Shelter Disenclosed

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On a rectangular plot of land in central Michigan stand seven crumbling brick buildings. Formerly home to the Mount Pleasant Indian Industrial Boarding School, the walls of these structures once represented powerful boundaries that the US Government placed between Indigenous children and their cultures and families. But today, more than ninety years after the institution they housed was closed, several of the classrooms and dormitories have begun to turn the corner towards ruin. Their boundaries have begun to fall apart. Many of their oppressive spaces are no longer enclosed.

This deterioration of building envelopes — the perforation of borders meant to keep out the rain, cold, and snow — might seem a case for historic preservation or restoration, simply requiring repair and maintenance. When there is a leak in a roof, or a hole in a wall, you fix it. To do otherwise would go against one common understanding of the term *shelter*. But in this place the situation is not so simple. Many boarding school survivors and their descendants would prefer these structures were instead left to decay. Some would like to see them gone. The architectural remains of a federal program of forced assimilation, they are potent reminders of the dispossession of land, culture, and language that characterise much of the history of Indigenous peoples' experiences with the United States. These specific building enclosures separated much more than just interior from exterior. As they begin to erode through the entropic forces of weather and time, perhaps their walls don't need restoration. The cracks that appear might allow for the reconnection of Native people to the culture and land that these buildings were designed to hold apart.

Despite its benevolent reputation, architectural preservation reflects several more sinister colonial impulses. The desire for restoration runs parallel to a desire for order, a desire for ownership, a desire for comfort, a desire for material accumulation, and a desire for control. While on their surface the common architectural acts of renovation, rehabilitation, and

reconstruction each seek to make things whole, at their core they all represent an inability to simply let things be.

Of course, these colonial impulses extend beyond projects of preservation. They shape most of how we think about design. The practice of architecture continues to mean the exertion of power on a large scale, the shaping of the natural environment into the built environment, and the creation of forms that embody a singular creative will. Such acts of creation require equivalent acts of destruction, at sites of material and energy extraction often located a great distance from those who design and construct them — what Kiel Moe refers to as their material and energetic *empire*.[1] As architects attempt to address our role in the climate emergency, we have become more conscientious about the sources of our materials and the impacts of our energy, but we have yet to do away with our obsession with enclosure. Indeed, the *airtight high-performance thermal boundary* seems to be the primary area of focus for those who seek to build responsibly. But as any physicist or geographer can attest, every boundary requires continuous energy to maintain. The simple act of marking an edge establishes an unequal condition, the division of an inside from an outside, and the start of a long fight against entropy. In the short term, this goes well. Bedrooms stay warm and basements stay dry. But over decades and centuries, even the perfect envelope breaks down, and it is at this point of decline that we so often move to restore, repair, and renew.

But what if we let our buildings be? Or what if we didn't insist on drawing such clear boundaries in the first place? If decolonising and re-Indigenising architecture means adopting a fundamentally different set of values, then one version of such a design practice might mean opening up our buildings: rejecting the artificial permanence of their arbitrarily located edges; giving up some control; allowing them to become disenclosed. There is less need for a conventional sense of enclosure, separation, or *shelter*, when the world outside our buildings is also considered our home.

1 Kiel Moe, *Empire, State & Building* (Actar Publishers, 2017).

Across the forests and lakes that stretch for hundreds of miles around the boarding school buildings, throughout *Anishinaabe Aki*, just such a porous understanding of spatial boundaries is found in the powerful precedent of the *midewigaan* — the *Mide* lodge — traditionally built from bent and tied saplings anchored directly into the ground. Constructed without a built-up floor, the land runs continuously in and across the building's footprint. The lodge defines its significant interior space through a repeated frame and eastern and western doorways, but its top and sides are left open, allowing for free passage of light, air, and weather through its wall and roof boundaries. It also allows for free passage through time, as the *midewigaan* exists in a blurry architectural state somewhere between construction and dissolution — a lightweight structural skeleton which acknowledges its inevitable return to the earth. Sometimes built in a single day, such structures are expected to last for a handful of years, not decades or centuries. The lodge therefore can't retain lasting meaning as an aesthetic achievement, or accrue value as real estate or land improvement. It instead derives its significance from community, from ceremony, from the act of being built, from the process of people coming together to create, inhabit, and care for it, each other, and the land that sustains them all. The *midewigaan* is not designed to be renovated and restored — it is designed to complete its cycle and pass back out of existence.

What would it mean to design all our buildings this way? It would mean living and thinking in a manner quite different from the path we've followed across much of the globe for the past century. It would mean living without skyscrapers, hospitals, or laboratories in the familiar polished forms we've come to expect — gone would be the era of continuous airport reconstruction. It could mean cities built within a forest, with parts of them growing and expanding while others simultaneously decay and recede. It could mean an end to the incredible ecological poverty of human life as currently lived across most of the urbanised world. Yes, it might mean more vulnerability, as our homes — our shelter —

might be less fortified against extreme weather, and less insulated from intense heat. But it will also mean a greater sense of urgency, a new sense of obligation to the earth, an increased sensitivity to the climatic changes which so many of us still have the luxury to ignore.

To live in architecture that is disenclosed is to create a better relationship with the world outside our walls. It is to construct a state in which we are less isolated, both thermally and socially. Architecture is not form. It is not boundary. It is the coming together of people to make collective meaning through space and material, and to shelter together. It is not the designing of a great work, the possession of an imposing building, or the preservation of a piece of history that makes architecture significant. It is the repeated making of shelter, and the continuous cycles of living within it. The land persists. The culture persists. Between them it is merely buildings that fall apart. Architectural symbols are not permanent. They should not be mistaken for the cultures that built them.

Disenclosure means to come to touch the environment upon which we are all ultimately connected and dependent. The world that supports our lives. The land from which we came, and to which we must all return.



Fig. 1. A lodge built on the site of the Mount Pleasant Indian Industrial Boarding School. Photograph taken by the author.