

Case Study 2

First Nations Cultural Centre

Project

Squamish Lil'Wat Cultural Centre

First Nations

Lil'Wat Nation and Squamish Nation, British Columbia

Design Team

Alfred Waugh, MRAIC (Architect in Charge), Formline Architecture,
Wanda Dalla Costa and Adam Slawinski

By Louise Atkins

RAIC | IRAC

Royal Architectural Institute of Canada
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Squamish Lil'Wat Cultural Centre

Source: formline.ca

By the late 1990s, the Resort Municipality of Whistler, BC was already a world-renowned scenic and sports destination. But there was little or no visible presence of the Lil'Wat or Squamish First Nations people whose traditional lands overlap at Whistler.

The Lil'Wat and Squamish peoples share ancient cooperative bonds, and both Nations were committed to no longer being invisible on their lands. A major cultural tourism centre in Whistler would showcase their peoples, cultures, architecture, and artifacts to the world, preserve their heritage and provide economic opportunities for future generations.

Similarly, the Resort Municipality of Whistler was seeking ways to showcase First Nations. When the Lil'Wat and Squamish leaders brought their proposal to municipal council, the mayor and councillors voted unanimously in support of the Lil'Wat Squamish Cultural Centre and eagerly joined the process.

Project Initiation

The parties envisioned a “big house” cultural tourism centre, and their joint enthusiasm soon led to the signing of a historic Protocol Agreement between the two First Nations. It also led to the creation of a multi-party steering committee, commissioning of a pre-design study, and a business plan to make the project economically self-sustaining. By 2001, they were ready to seek funding.

The 2010 Winter Olympics proved to be a catalyst. As part of the Olympic bid process, support from host First Nations was crucial. In November 2002, the Squamish and Lil'wat Nations signed the Partners Creating Shared Legacies Agreement with the Vancouver 2010 Bid Corporation and the Province of British Columbia. Among several key commitments, this agreement included contributions to a Squamish and Lil'Wat Cultural Centre.

When Vancouver won the bid on July 2, 2003, Chief Gibby Jacob knew the First Nations had financial leverage, and they used it. For the cultural centre, major contributions from Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, the Province of British Columbia, and the two First Nations were secured. The Resort Municipality of Whistler provided the land and other in-kind contributions. The Olympics added impetus for private sector sponsorships, most notably Bell Canada which contributed \$3 million and leased the facility during the 2010 Winter Games.

Co-design Process

With so many stakeholders, the project steering committee for the design phase was enormous and the goals diverse. The two First Nations chiefs and official representatives sat at the table surrounded by lawyers, business plan accountants, museum and cultural consultants, plus government funding partners.

Early on, it was decided to hire an Indigenous architect. Starting with the pre-design, the steering committee selected Alfred Waugh, RAIC, based in West Vancouver. He was a fairly newly-licensed architect with a strong background in green building design and technology. Alfred Waugh's First Nation origins were in Northern Saskatchewan, but he embraced the opportunity to learn about the longhouse architecture of the Coast Salish and the Istken pit-houses of the Lil'Wat people. For part of the design phase, Alfred Waugh hired two Indigenous intern architects providing them the opportunity to design in a First Nations context.

According to Alfred Waugh, several factors drove the design – the site, the vision of each First Nation and the business plan. In his experience, people respond to visuals, so for steering committee visioning exercises,

he mixed traditional images of longhouses and pit-houses alongside his design drawings.

The 4.35-acre triangular site with its curving rock hillside was difficult. In Alfred Waugh's design iterations, the form of the building followed the curve of the rock wall, and at first, some steering committee members did not like it. As Chief Gibby Jacob explained, a curved wall is expensive, and the huge traditional wooden longhouse that his father grew up in had straight walls. On the north side, a circular Istken pit-house completed the building.

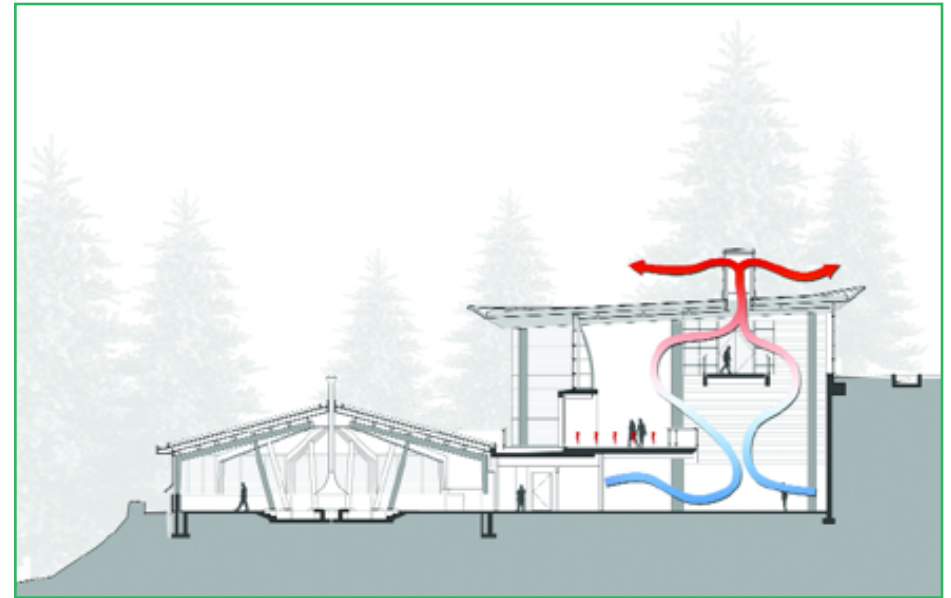
“In the lead up to the 2010 Winter Olympics, everyone stood to get benefits – Vancouver, the provincial and federal governments, the Olympic and Paralympic committees, Whistler and Richmond. We saw the Olympic bid process as a way to get legacies for Squamish and Lil'Wat First Nations too, and one of these was the cultural centre.”

Hereditary Chief Gibby Jacob, Squamish Nation

Balanced on a ledge-rock plinth, the elegant longhouse portion facing the Whistler townsite is completely glazed. Traditional longhouses are made entirely of wood and are private inward-looking sacred spaces, however in Alfred Waugh's words, "The First Nation Cultural Centre would look outward, a welcoming beacon to the rest of the world."

The design of the 2880-square-metre structure was extended over a five-year period due to pauses in the process until more funds were raised. The steering committee remained involved throughout all phases of the design. Chief Gibby Jacob describes Alfred Waugh as a very good architect. "His designs are well thought out and his approach methodical. He is also a good listener – it is part of his make up as a First Nation person where knowledge is passed on through listening to your grandparents."

The steering committee placed a high priority on environmental impacts of the centre. Alfred Waugh's design makes skillful use of green building principles and leading-edge environmental technology. The building's main open areas are not air-conditioned. The low-e glass wall faces north, avoiding direct sunlight and the remaining walls and roof employ advanced insulation technology. The design facilitates natural ventilation patterns allowing for passive air circulation. The mountains, rocks, and trees surrounding the building are complemented by planted natural gardens and permeable hard surfaces. Many other features reduce energy consumption both through structural design and efficient lighting and plumbing fixtures.



Natural ventilation patterns

Culture and Nature

Inside the longhouse portion of the building is a soaring Great Hall for museum exhibits and public events. A mezzanine level has open areas and as well as enclosed climate-controlled gallery spaces. The centre's main entrance faces east, flanked by house posts and carved cedar doors. There is a procession through the Great Hall, up through the building levels, eventually bringing the visitor outdoors at the foot of the forest – the

“We need to give big complex work to Indigenous architects. They become role models. It's First Nations looking after First Nations.”

Hereditary Chief Gibby Jacob

natural living environment of the Lil'Wat and Squamish peoples. Here, First Nation members and their visitors can find small-scale replicas of a pit-house and longhouse. Culturally, it is important to preserve and keep alive these Lil'Wat and Squamish archetypal architectural forms which embody their social structures and spiritual worldviews over thousands of years of civilization.

There are many other cultural and natural references. The shimmering glass wall fronting the building is laid down as overlapping planks in the style of the Salish longhouse – in Alfred Waugh's words "A 21st-century expression of the past." In keeping with tradition, the cultural centre is built primarily of wood and oriented to the cardinal directions. And customary to both cultures, the entrances face east.

The large round Istken pit-house on the north side anchors the building and sits at ground level. The design is close to archaeological proportions and is constructed of earth and logs, as were the traditional Istkens. Inside, beautifully angled log pillars hold up the roof which is covered with soil and planted with native plant species.

Building Process

Tradespeople from both Nations were heavily involved in building the Squamish Lil'Wat Cultural Centre. In the early 1990s, the Squamish Nation contracted Terry Ward's Newhaven Construction Company to build a community centre. He encouraged the First Nation to form a crew to help with the build. Over this and several subsequent Newhaven projects, the skills and numbers of Squamish tradespeople grew to the point that the Squamish Nation and Terry Ward's company formed the Newhaven Projects Limited Partnership.



Source: formline.ca

“The building expresses locale as well as content. It is very aware of the natural world. First Nations value animals and trees equally with humans which is different from Western culture which puts humans at the top.”

Alfred Waugh, Design Architect

Back in 2000-01 during the initial meetings for the cultural centre, Terry Ward had been at the table. Then in 2004-05, the steering committee approached him to serve as construction manager for the project. From the start, both the Lil'Wat and Squamish bands were determined to get their members working on the build. Terry Ward called together both groups of tradespeople and asked them to take on contract pieces themselves, from excavating, foundations, and framing to heavy timber construction. While the Squamish, through Newhaven Construction, were set up for contracting, the Lil'Wat had no similar grouping. This was resolved when one of their journeymen stepped forward and said he knew other Lil'Wat tradespeople and would organize them to undertake contracts. With one construction superintendent from Newhaven and one from Lil'Wat, construction of the cultural centre was truly a two-nation enterprise.

“By incorporating so many Lil'Wat and Squamish Nation members into the planning and the construction, building care and maintenance is high.”

Terry Ward, President (retired), Newhaven Construction

Outcomes and Reflections

The spectacular Squamish Lil'Wat Cultural Centre opened its doors in 2008. When Chief Gibby Jacob brought the Elders in to see the completed project, “you could see the happiness in their faces. They came from an era when First Nations got nothing.”

True to the initiating vision, the cultural centre houses and showcases the art, history, and culture of the Squamish and Lil'Wat Nations, shares their cultural knowledge and inspires understanding and respect among people. Welcoming visitors from around the world, Squamish and Lil'Wat First Nation Youth Ambassadors are on hand to provide tours and workshops, teach crafts, explain the history and demonstrate other aspects of culture through song, dance, drumming and food.

The Great Hall museum doubles as a venue for conferences and large events. It is designed so that a Salish canoe and other large artifacts can be lifted and suspended overhead to clear the floor area. The Istken is multi-purpose as well, operating as a restaurant, café and gallery shop. It can also be adapted as a special space for meetings, dinners, and weddings. It is also very much a community space drawing First Nations and Whistler townspeople together for activities ranging from yoga to a farmers' market.

As one its the greatest achievements, the Squamish Lil'Wat Cultural Centre is preserving and transmitting architecture, traditional knowledge, culture and spiritual teachings through the generations. It is reviving interest in ancestral languages. Native crafts such as intricate beading, basket-making, weaving, and carving are once again flourishing.

Indigenous youth are benefitting too. Before taking up their duties at the Squamish Lil'Wat Cultural Centre, all the Youth Ambassadors receive hospitality and tourism training through a partnership program with Capilano University. Many go on to productive careers in the industry, while for others it is a gateway to pursue further studies at college or university.

The same is true for the construction trades. The experience with the cultural centre and other Newhaven Construction projects inspired the Squamish to establish an Indigenous trade school, which began in 2011.

More than 1,000 First Nations, Métis and Inuit men and women have been through the school learning to be carpenters, electricians, pipe-fitters, heavy equipment operators and other trades.

“When I read that 60 percent of membership in the trades were between 55 and 65 years old, I saw this as our opportunity to fill the gap by setting up our own Indigenous trade school.”

Hereditary Chief Gibby Jacob

Further partnerships are in the offing, this time to build much-needed staff housing in Whistler. Right now, most cultural centre employees must commute long distances to work. A coalition including the Squamish Lil'Wat Cultural Centre, the Province of British Columbia, and the owners of Whistler Blackcomb ski facilities will spearhead the housing initiative.

Large cultural complexes are expensive to build, and it was difficult to estimate construction costs accurately. As time went by and the Olympics approached, prices for materials rapidly escalated. The two First Nations had a large funding gap to fill, and had to be steadfast and use their business acumen and band resources to get the project done.

Terry Ward believes that the completed cultural centre project is an amazing achievement. And with such a spectacular building, Chief Gibby Jacob declared, “We are showing the world we’re here and we’re visible.”



Source: <https://slcc.ca/venue>

Sincere thanks to those interviewed for this case study:

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Kakalitn Siyam (Hereditary Chief Gibby Jacob,
Squamish Nation)

Terry Ward, President (retired),
Newhaven Construction

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