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Le altre montagne

Les autres montagnes / Die anderen Berge
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2. PAESAGGI





Representations of a vast territory and complex history: diverse faces of contemporary mountain architecture in North America

The vastness of territory that makes up the mountainous areas of the United States and Canada could be characterised more by its diversity than by any common trait. Different environmental, socio-cultural and historic conditions mean a wide array of architectural response strategies.

Many elements play a role in dictating contemporary mountain architecture in North America. The ruggedness and remoteness of the mountain territories drives materiality and design influences. Land ownership ranges from private to tribal to federal and has an impact on the built environment, as does the historical context which spans from thousands of years of indigenous habitation to homesteaders and settlers in the last two centuries. Recent efforts to revive and preserve Native American traditions have seen an increase in indigenous influence on design, while inspiration from Europe and Scandinavia has likewise had an impact. The result of this myriad of influences is not a definable American mountain architecture style but rather a multifaceted diversity of approaches to design.

The essay begins with an introduction to the diverse contexts of the mountain ranges in Canada and the United States, then illustrates the variety of approaches to contemporary architecture within the territory through examples projects from four architectural studios spread across the region.

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Keywords

Contemporary architecture, United States of America, Canada, mountain architecture.

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Opening picture

La Pointe hut in Poisson Blanc Regional Park (photo Jack Jérôme).

Fig. 1

The Cultural Values Pole depicting the shared core values of the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian peoples beneath Yadaa.at Kalé, which means “beautifully adorned face” (photo courtesy of SHI).

Fig. 2

The Cultural Values Totem (right) and the Walter Soboleff Building with integrated formline art panels on the cedar facade (photo courtesy of SHI).

Fig. 3

The Cultural Values Totem (right) and the Walter Soboleff Building with integrated formline art panels on the cedar facade (photo courtesy of SHI).

Disparate territorial context

The vast territory that comprises the mountain context of the US and Canada spans from the Pacific to the Atlantic Ocean and from the Arctic Circle to near the Mexican border. This extensive tapestry of high country, interwoven with the valleys and plains, can be diversely characterised as Arctic, sub-Arctic, high plains, desert, coastal or continental, with each zone presenting different environmental and social conditions.

While some of these mountainous areas have seen significant urban development and impacts of tourism, many share a characteristic that differentiates them from their alpine counterparts: a ruggedness and remoteness which translates to sparse development, less material availability and a relative lack of architectural interventions.

Much of this mountain territory is government land under the protection of federal designations. This status contributes to the preservation of wild spaces but also tends to dictate a uniform utilitarian style for built structures. Similarly, mountain tourism developments tend to follow a prescribed ‘resort rustic’ style. While residential architecture has generally been more expressive, recent public developments are also beginning to move beyond ‘traditional’ styles. These projects exhibit influence from European and Nordic design, but also embody more place-based characteristics, taking inspiration from the rugged landscape, early settler vernacular, and ancient indigenous traditions.

The following examples, from a widespread range of geographical, environmental, and socio-cultural contexts, offer insight into how contemporary architecture reflects the diversity of the mountain landscape in North America.

Indigenous influence and regeneration

The Sealaska Heritage Institute (SHI) Arts Campus is an ambitious project which seeks to preserve and protect the traditions of the past while carving a new space to adapt those traditions to the future. The campus is located in Juneau, a small remote city nestled in the rugged terrain between bay waters off the Gulf of Alaska and the peaks of the Alaska Boundary Range. The roots of the settle-

ment trace back more than 10,000 years with the presence of the Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian clans. Designed by Juneau-based MRV Architects, the SHI Arts Campus includes a museum of Native artefacts, classrooms, a library, a replica clan house, and a space dedicated to public events and a Native art market.

The campus is formed by the Walter Soboleff Building (2015) and Atnané Hít (2022), situated around an open plaza and hosting both indoor and outdoor spaces for artists to create different mediums of Northwest Coast art.

The concept for both buildings stems from a traditional bentwood box, which contained at.óowu, valuable items. The architects, specialists in totem pole and clan house reconstruction, studied old photos of clan villages to reinterpret vernacular elements in a contemporary way, expressed by heavy timber framework and cedar wood hand-adzed by master carver Wayne Price. The buildings feature integrated monumental work by prominent artists of the three tribal groups, such as the 12-meter red facade panels designed by Haida artist Robert Davidson in the traditional two-dimensional formline style and the large carved and painted screen made by Tsimshian master artist David A. Boxley and his son which adorns the interior clan house. In the plaza outside a 360 totem pole embodies the core values of the Native peoples, its four faces looking out at the town and the peak of Yadaa.at Kalé (Mt. Juneau).







Fig. 4
Contemporary lines pair with traditional heavy timber framing used frequently in U.S. national parks and forests (photo Woods Wheatcroft).

Fig. 5
Rugged detailing reflects the wild, rural character of the Idaho Panhandle (photo Woods Wheatcroft).

Fig. 6
Summit neighbourhood in the landscape of Powder Mountain (photo Doublespace Photography).

Sited on a formerly burned out lot in the town center, the campus is an example of regeneration in the remote yet urban mountain context. While crowdfunding for the project, SHI first landscaped the lot, converting it into a public resource which helped convince supporters of the project potential. As it expands opportunities for Alaska Native and Northwest Coast artists, the campus serves as a community center and epicenter of living culture, ensuring the Indigenous traditions are passed on from one generation to the next.

Collaborative initiatives for the common good

In the Kanisku National Forest of the Idaho Panhandle, the 2016 Moose Creek Warming Hut is a product of a National Forest Foundation program focused on environmental conservation, land stewardship and outreach. The project is a laudable example of a collaborative approach between multiple public entities to produce a resource for the general public. Designed and constructed by University of Idaho students and their collaborators, the hut is a public gathering place immersed in nature and a safe-haven during inclement weather, as well as a base camp for search and rescue teams. Built almost entirely in heavy timber, the structure

is a unique interpretation of the typical log and A-frame cabins that appear in the rural area.

The central gathering space of the hut is organized around a wood-burning stove. The southern wall of the central space is inclined and formed entirely of windows, with an external heavy timber structure creating a screen reminiscent of the forest beyond. Durability and resource availability was key to the project and timber was locally sourced and donated. The rough materiality of blackened wood cladding and corrugated corten steel roof panels, together with the thick timbers, communicates a sense of ruggedness, rurality, and wilderness, refining the aesthetic typical of American National Park infrastructure.

The hut demonstrates the potential of design-build programs, increasingly common in American architecture schools, which pair the resources of the university with non-profits working for the good of the community. The programs bring a more considered architectural approach into the sensitive environments of protected lands, where projects are often driven by top-down governmental processes that stifle design expression and innovation. Similar recent initiatives include those by the Colorado Building Workshop: the Longs Peak Privies, the



Outward Bound Micro-Cabins, and Confluence Hall. The latter two echo a formal language of horizontality and raw materiality that can be seen in the mountain-region works of architects such as Olsen Kundig and Lake Flato and like the Moose Creek Warming Hut, reflects an idea of American ruggedness.

Community building through design

Summit Horizon, an ongoing project located at 2,750m on Powder Mountain, Utah, contrasts the previous examples in terms of form and design process. A privately funded initiative by Summit Series, a program that brings together innovators, social impact investors and advisory groups to address big topics, the pre-designed neighborhood seeks to set an example of community building, climate responsiveness and land stewardship within the high-altitude environment.

Designed by Canadian practice MacKay-Lyons Sweetapple Architects, the development consists of 30 modest cabins of a range of sizes along with a communal lodge. The houses follow a set of four typologies and are either oriented in parallel to the slope contours or ‘cross-grain,’ cantilevering from the terrain. Together with the dramatic topography,

the alternation of units creates a village feel that is both unified and varied. With a level of density usually reserved for urban areas, the design conserves the surrounding wild lands for future generations.

The cabins are aggregated around courtyards to foster social interaction as well as create micro-climates protected from the otherwise windswept landscape. The siting of the buildings frames views and maximises solar gain which combines with thermal mass floors for passive heating. The buildings are elevated to reduce impact on the fragile terrain and are accessed on the upper floor via open-mesh steel bridges, an adaptation to the extremely high annual snowfall of the area. Cedar roofs and walls inspired by the vernacular barns of the valley below compliment the minimalist, Nordic-influenced designs, making the project an example of the liberative regionalism often exemplified in MLS Architects’ work.

Horizon is one of several of the studio’s ‘village making’ projects. The Margaree Research Shed is another example of the potential for community building through design in the low island mountains of Nova Scotia. The Shed is headquarters for the Golden Grove, a project focused on revitalizing the historic farmlands in the area and engag-

Fig. 7

Houses accessed by upper level steel bridges (photo Doublespace Photography).

Fig. 8

Elevating the structures reduces impact on the terrain (photo Doublespace Photography).





ing community members and local entrepreneurs in the development of the area. A simple structure which seamlessly blends traditional form with contemporary detailing, the Shed acts as an operations base for the farm and hosts various community events.

Minimalist approaches for low-impact tourism

Shifting west into the Hautes-Laurentides of Quebec we find other examples of North American mountain architecture which embody a minimalist approach and combine inspiration from the local vernacular with a Nordic-inspired purity of form. Several projects by Montreal-based design-build studio L'Abri encapsulate this typology.

Le Pic and Le Pointe, built within the Poisson Blanc Regional Park, are two small off-grid shelters accessible by foot and designed to be simple, functional, nature-oriented spaces. The minimalist structures make efficient use of space and their built-in furnishings adapt to a variety of use configurations. La Pointe is a reinterpretation of the 1950s style A-frame houses typical of the area, while Le Pic is simplified further with a single-slope roof. Both are entirely built and clad in timber, a choice of materiality based on local availability and durability.

Fig. 9
Le Pic cabin set within in the landscape (photo Yan Kaczynski).

Fig. 10
La Pointe hut in Poisson Blanc Regional Park (photo Jack Jérôme).

The focal point in both structures is the surrounding nature as framed through the windows of the structures.

For Farouche Tremblant, a Nordic farm and agritourism near Mont-Tremblant National Park, L'Abri took the traditional A-frame form to its apex with a series of pointed cedar-clad micro-cabins organized organically and connected by a winding path to a vernacular-inspired farmhouse which hosts a farmer's market and cafe. The minimalist structures blend into the surroundings and mimic the shapes of the spruce forest which envelop them. As with the projects of MLS Architects and the design-build programs, these works promote connection to nature, land stewardship, and a more gentle and low-impact tourism.

A more sustainable and inclusive future of design

While they don't yet represent the majority of building projects, the preceding examples demonstrate strategies for a design approach that is more sustainable, more inclusive of cultural diversity, and more reflective of the multifaceted environmental and social contexts in the North American mountain territories. ■



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