



by Debra Gelbart

Designed by Leo A Daly and built by Chanen Construction, Casino Arizona opened last year.



NATIVE SOIL

Sensitivity a must when doing business with Indian communities



Most successful business people agree that one of the most important steps in building a lasting relationship with a client is listening intently to what the client wants and needs. That is particularly sage advice for cross-cultural exchanges and it explains in large measure how predominantly Anglo design and construction firms in Arizona have strengthened their working relationships with Native American communities.

When working with Native Americans, it's imperative to "keep your ears and eyes open and your mouth shut," says Pat Edwards, managing principal for Leo A Daly in Phoenix, an international architectural firm headquartered in Omaha. "You have to be willing to say, 'We want to be educated' and you must be receptive to what they're trying to teach you."

Being receptive to a culture that may not be your own is the key to establishing a relationship, he says. Adding that it's important to relate to tribal representatives "at chest level (your heart) and at your navel (your gut) instead of just eye level."

Edwards says being aware of and sensitive to what he calls "low-content conversations" and "high-content conversations" can be helpful. In a high-content conversation, he explains, a person may not – for fear of sounding rude or too insistent – indicate a wish directly.

"Sometimes you have to read between the lines to understand what's being said," he explains. "Everything may not be readily apparent." An example might be that a Native American client may not say, "We don't want our land scarred by a parking lot." Instead, the statement might be "the land is sacred to us." It's then up to the firm to figure out the message that's actually being conveyed.

Edwards says acknowledging that "things have their own time" is helpful too. An architect's or contractor's timetable may not necessarily be the same as the tribe's timetable.

Edwards says his firm, which has been awarded a contract to master plan all commercial and industrial development along the Loop 101 corridor owned by the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community, has worked with Native Americans for 40 years. "Yet we're not going to say that we completely understand Native American culture," he says. "We're still learning."

Taking time to learn that tribes are different from each other is vital. "Our approach is that each tribe is unique in its culture, traditions, language and location of its homeland," says Nona Baheshone, director of Native Design for Cornoyer Hedrick, an architectural firm in Phoenix. "This requires taking the time to get to know each Native American community and learn about its rules and regulations, its customs in hiring and about the training opportunities that you'll be expected to provide for members of the community. We've found the tribes to be very business-oriented and professional."

Cornoyer Hedrick has had a relationship with Native American tribes for a decade, but the Native Design division of the firm was just established in February when Baheshone, herself a member of the Navajo Nation, came to work at the firm. "The goal for Native Design is to balance the concepts of development and preservation, not just with Indian tribes in the public and private sectors for 20 years and I have a background in planning and design and Cornoyer Hedrick wanted to take the initiative to develop a Native Design program. We have a great opportunity to create sustainable development by blending organic, neo-urban design with tribal culture and environment. We believe that the preservation of Indian nations and their sovereignty can be achieved through careful, methodical planning processes. The response from Native American communities has been tremendous."

Currently, Cornoyer Hedrick is in the design guidelines/master-planning phase for a government campus for the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community. The campus is located on a 30-acre site at Osborn and Longmore Roads. Cornoyer Hedrick also is designing Phase IV of Chaparral Business Park at Chaparral Road and the Pima Freeway. Phase IV is a Class A office building. The first three phases that the firm designed are a flex building, a Class A office building and a build-to-suit for Fender Guitars. The Fender Guitars building is under construction.

Kitchell Contractors is the general contractor for Chaparral Business Park. "By the end of the summer, Phase III will be completed." Says Sandy Werthmen, vice president of marketing for Kitchell. The firm began working for Native American communities in the mid-1990's, when it served as construction manager for Gila River Casino, but Kitchell also built Indian health clinics and hospitals in the 1970's and 80's when the federal government was the client. "The native American communities that we've worked with don't want to rely on gaming as their only source of additional revenue."



Werthman says. “They have built office parks, golf courses and hotels to generate revenue equal to gaming.”

Werthman points out that working with the tribes involves “very broad participation. You need to get to know a lot more people that if you were dealing with a corporation.” With a corporation you might seal the deal with the CEO, she says. Native American communities “are a lot more egalitarian. You might work with the tribal council, the community economic development office, tribal engineering and tribal employment” both before the agreement is signed and throughout the project.

Edwards says agreement often must be unanimous, calling it “concordance, not concurrence. With a project on tribal land, everybody must come on board, not just the majority.”

Currently, Kitchell is in the pre-construction phase for a junior high and high school campus for the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community, which will be paid for from revenue from gaming and retail venues. “This is going to be a private school that will rival Brophy Prep in its technology,” Werthman says. “The schools are scheduled to open for the 2003 school year.”

Kitchell also is in the process of building a temporary and permanent new casino for the

Pasqua Yaqui Tribe in Tucson and is undertaking remodels of the casino at the Fort McDowell Gaming Center and Cliff Castle Casino on Yavapai Apache Indian Nation near Camp Verde.

Listen, or
your tongue
will keep
you deaf.

-- Cherokee proverb

Chanen Construction Company in Phoenix has completed numerous projects for Native American communities in Arizona, including Wild Horse Pass, the primary location for Gila River Casino; three structures for Casino Arizona, sponsored by the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community; and the first phase of Cliff Castle Casino.

For Casino Arizona, we constructed a 15,000-square-foot temporary sprung structure at McKellips and Loop 101, “ says Steve Chanen, president of the company, “ and a 20,000-square-foot sprung structure on Indian Bend just east of the Pima Freeway. The structure on McKellips was torn down and we replaced it with a 170,000-square-foot facility with 500 slot machines, seven restaurants and lounges and administrative offices.”

Chanen says his firm spends a lot of time learning about each community’s values to ensure that those values are reflected in every project. “With Gila River, for example, it was important to create a water feature within the project that tells visitors they are among the ‘people of the river.’ So, inside Wild Horse Pass we have a replica of the Gila River that runs the length of the entire building.” Chanen says Wild Horse Pass is modeled after historic earth berm structures and was designed as through “ rose out of the earth.”

Chanen says he did a great deal of research before he even began to develop his first proposal for the Gila River Indian Community’s casino project. “ This project was to be the economic development engine for the community,” he says, “ and we needed to first understand what was important to tribal elders.” He credits the leadership of former Gila River Indian Community Governor Mary Thomas with helping his firm to better understand the community’s culture.

Chanen says education is paramount when working with Native American communities. “You’ve got to understand the cultural elements,” he says, “and you have to remember

that from the tribes’ perspective, it’s not just a casino that’s being built. What’s being built is an opportunity to create an economic development source from which many other community projects can spring.”

Projects with and for Native American communities are sometimes still overseen by federal and state government. FCI Constructors in Phoenix is repairing and replacing facilities with the Chinle and Pinon Unified School Districts on the Navajo Reservation in northeastern Arizona, under the auspices of Arizona’s School Facilities Board. “We’re repairing or replacing nine different facilities,” says Joe Kelleher, vice president of operations at FCI.

FCI had worked “almost constantly with the Navajo Nation since 1991,” Kelleher says. “You have to respect the laws of the Nation and be willing to comply with the laws,” he says, “particularly those that require you to rely on the local employee base whenever possible.”

Although tribal leaders are savvy business people, it’s critical to remember that “Native American culture is not Anglo culture,” Werthman says. “These are communities that operate under cultural guidelines that are different from each other and from those that we may be accustomed to.”

“It’s a great learning experience working with and coming to know the tribes because they’re all so different,” adds Baheshone. “It’s and honor and a privilege to work with them.”

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Debra Gelbart is a Phoenix free-lance writer.