

The Blueprints of Power:
A Documentary on Permanence and Transition
in the Architecture of the Indians of the American Continents

*A Proposal for a 58 minute color documentary
for Public Television by
Juan Downey
August, 1987*

Introduction

There is a beautiful passage in the Book of the Hopi that describes the history of those people's migration. Its resonance lies in its celebration of perpetual migration. The Hopi believe that the less bound a society is to a certain site, the freer it is to renew itself through its new surroundings. Unlike Western creation myths, its emphasis lies in decentralization and in movement.

Pre-Columbian and Indo-American cultures are often remembered by the monumental architectural remains left by the Aztecs, Mayans and Inca. The huge stone structures that still dominate the landscape in the Andean region are testaments to their builders' intent to create a culture and an architecture of permanence. These cultures and the cities that they built stand in direct contrast to the Amerindian peoples whose way of life is more migratory, flexible, biodegradable. These peoples have no use for stone and mortar, but build themselves dwellings organic in make-up and temporary in design. Video artist Juan Downey, who was trained as an architect in Chile and studied art in Paris, began to consider these forms of society and architecture when he read Pierre Clastres' *Society Against the State*. Downey began to see that buildings often reflect the social structure and political style of the peoples who created them. In the proposed videotape Downey will establish, through detailed visual analysis of the architecture of selected Amerindian cultures past and present, two polarities; a centralized, coercive state that created a monumental and permanent architecture of angles, versus a more loosely woven society that, stressing individual responsibility and direction, produces an architecture that is circular, lightweight, biodegradable and most importantly temporary.

No attempt will be made to cite "pure" examples of either pole. Rather, Downey will focus on two cultures, the Inca of the Andes and the Yanomami of the Amazon basin, and touch briefly but succinctly on the Mayan civilization, the Kwakwiltl of Southwest British Columbia, the Mapuches Indians of Chile and the Hopi and their ancestors of the southwestern

United States, in order to construct a paradigm within the bounds of this binary opposition.

Treatment

That the empire of the Inca lasted only a century is surprising given the number of seemingly imperishable monuments that, radiating from the Inca capital of Cusco, reflect its vast territorial holdings. In less than 100 years the Inca conquered an area that spanned from Ecuador to central Chile. The principle motive of the Inca Empire was expansion, a practice that not only stimulated economic growth but secured perpetuation of the Inca civilization. The structure of the Empire was one of cellular growth. The centralized government based in the capital city methodically consolidated discrete territories by imposing strict, hierarchial controls, which served to regroup masses of conquered individuals into identical, integrated social bodies which functioned exclusively for the enrichment of the state. Defeated peoples were inventoried, taxed and bound into service of the Empire. Inca Imperial art, particularly architecture, was a powerful tool of Inca military and administrative occupation. The Temple of the Sun, built at every Inca site was the manifestation of this power. The sun, radiating outward from the center served as a metaphor for the Empire's structure. Inca building and rebuilding both within the the capital and throughout the conquered territories rose in direct relation to the amount of territory accrued between 1438 and the Spanish conquest in 1533. Inca structures were simple but massive, marked by the Inca formal signature-trapezoidal openings. Building programs were ambitious, all-encompassing (everything built was codified by the state, including individual dwellings) and labor intensive. By using subjugated populations to erect distinctly Inca citadels, temples, city walls, fortresses and terraced fields, the government in Cusco gave physical evidence to captured communities of their material and cultural attachment to the capital. In addition, 5,000 kilometers of paved roads gave the government at Cusco direct access by messenger to every outpost.

The Inca not only built symbols of their control in conquered territories, but through architectural reconstruction, erected visual evidence of their

empire-building in the capital itself. Selectively borrowing building methods and motifs from colonized cultures, for example the Tiahuanaco method of stone carving, or the orthogonal building plan of the Chanchan and neighboring Wari cultures, the Inca rebuilt existing structures, or constructed new ones in the capital that served as visual trophies and reminders to the population of the State's evergrowing holdings, seemingly unbeatable military might and omnipresent control.

This pattern of empire-building and disappearance not caused by conquest, is repeated by other Amerindian cultures before and after the Inca. The Mayan civilization, which "collapsed" around the tenth century A.D., is of interest here not so much for its empire, but rather for the circumstances surrounding its decline. In fact, the theory of the collapse and disappearance of the Mayan civilization rests mostly upon the observation that around the tenth century the Mayans ceased to build and to expand. Although the reasons for this phenomenon remain obscure, it seems not to have been caused by external forces. Rather, forces within the society itself caused the breakdown of the ruling elite (the force behind the building) and the remaining elements, while retaining significant aspects of the culture, renounced the quest for architectural permanence.

The Anasazi, ancestors of the Hopi and ancient inhabitants of the Four Corners area of Northwestern New Mexico and Northeastern Arizona are pertinent because, like the Inca and the Mayan, they too built an empire of stone. Their multiple-story, multiple-unit pueblos, most often rectangular in plan, with high outer walls, reflected their abiding interest in pure form. These angular and regulated structures are set off, however, by attendant, semi-underground, circular sacred chambers called *kivas*. The juxtaposition of the kiva with the square dwellings illustrates the interplay of opposing forms, both of which were adapted to the natural environment. The great Anasazi network of communities centered in the Chaco Canyon area was also gradually abandoned, for reasons which scholars, using empirical evidence have still to divine. In terms of Hopi belief, the Anasazi abandonment of these great sites can be explained simply as a continuation of the four migrations commanded by Masaw, the Hopi guardian spirit. A

passage from the Book of the Hopi pertaining to the migrations sheds some light on this explanation and reads in part:

... these migrations were themselves purification ceremonies, weeding out through generations all the latent evils brought from the previous (worlds). Man could not succumb to the comfort and luxury given him by the indulgent surroundings, for then he lost the need to rely upon the creator.

The Kwakuitl-speaking peoples which make up one subgroup among a number of Indian groups that inhabit the densely forested areas, mountainous regions and coast of Southwest British Columbia, exhibit another phase within the paradigm of permanence and transience. Their strictly regimented society with a centralized system of government offers an example of the progress that can occur in either direction within the paradigm. In each village, units containing individuals who are related form the rigid and hierarchial socio-political structure of the tribe. Each family unit or *nomay' ma* has a designated class and attendant political and social obligations, with the tribal chief, his offspring and relations enjoying the most privileged positions. Each *nomay' ma* has a fixed number of "seats" attached to which are ancestral property rights to fishing and berrying sites.

The Kwakuitl are by and large coastal and sedentary, their single *nomay' ma*, square, log and wood dwellings neatly aligned along broad streets that are often raised on wooden foundations that jut pier-like over the shore. Houses are built for permanence; their framework rests on heavy beams and posts sunk into foundations and their facades are often elaborately and painstakingly carved and painted. Further research remains to be done on the Kwakuitl, but it is significant that this society with its centralized government has managed to build permanent villages without stone or mortar, but with two seemingly impermanent materials: wood and water.

The Mapuches Indians of Chile offer an interesting case study because, with their culture's nineteenth century pacification by the Chilean army and the subsequent imposition of the reservation system, their social organization-- and architectural production-- changed markedly. Before their confinement

within discrete, bounded areas, the semi-nomadic Mapuches ranged freely over the land, setting up temporary agricultural homesteads, the locations of which changed with the availability of natural resources and the fertility of the soil. Communities were organized by localized patrilineal descent groups. There was no centralization of authority and no chief as such during peacetime. When a chief was appointed, his authority was consultative and persuasive, not coercive. He had no right either to inflict punishment or to claim tribute.

The reservation system severely restricted the Mapuches' mobility and forced upon them a sedentary and more hierarchially organized lifestyle. The Chileans, understanding correctly that domination and integration could occur more easily if groups were more centrally organized, appointed permanent, local chiefs to serve as the tribes' representatives. Today, the Mapuches live in clusters of households on or near their fields which are cultivated familiarly. Not unexpectedly, the configuration of these villages under conquest, like the Mayan, Inca and Kwakuitl, tend toward the rectangular. In addition, whereas the traditionally conical *ruka*, (single-family dwelling) had a thatched roof, the modern *ruka* is built either of stout wood planking or of corrugated metal.

In direct contrast to these civilizations stands the Yanomami culture, which despite limited governmental and religious penetration by the West exists today relatively unchanged. In his *Tristes Tropiques*, Claude Levi-Strauss observed the following about the habitations of the Bororo Indians of Bolivia:

(Their houses) were not so much built as knotted together, plaited, woven, embroidered and mellowed by use; instead of crushing the occupants under an indifferent mass of stones, they adapted to their presence and their movements... The village rose round its occupants like a light, flexible suit of armor, closer to Western women's hats than to Western towns; it was a monumental adornment retaining something of the living bowers and foliage whose natural gracefulness the builders had skillfully reconciled with the rigorous demands of the plan.

Although these observations were written to specifically describe the habitations of the Bororo, they serve equally well to illustrate the housing and the lifestyle of the Yanomami, the last "primitive" tribe of the Americas to occupy the area of the Amazon basin on the border between Brazil and Venezuela. The Yanomami live in a society that is by definition anarchic. Organized into tribes made up of discrete patrilineal descent groupings which interweave and bind with each other and other communities through marriage, theirs is a complete absence of government. Although each group has a leader, there is no formal designation process by which he attains the title. The responsibilities of such an office are flexible and unspecified; rather than give specific orders, the Yanomami leader functions as an example to the rest of the group. He is the first to join a raiding party, or to begin to prepare for a feast. In many cases, there is both a spiritual and a war leader, each assuming his role only when necessary.

Yanomami social structure is best illustrated by the *shabono* or communal dwelling place which can be defined in terms of function and of symbol. The large, circular lean-to with its unroofed central courtyard is communally built of biodegradable materials and is quite simply a model of the Yanomami universe. Jacques Lizot in his *Tales of the Yanomami* describes it thus:

... the high part of the roof, somewhat in from the most forward supporting posts... (is) a place customarily devoted to the great events of social life: shamanic exercises and cures, drug-taking sessions, exchanges of goods, and consumption of funeral bone dust. The low part between the two rows of posts that support the sloping roof is the place of family life and domestic activities. Farther back, beyond the upright logs set at the edge of the forest, is the dumping ground for household refuse... From the central plaza to the forest - looking from the inside towards the outside - one can make out a series of concentric rings within which specific activities are carried out. Each of these rings is in turn divided transversely, each segment being occupied by a particular lineage... But that is not all: The great shelter... also reflects the Indians' conception of the universe. The central plaza is the celestial vault, and the low part of the roof is a replica of the low part of the sky - conceived as a convex structure - where it meets the disk of the earth... This exact convergence of the social, religious, and cosmological orders makes a microcosm of the Yanomami dwelling.

The circular structure of the complex then, represents the ideal and it is important to note that, although a shabono always incorporates separate concentric rings, these rings rarely take the form of an absolute circle. In building the shabono, each lineage group starts from a *different* area of the ideal circle and as a result, in many instances the roofs of these individual areas do not meet. The final result may be a truncated and inverted ellipse or an oval; or, if a number of families leave the community, a half-empty loop. Given this observation, it becomes clear that the configuration of Yanomami groupings can literally be read from the configuration of their shabonos.

The shabono is at once protector against and part of the nature that surrounds it. Built wholly of materials that in a matter of a few years decay, it is meant only as a temporary shelter. Unlike the Inca, whose buildings lay permanent claim to the land that they occupy, the Yanomami structures are designed to allow nature to reclaim them after a relatively short period of time. The shabono is the communal skin that holds the group together, but it is a skin that is periodically shed and built anew. Yanomami agriculture is intimately connected to this idea as well. The large gardens that are planted just outside the shabono's walls are also designed not to resist eventual takeover by the natural plant life of the jungle. Unlike the agriculture recently introduced into the Amazon basin by Occidental planters which, within a few short years has succeeded in leaching and eroding the soil, the Yanomami method of "discrete agriculture" allows the soil to recover.

Application

The development of the idea for this videotape is based on many years of preliminary research on the peoples on which it intends to focus. *Inca Split*, a video installation centering on the Inca civilization exhibited at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1976, utilized black and white videotape studies made by Downey during the previous year. He has also visited and worked with the Mapuches in Chile. Perhaps most importantly though, Downey lived with the Yanomami for eight months in 1976-77. Indeed, it was this period of study that gave him primary inspiration for *The Blueprints of Power*. During this time he learned their language,

participated in their activities and established friendships among the Yanomami as well as with the anthropologist Dr. Jacques Lizot. Out of this first, sustained encounter, Downey produced a number of videotapes, one of which, *The Abandoned Shabono*, contains the seeds of the idea to be investigated in the proposed documentary. In the production of the latter, Downey plans to work with Dr. Jacques Lizot, who has lived with the Yanomami since 1968 and has authored several authoritative texts on them. In addition to Lizot, George Kubler will serve as consultant for the Maya portion of the work, and Professor Carlos Aldunate, Director of the Museum of Pre-Columbian Art in Chile, will act as an advisor for the section of the tape dealing with the Mapuches.

Should grant monies be awarded to *The Blueprints of Power*, funds would be applied towards travel to, and two months of research at Inca sites (Cusco, Machu Picchu, Ollantaytambo and Pisac) and the Hopi and Yanomami territories, as well as towards salaries for a crew, consisting of a cameraman, sound operator and scholar. A rough edit of these three cultures will also be post-produced. Funds will be sought elsewhere for the Canadian and Chilean expeditions.

JUAN DOWNEY

Born in Santiago, Chile, 1940. Lives in New York

EDUCATION

1964 B.A., Architecture, Catholic University, Santiago, Chile
1963-65 Atelier 17, Paris, France
1967-69 Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, New York

SELECTED ONE ARTIST EXHIBITIONS

1962
Galeria Condal, Barcelona, Spain
1968
Judson Church Gallery, New York, New York
1969
The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC
1970
Howard Wise Gallery, New York, New York
1974
The Kitchen, New York, New York
1975
Anthology Film Archives, New York, New York
1976
Long Beach Museum of Art, Long Beach, CA
Contemporary Art Museum, Houston, TX
1977
Everson Museum of Art of Syracuse and Onondaga County, Syracuse, NY
1978
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY
1982
Schlesinger-Boissante Gallery, New York, NY
1983
Institute for Art and Urban Resources, PS: 1, Long Island City, NY
1984
Galeria Plastica 3, Santiago, Chile
1985
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA
1987
Long Beach Museum of Art, Long Beach, CA
International Center for Photography, New York, NY

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1964
Musée d'Art Moderne, Paris, France "Salon des Realites Nouvelles"
1968
The Brooklyn Museum, New York "Some More Beginnings"
1970
Musée Cantonal des Beaux Arts, Lausanne, Switzerland "Troisième Salon International des Galeries Pilotes"
1973
Everson Museum of Art of Syracuse and Onondaga County, Syracuse, NY "Circuit Invitational"
1974
John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Washington, DC "Art Now '74"
Kolnischer Kunstverein, Cologne, West Germany "Projekt '74"
1975
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY "1975 Biennial Exhibition"
1977
Kassel, West Germany "Documenta 6"
1979
Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, PA "Masks, Tents, Vessels, Talismans"
1980
United States Pavillion, 39th Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy "Drawings: The Pluralist Decade" (traveled)
1983
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY "1983 Biennial Exhibition"
1984

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY "A Survey: Artist's TV Lab, WNET/Thirteen"
1985

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY "1985 Biennial Exhibition"
1986

American Film Institute, Los Angeles, CA "National Video Festival"

SELECTED FELLOWSHIPS, GRANTS AND PRIZES

The J.S. Guggenheim Foundation: 1971, 1976

National Endowment For the Arts: 1974, 1975, 1976, 1980, 1982, 1984, 1985, 1987

Rockefeller Foundation Video Fellowship Award: 1981

New York State Council on the Arts: 1974, 1981, 1982, 1984, 1985

Festival de Video, San Sebastian, Spain: 1983

Kaltenborn Foundation: 1985

Athens International Film and Video Festival, Athens, OH: 1985, 1987

National Video Festival, American Film Institute, Los Angeles, CA: 1986

Massachusetts Council on the Arts: 1986

Daniel Wadsworth Memorial Video Festival: 1987

SELECTED BROADCASTS

WNET/Thirteen, New York: 1976, 1980, 1982, 1985, 1986, 1987

WTTW, Chicago, IL: 1979, 1982, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1987

KQED, San Francisco, CA: 1982, 1983, 1984, 1985

VIDEOGRAPHY

Three Way Communication (1972, b&w, 10:00, two channel installation)

Plato Now (1972, b&w, 30:00)

Monument to the Charles River (1973, b&w, 27:00, two channel installation)

Yucatan (1973, b&w, 27:00)

Zapoteca (1973, b&w, 27:00)

Guatemala (1973, b&w, 27:00)

Rumbo Al Golfo (1973, b&w, 27:00)

Nazca (1974, b&w, 11:00 two channel installation)

Lima (1974, b&w, 27:00)

Macchu-Picchu (1974, b&w, silent, 27:00)

Video Trans-America Debriefing Pyramid (1974, b&w, four channel installation)

Publicness (1974, b&w)

Chile (1974, color, 13:00)

Moving (1974, b&w, 27:00)

Inca (1974, b&w, 20:00 two channel installation)

It Can Happen to You ((1975, b&w, 30:00)

Videodances (1975, b&w, 30:00)

Maids of Honor (1975, color, 18:00)

La Frontera (1975, b&w, 20:00 two channel installation)

In the Beginning (1975, colorized, 26:00)

Cuzco (1975, colorized, 20:00 two channel installation)

Inca Split (1976, b&w installation for film and audience participation)

Guahibos (1976, color, 26:00)

Yanomami Healing One (1977, b&w, 50:00)

Yanomami Healing Two (1977, b&w, 50:00)

The Abandoned Shabono (1978, color, 27:00)

More Than Two (1978, color two channel installation)

The Laughing Alligator (1979, color, 28:00)

The Circle of Fires (1979, color three channel installation)

Venus and Her Mirror (1980, color, painting with single channel video installation)

Chiloe (1981, color, stereo, 18:00)

The Looking Glass (1982, color, 28:00)

Information Withheld (1983, color, 28:00)

Signage (1983, color three channel installation)

Chiloe (1983, color, 16:00)

Chicago Boys (1984, color, stereo, 16:00)

Shifters (1984, color, stereo, 28:00)

Obelisk (1985, color, three channel installation)

J.S. Bach (1986, color, stereo, 28:00)

The Motherland (1986, color, stereo, 9:00)