

SHUSWAP HEALING CENTRE

Design Inspiration and Intent

By Douglas Cardinal

I will always remember my first experience when I was called to work with the Indigenous peoples of the Okanagan Valley in the 1970's. I was involved in several ceremonies in the pit-houses in order to design educational facilities and programs to bring back the culture. It was the beginning of a long process for truth and reconciliation with the Indigenous cultures. I found fascinating to see how the pit-houses were made with cedar and were built well into the earth. Coming to these ceremonies, I was very conscious and humbled by being surrounded and encapsulated by the nurturing of Mother Earth. It left an indelible impression on me how we must respect our mother the earth to heal ourselves. Since the Indigenous peoples of the District of Sicamous lived in pit-houses, I felt that any building we produced must reflect this deep relationship with our mother the earth. After all, the love for the land is what unites us all, be of Indigenous or settler cultures.

To me, architecture is an art, and as an artist, I have always aimed to reflect my art as an abstraction of nature. When I design a building I analyze and honour both, the nature and contours of the environment where the building will rest, and the cultures of those who inhabit the area. For this, I do not copy local Western or Indigenous architectural forms, but I seek to represent the subliminal connection of the people to their site. For the Shuswap Healing Centre, I felt the need to powerfully abstract artistic symbols that reflected the deep and powerful relationship of the Secwepemc (Shuswap) peoples with Mother Earth as a beautiful teaching for all.

Driving along Mara Lake I observed the stunning geography of the site. I also felt the powerful energy at Sicamous Narrows meeting Shuswap Lake. When I stood on what is now addressed as Main Street Park, I felt that the land was beautiful and cared for. It was truly a healing site. I admired the beautiful trees that stood there, and I could visualize the vitality of the park to continue to be integrated with a healing center. Facing the Monashee Mountains, I envisioned a strong architectural expression that would reflect my interpretation of the earth forms in the Shuswap Region. This is why the forms wrapped around the building are the earth, the mountains, and the curving glass represents the water and rivers that are such a stunning feature in the whole area.

For the Shuswap Healing Centre, it was extremely important for me to create an architecture where the building could wrap its internal healing function as a warm and nurturing blanket. Even the smudging areas outside the building are integrated as the powerful natural expression of the entire area. I wanted people to realize that, like in the pit-house that is surrounded by earth, entering inside Shuswap Healing Centre could feel the same as the nurturing protection of Mother Earth, but in a modern and contemporary stylized artistic expression. I believe that instead of designing cold and clinical buildings, a healing center should be welcoming and nurturing like Mother Earth, wrapping healing services with love and tenderness so we can heal in good spirits. Indeed, my design intention for Shuswap Healing Centre is that it will evoke a sense of well-being and will embrace the community to an all-inclusive physical, psychological, and spiritual healing for all.