

spirit human animal natural BUILDING DESIGN

*Native Architect Johnpaul Jones Paves New Ground
by Building Traditional Values into Modern Designs*

by Pat Tanumihardja

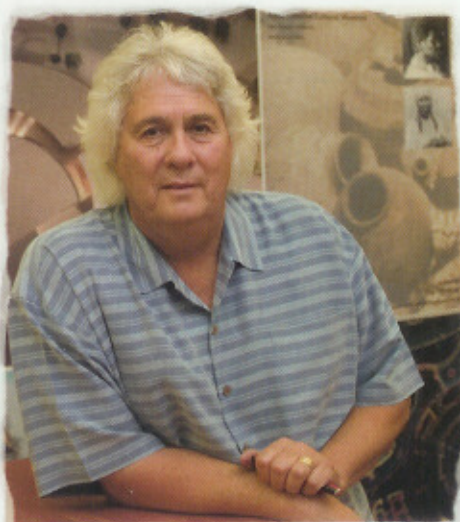
We're connected to four worlds: the natural, animal, human and spirit worlds," says architect Johnpaul Jones, his calm steady voice belying his inner strength. And respect for these four worlds forms the foundation of his craft.

"Those are the kind of values that ... my mother and grandmother have installed in me and I use them now in all the work that we do," reflects Jones, a principal at Seattle-based Jones & Jones Architects and Landscape Architects. With a laugh, he admits he didn't pay too much attention to it when he was young. "It wasn't really until I was out of college that I started realizing what they had given me and it was a way to handle life and design planning plans."

At 64, this tall grandfatherly figure with a head of Einstein-esque white hair has drawn from his Native American heritage in myriad ways over the course of his distinguished career. The firm he has built up with partners Grant and Ilze Jones (no relation) is grounded in a profound respect and celebration of the nature and culture of place, while centering on the sustainability of places and cultures.

Early Years

Born in Oklahoma to a Choctaw-Cherokee mother and a Welsh father, Jones moved to California in his teens after his parents



Johnpaul Jones

separated. "They wouldn't hire Indian people in the late '40s so (my mother) had to move all of us to California. There were...relocation programs for Indian people to be moved from the reservations and homelands and sent to the urban centers.

"We ended up in San Francisco (where) we worked in the fields in the San Joachim Valley," he explains. "My sisters, some of them were very young, and my mom, we worked together in the fields with...Mexican laborers to stay alive."

Two to three times a year, his mother would take them back to Oklahoma for Choctaw events,

allowing Jones to maintain ties to his heritage and his relatives

At school, Jones says matter-of-factly that he "was very slow at reading and had difficulty spelling." On the other hand, he "had good observation and I could draw really well so when I was in middle school I was put into a lot of drawing classes."

When it came time to decide on a college major, it was only natural for him to combine "art" drawing with technical drawing. The University of Oregon's school of architecture and allied arts was the perfect place for him. "It's got all the fine arts mixed in with the architecture and planning. I just lucked out," he says.

In 1967, Jones moved to the Puget Sound and worked for several architects before opening his own home office on Bainbridge Island.

While designing the master plan for the Daybreak Star Indian



The Evergreen State College's landmark Longhouse, which houses the Native American Studies Program.

Cultural Center in Discovery Park in the late 1960s, Jones was looking for a local firm to help with the project. Enter Grant and Ilze Jones, two architects with similar values and ideals. "It was nice to run into two other people who had the same values along the same lines," he says. "It was a natural gravitation to (join) the firm and be a partner."

The partnership blossomed and since then, Jones has been involved in a running list of projects, including exhibits at the San Diego Zoo and Seattle's Woodland Park Zoo and numerous Native American projects including University of Oregon's Many Nations Longhouse, the Evergreen State College's Longhouse and the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, which opened in September 2004 in Washington, D.C.

Holistic Style

Jones' design style comes from inside. "It's strongly tied to my heritage," he says. "I was always outdoors and I always living in a rural setting. There was a lot of discussion...about the seasons and the land, the environment and the animals. So all of that was ingrained in me and came out when I was doing real architecture and landscape problems."

Set apart from traditional schools of thought, Jones describes his architectural way as being more responsive "to very strong cultural

values and very strong land and environment issues."

When Jones designs a building, it's not all about bricks and mortar. He designs holistic and organic spaces that are interconnected with the four worlds: the natural world comprising plants and trees, the sun and sky; the animals who share everything with us; the spirit world, which has nothing to do with religion but is the belief that the things around us are alive and they deserve respect; and finally the human world where the transfer of knowledge takes place.

A holistic overview involves looking at the entire picture. "It's like a hand," Jones says placing his right hand flat on the table to illustrate his point. "You look at all these different elements and then as you move along they might narrow down into two, and then as you get further along they turn into one design," he explains as his left forefinger and thumb stroke each tanned finger in turn.

"The hand is a real good expression of that. When you first start out, you're looking at the program for the building, you're looking at the site, you're looking at the things that have happened there," Jones says. "Those things narrow down into ... simpler things that start to combine. And then we try to do one project – the building and the site."

Taking the National Museum of

the American Indian as an example, Jones explains how he always starts from the land, part of the natural world. "Before we start designing the building, I tell my team, 'Let's go look at what the land there is telling us. What's the history of the land? Maybe there's something in there that would be great to bring into the design.'"

"We also looked at what animals migrate through Washington, D.C.," he continues. "Monarch butterflies migrate through there all the way to Mexico and in the summer come back up to New England."

Jones recalls watching the monarchs fly through the site on the Mall in flocks. "(I said) 'We've got to create a place where they can rest.' It also ... ties to stories that elderly Indians have about animals and how we should conduct our lives."

In the Indian world, a lobby isn't just a lobby, Jones says. "You don't look at it that way. You look at it as 'this is the welcome place; this is where it starts; this is where we welcome.'"

"In Washington, D.C., it's hot in spring, summer and fall," says Jones. "If we're going to welcome the visitor to our site and our building, wouldn't it be nice to have them walking by cool water and shade?" Since the north side of the building fell in the shade, Jones decided to build a stream and a waterfall to create a welcome respite from the heat. Visitors were

directed along the north wall and "what results is a nice pleasant greeting."

In the spirit world, a building is considered a living thing and needs a birth date. The museum was no exception. "In the east plaza in the pavement, (there's) a stone pattern which shows where our solar system and the planets are on the date that the federal legislation was put in place to create the museum," he says. "Those are some of the things (to consider) when you are working on American Indian projects."

Favorite Projects

Jones views the National Museum of the American Indian as one of his most important projects. "It's the most recent and I probably won't work on one that big again. It was a lifetime project – it took 12 years from the design to the construction and finish."

It wasn't without its challenges. Work on the museum stopped halfway when one of the lead consultants dropped out. Jones, who was on the original design team, was called in to take over. He regrouped and rolled the project back to its design-development phase, eventually overseeing the entire project as lead design consultant.

He celebrated the culmination of this massive project with his wife, son and daughter, and their families, walking with the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma in a proces-

sion across the Mall together with 400 Indian nations to mark the museum's opening last year.

Another project close to his heart is his work at Seattle's Woodland Park Zoo, which started in the 1970s, "taking the animals out of cages and putting them in natural, or as-close-as-we-could-to-natural, habitats."

"We did the master plan and one thing that was wonderful was...the gorilla exhibit," Jones says. "To see the gorillas relaxing together, climbing trees, rolling on slopes...was as satisfying as doing the Indian museum."

"Those two are the most wonderful things I've been involved with," he says with a smile.

Encouraging Diversity

Architecture has always been a "good old boys' club" but Jones is trying to change that.

"When I was in school in Oregon in the '60s, I was the only Indian architectural student, and it hasn't changed too much," he says with a hint of melancholy. "There are very few Indian architects and engineers in the country. I belong to a group called American Indian Council of Architects and Engineers and there are only about 30 or 40 of us in the country."

With a strong belief that architecture is "a great profession for minorities of all races," Jones hopes to encourage more people of color to pursue architecture. "The profession can use their experiences and knowledge to enrich the architecture community," he says. "Singaporeans (referring to residents of one of the smallest island-states in the world) bring some wonderful perspectives of living together closely that could solve some problems (in U.S. cities)... It's the same thing with the Indian community. They bring things from their heritage that could help solve some of the current

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problems that we face in Seattle, the Northwest and the world."

It starts with leveling the playing field and giving all students equal opportunities. As a pioneer of the American Institute of Architects' (AIA) diversity committee in Seattle and a member of the National Minority Scholarship fund in Washington, D.C., Jones has been an influential figure in implementing change. He has helped set up scholarships and encouraged schools of design and planning to recruit minority and especially Indian kids into their programs. "At the University of Oklahoma, it went from 20 kids in their planning and design program to 100 kids over a two-year period."

Mentoring resource

"Julio San Jose," the name popped out of his mouth easily. "He was a professor (at the University of Oregon) and he mentored me more than anybody else through college."

"There are a lot of pressures when you're younger that discourage you from continuing your education," says Jones. "And mentoring is a resource...this person can come to you and talk to you about whatever the issue might be that's really important."

"It works real well to keep the Indian kids in school," he continues. "I've done that with three Indian kids who are now very successful here in Seattle in the architecture community," he says. "It's been a very wonderful thing for me but I

think it's been very helpful for them to have someone they can talk to... after they get out of college: What should I do, where should I go, how should I prepare myself."

Keli Hagen, architect and Suquamish Tribal member, met Jones in 1993 and found him a great resource. "I had access to him basically whenever I had a question...like should my firm pay for my AIA dues, or if I'm (just) feeling a little uncomfortable," she says. Jones was a shining star during the times Hagen felt trapped between her Native American projects and her firm's Western way of doing things. "(Jones) understood that and helped me to understand ways to handle that."

In addition to explaining what was expected of her and what she should expect from others in the field, Jones helped build up Hagen's confidence. "He (also) opened doors...and gave me access to resources and people I didn't even

know existed," she says.

Hagen is also grateful to Jones for showing her the virtue of patience. "He was very patient and in the world of architecture that's pretty hard."

Sharing wisdom

Just as his mother and grandmother gave him words to live by, Jones shares some words of wisdom he recently gave his firefighter son. "I told him that it's the long run that really counted. Trying to move too fast is often not the best way... overall in the long term," he leans back in his chair and says these words slowly as if for the first time. "Don't rush, take your time. Get to know the place where you're at, the people you're with and advance at a reasonable pace."

And listen. "Listen to the land. Listen to the people. If you're a good listener, you can make great advancements for yourself and your community." ■

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