of it. The actual design, meaning the process of doing an actual drawing or an actual model, is part of the research for me. I'm not really a writer, so I wouldn't write a paper or anything before I started a project, for instance. But I would compile information in a visual manner, or I would translate it in a visual way.

With the Alcatraz project there's quite a bit of research embedded in it. In the drawings, you'll find that I've done tracings of indigenous dwellings all over the US, because I'm interested in how those things may be similar or how they're different. I draw them in plan, I draw them in section, I'll trace over historic maps or even vernacular maps of indigenous settlements where I don't even understand how they were made. Those tracings get put into the drawings. There is a lot of research that goes into this specific set of drawings. I would say out of the entire time it takes me to do one of these drawings, in a six- to eight-week period, probably seventy percent of my time is spent finding things and tracing them. The tracing is a way of taking a thing I'm researching and synthesizing it into a thing that's part of the design process. All of it can then be integrated. After that I have to figure out how I want to synthesize or translate it into an architectural thing, whether that's a building or an installation or some other physical artifact.

MA: Would you say that in the case of the Columbus project, or Alcatraz, that the built thing is the end point, or is it just another step in that continuous process?

CC: That's interesting. They're very different. Obviously, for Columbus, there was an event, a timeline for it to exist. But to me it's existed much longer.

MA: The two projects are very different, because Alcatraz hasn't culminated in a building yet.

CC: It's kind of interesting, the coupling of those two things. With Alcatraz I'm actually finding it a little, not difficult per se, but challenging to translate it into a building. It's not that I don't know how to do that. Maybe there's a little bit of hesitation on my part that I need to get over in order to start pushing it in that direction. To me it seems it's much bigger than a building. I want this building to be able to do things that we haven't thought buildings could do. There's a whole series of thoughts and ideas in it that I haven't quite figured out whether to draw or model.

Because it's a longer project, it's a self-initiated project, it's a research project, it's different and doesn't necessarily have a deadline like Columbus and the other installation work I've done. It's moving at a sort of geological pace while the other things are moving at more like a weather pace—things happen fast and they last for a little bit, and then they go away.

But it's interesting to think about. To be honest, that is what currently compels me, is that now that I've done these things, what's next? And I did do a big project with Antoine Predock early in my career, a great project that exemplifies a lot of my thinking about how indigenous architecture should be. People who are observers of my work are really wondering how these new drawings and models translate into a building. For me, it's pretty straightforward in the sense that what I'm trying to do, to get these ideas into a building, is already something I know how to do. I know how to make a building, but can I translate these qualities and characteristics into experiences? The installation work allows me to do that very quickly, at a smaller scale.

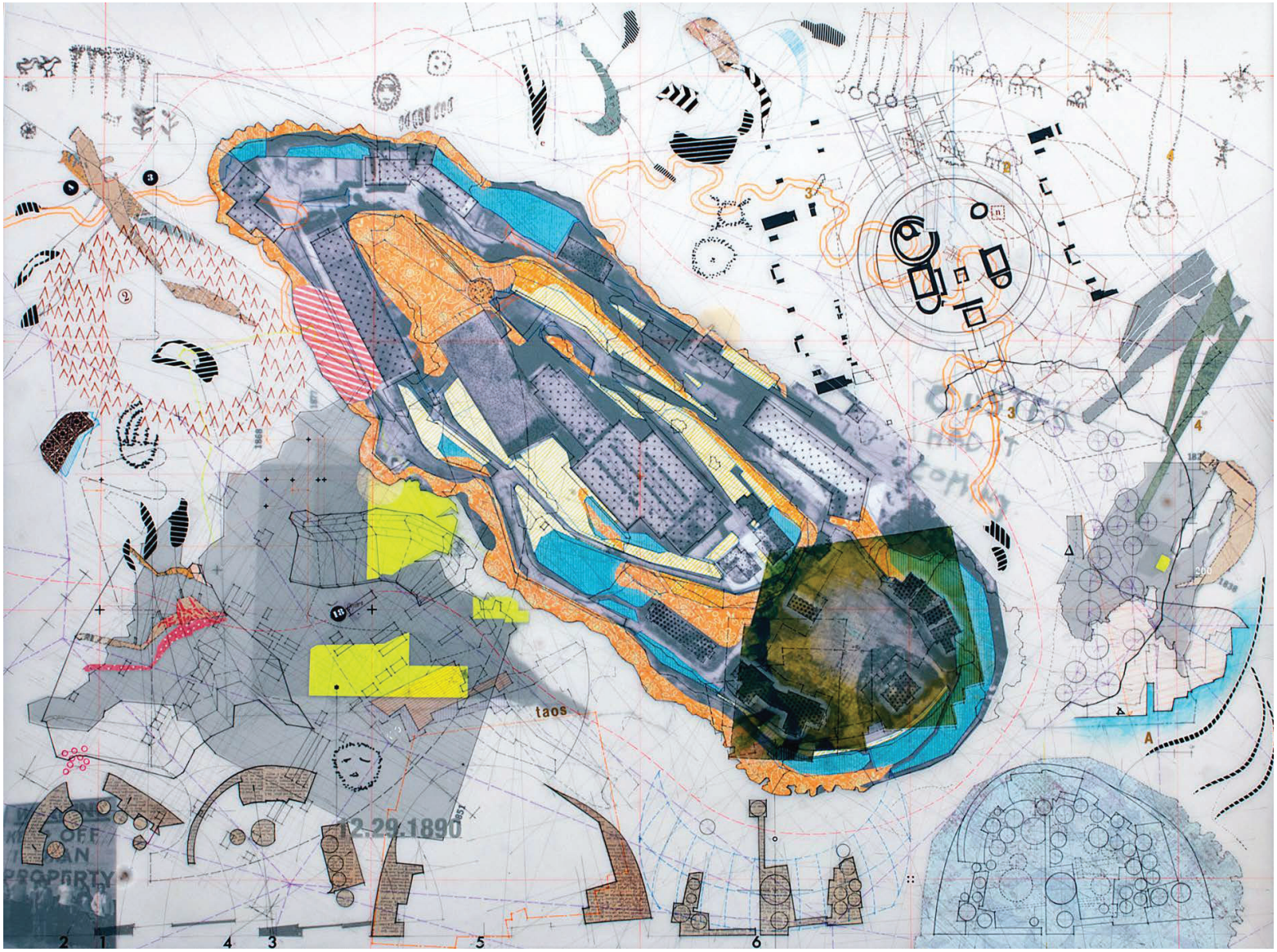


Figure 4: "Territories," from the Radio Free Alcatraz series
Courtesy: studio:indigenous

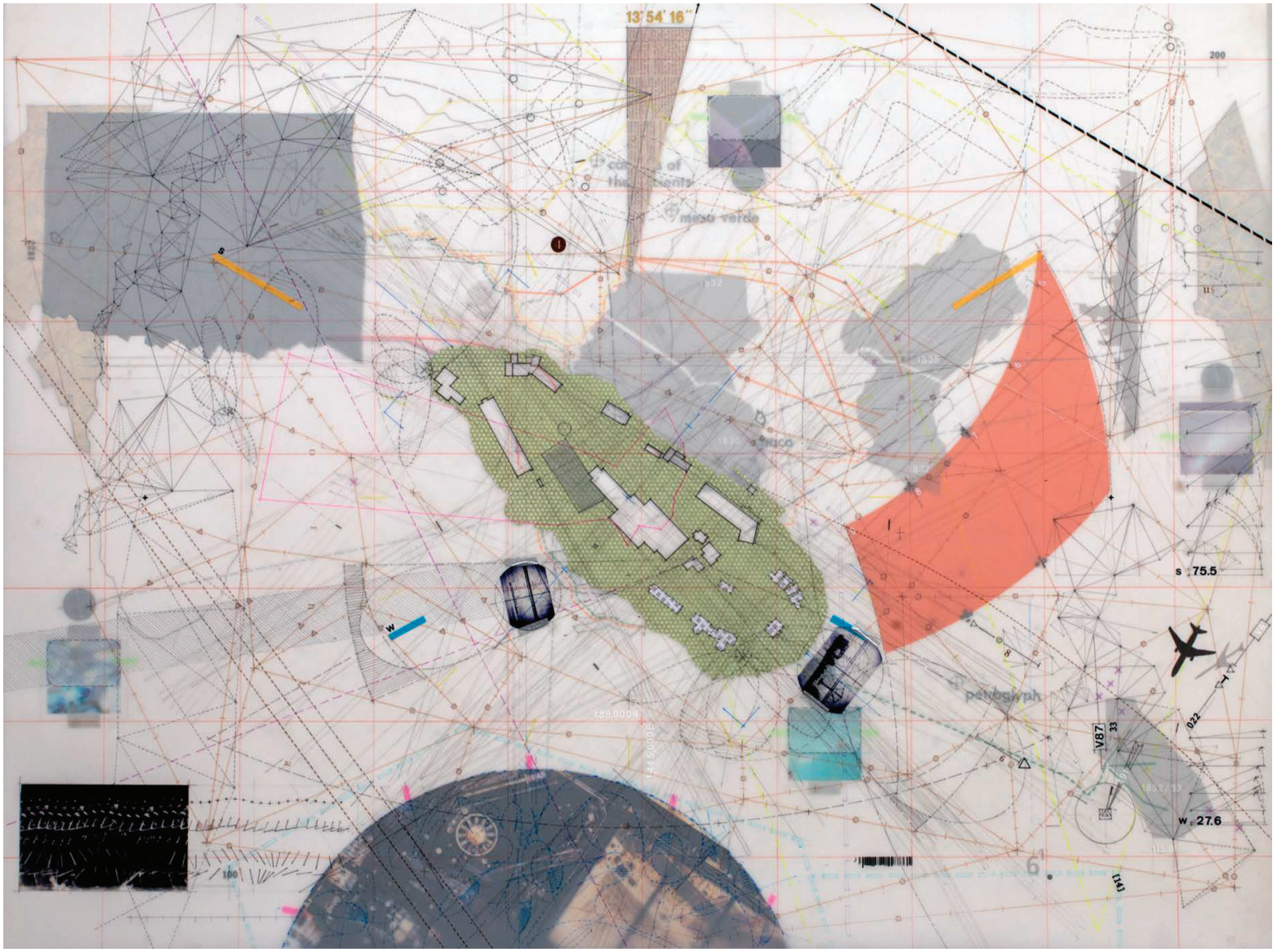


Figure 5: "Trajectories," from the Radio Free Alcatraz series
Courtesy: studio:indigenous

There's definitely a continuum between the drawings and models and what would manifest itself as buildings, but it is not this one-to-one correspondence. It's not just that I'm going to scale the Alcatraz drawings up and make a plan or a section. That's not how it works. These are just the way I'm currently thinking about how to represent ideas or notions in an architectural project.

MA: You often emphasize the role of storytelling in your practice, and connect this to your membership and participation in oral traditions as an indigenous architect. One might say that oral knowledge traditions develop over time through retelling and repeating a set of stories with subtle variations. Similarly, in your design research you often work in series, developing a set of shared themes and formal guidelines that you allow to unfold multiple times. Do you see a connection between your serial working method and oral traditions of knowledge sharing?

CC: I certainly do. My earliest understandings of indigenous oral traditions was not only that they were a way of conveying the culture, but that the storyteller is important in the process. They have degrees of freedom in what they want to emphasize or deemphasize in a story. The story could be the same story told by ten different people, over ten different time periods. Some storytellers might take longer, or add detail, or reduce detail. I'm interested in that, as a designer, when I'm telling the story I can choose to emphasize or deemphasize certain parts, but the core of the thing stays the same, meaning that the way the culture is conveyed stays the same. So I might be trying to make indigenous architecture that is based in certain cultural principles that have always been the same, but what it looks like is completely different. It's not what traditional indigenous art, or patterns, or dwellings, even, looked like. There are other circumstances within it, however it's still based in the same culture and way of thinking.

With the series idea, I am interested asking what if I did something multiple times? Maybe it's like how an Olympic athlete might train. They might be doing things repeatedly in order to improve certain parts of their performance, but not just to do it wholesale. No one's going to go out and run a marathon every day. They

have to train to do that. When I build models in series or do drawings in series, it's like athletic conditioning in preparation for the event. The larger commissions are those events. I should be able to do them more easily, and embed some of those thoughts into a larger project through doing a series.

I also like working in series because I get to have more than one kick at a can. You're able to think about things you hadn't thought about before. I try not to anticipate future iterations when I'm doing the current iteration. I just allow each iteration to be its own thing that addresses whatever circumstances. I started with drawings and models, and now it's installations, which I've started to do in series and will continue in the coming years. I'm interested in that way of working.

What interests me, too, is that, as an architect, when I look at other kinds of artists, I often wonder why they might do the same thing over and over again. It's different in our discipline. Like Tony Smith's sculptures. They're beautiful, but certainly you know one when you see one, because of the repetition of the work. I'm interested in repetition, but not repeating in that way—repeating in a language that's my own so that people can understand that it's my work based on the things that I'm trying to advance or expand.

Working in series is part of being able to retell the story to get new insights, even if, in the end, it's the same story. There's definitely a connection between storytelling, oral traditions, and the work that I'm doing.

MA: Your most recent design research series, Radio Free Alcatraz, not only makes an impassioned argument for decolonization—for quite literally handing back unceded and stolen land—but also provides the groundwork for an architectural project. Can you describe that project, as it stands right now, and the ways your research into the history of Native American land rights and this particular indigenous protest movement continue to inform the development of your architectural proposal?

CC: I have always seen and understood colonization as a system and/or an apparatus, meaning that it's very systematized. I borrow some of my terms from Linda [Tuhiwai] Smith's book *Decolonizing Methodologies*.[1] She talks about many things that are basically architectural acts: drawing the line and saying "this is the boundary," or establishing a center and then everything is judged based on your relationship to the center—I'm in or I'm out, I'm in the boundary or out of the boundary. Those can be seen as architectural acts as well as political and colonizing acts. I think that we can use design in the same way, to dismantle that system.

The Alcatraz occupation was intriguing to me when I began to learn about it because they wanted to make architecture, basically. They wanted to make a cultural center, a native university, and a native ecological center on the island. It wasn't just about how they owned this property and now they've got it back—they actually wanted to do something with it. For all intents and purposes, they had the right to do that based on treaties indigenous peoples had made with the US government. That's why they were trying to take the land back. They weren't just trying to do a sit-in, or take something that wasn't theirs. They were saying that this is rightfully ours based on the agreements that we've made with you.

It's a microcosm of a larger issue we should be thinking about. How do we begin to have a dialogue about honoring these treaties in some way, shape or form? We'll never be able to do it one hundred percent, but if land is given back, there should be some plan to put it toward the greater good. I think architecture can have a role in that. That's where I see my role, is in trying to establish parameters and ways of thinking about how you actually do that. It's not just always making a cultural center or something that memorializes, but to really say, "This is how indigenous sovereignty is expressed." Yes, it's land, but it's also indigenous funds, it's indigenous lawyers, it's indigenous doctors, it's indigenous architects and contractors, it's indigenous governments. Everything that is tied to that land becomes indigenous. It's not a part of the paternalistic relationship that has been created for indigenous people in the US and Canada, where the government is supposed to be taking care of us in some way, or speaking for us.

The idea that land is the foundation for all of that is the bigger question that I'm trying to present in the Alcatraz work. What would a native university really look like? For me, it's something different than any other university in its structure, its composition. Even its policies would have to be very different.▪

ENDNOTES

1. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 1999).