

## Indian Reservation Housing: Progress Since The "Stanton Report"?<sup>1 2</sup>

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The Wasichus have put us in these square boxes. Our power is gone and we are dying. For the power is not in us any more. You can look at our boys and see how it is with us. When we were living by the power of the circle in the way we should, boys were men at twelve or thirteen. But now it takes them very much longer to mature.

Hehaka Sapa (Black Elk)

I. Forced into a situation of total dependence by the destruction of their traditional economic bases during the latter half of the nineteenth century, Native Americans on reservations abandoned their houses and traditional building technology as they tried to "assimilate." The existing housing deteriorated. Unable to afford anything resembling conventional market housing in the twentieth century, reservation Indians have been compelled to rely almost entirely upon the federal government, with what most observers concur has been a poor-to-indifferent response. In 1969, three major designated agencies met to examine needs, and to determine future responsibility, for housing production. In the tri-agency agreement thus reached among the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Indian Health Service, and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, HUD committed itself to producing 30,000 new Indian housing units during fiscal years 1970-74 but fell short of reaching this goal by nearly 50%. The glaring gap sparked Thomas Stanton, Director of the Housing Research Group of the Center for the Study of Responsive Law, to write an assessment of this and other failures in HUD's Indian Housing programs. The main findings of this report are

worth reiterating, and are summarized in the following paragraphs.

According to Stanton, 1977 was the ninth consecutive year that HUD promised more housing than it delivered. From 1970 to 1974, HUD was responsible for 17,000 housing starts instead of the 30,000 committed. In 1975 and 1976, 9,723 housing units were committed, but only 5,677 units actually started. During the eight years preceding 1976, in summary, the number of units completed for occupancy was only about 38% of the new units needed.

As of 1977, only 26% of the 117,000 Indian housing units in areas served by the Bureau of Indian Affairs were in conformance with uniform codes and standards, and inhabited by the intended number of occupants. 26% were substandard (lacking running water, other utilities, or access by paved road), 28% so dilapidated as to require (usually unavailable) replacements, and 20% occupied by more than one family. In comparison with the rest of rural America, Indian housing is 4.5 times more likely to be crowded, 4 times more likely to lack indoor toilets, and 8 times more likely to lack running water.

The relationship between housing and health, while not fully understood, is certainly well-known. But what is less known is that while the rate of death for Indian infants is twice that for the remainder of the nation during the first year of life, it is *comparable* during the first month and even *lower* than the national rate during the first week of life. McCammon (1977) concluded that, for babies born in hospitals, inadequate housing and inadequate nourishment were responsible for the high subsequent mortality, stating "It is harsh environment and socioeconomic conditions of the family that put the newborn at high risk."

Of accidents, a leading cause of Native American deaths, greater than 40% occurred in and around the home. Both high infant mortality rates and high rates of domestic accidents are traced in large part to badly-designed, poorly constructed, and inadequately equipped homes. High rates of other forms of pathology—alcoholism, suicide, and homicide—may have their environmental correlates as well, but too little attention is paid to the possibility. One milestone report (National Institute of Mental Health, 1973) on these three prominent causes of Indian deaths does not deal *at all* with contributory factors.

Stanton traced other housing problems, as well, to HUD's confused administrative structure. According to Reeves Nahwooky, then Director of HUD's Office of Indian Policy and Pro-

grams, "members of the Office met almost daily with members of those (HUD) staffs having the ultimate production and management decisions (but lacked) the authority to make those decisions or to countermand them once made." (Stanton, 1977, p. 6) Even further, "Indian Program officials in the field complain about the low status HUD gives Indian housing. Low status means insufficient manpower, resulting in insufficient HUD staff support to Indian Housing Authorities . . . which assures a lack of both quantity and quality." (Stanton, 1977, p. 7)

But defects in housing, for administrative reasons, are difficult to remedy. The incidence of defects, in 1977, was monitored by local housing authorities, but no records or statistics were maintained by the HUD Central Office. Indian Housing regulations failed to make provision for HUD reimbursement to IHAs for correcting construction defects in new HUD housing—hence, such defects went uncorrected. HUD regulations provided neither for ongoing maintenance and repair of rental housing, nor for maintenance training programs, and HUD housing was excluded from BIA home improvement programs, as well.

Moreover, no administrative means existed for coordination among the various federal agencies responsible for Indian housing. It was not uncommon for jurisdictional disputes among HUD, BIA, and the Indian Health Service to halt badly needed projects for six months or more, sometimes with ludicrous results. In Navajo, New Mexico, for example, a housing development adjacent to a paved highway was provided with paved streets, but the short connector between the development and the highway was a dirt road often impassable during the heavy summer rains.

Even HUD's relationship with its own housing authorities has been relatively poor. The standard mechanism for controlling Indian Housing Authorities, until recently, was rejection of all further housing applications. Failure to conform to HUD regulations is blamed by some IHAs on the HUD manuals, which many consider unreadable. Nevertheless, HUD has chosen to apply sanctions, rather than to provide much needed technical assistance. Some managerial assistance to local Indian Housing Authorities has been offered, but this aspect of the program is severely flawed as well. The 46-page Management Initiatives for Indian Housing handbook sported a process flowchart four pages long, and specified that IHAs could not get management funds until training proposals were prepared, but also could not submit training proposals until it was known exactly who

was going to provide training. Stanton's statement that only seven of twenty-four IHAs in Region IX and none of the IHAs in Region VIII provided mutual-help homebuyer counseling in mid-1976, and that HUD spent less than 8% of the funds allocated to this program in 1976, then comes as no surprise.

As a result of his findings, Stanton made four recommendations:

1. HUD should maintain a commitment to high Indian housing goals;
2. HUD should combine all Indian program activities into one Indian Program Office reporting directly to the Secretary;
3. HUD should take the lead in federal Indian housing, coordinating the tri-agency efforts of HUD, BIA, and IHS;
4. HUD should face squarely the responsibility to help build institutions as well as houses.

II. In the four years from the publication of the "Stanton Report" through mid-1981, certain aspects of the Indian housing situation began to change for the better, others for the worse, and still others not at all. There were some immediate responses to the findings of Stanton and researchers working along similar lines; by late 1978, HUD actions on Indian housing included:

. . . the drafting of interim amendments to existing Indian housing regulations to expedite processing and production, and requests for proposals to uncover and remedy deficiencies in application processing and in development, design and construction of Indian Housing and related facilities. (*Indian Truth*, 1978)

Other situations were less resolved, however, and some striking examples are detailed below.

**Coordination of Governmental Programs Dealing With Indian Housing.** The Stanton Report recommended that HUD take the lead in the federal Indian housing effort. A couple of years later, Patricia Harris, then Secretary of HUD, stated that her organization had done such a woefully inadequate job in the Indian housing area that it should certainly *not* be the coordinating agency. The problem was clearly recognized in the Housing and Community Development Act of 1980, following the Committee's intensive review of Indian and Alaskan Native housing programs:

Despite several years of effort to coordinate roads and water and sewer installations with HUD-assisted housing development activities on reservations and in villages, the agencies involved consistently failed to effectively coordinate their efforts. Roads are provided principally by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and water and sewer systems are provided by the Indian Health Service (IHS). Budget and funding cycles, allocation criteria and program policy emphasis differ among these agencies, HUD, and the Village and Tribal governments. Yet, the resources of each agency are usually required in order to successfully and efficiently develop HUD housing projects. In most instances, this lack of coordination has led to substantial increases in the cost of HUD-assisted housing.

This conclusion was strongly supported in one of HUD's own reports, "An Evaluation of the High Cost of Indian Housing," written in late 1979.

**Minimum Property Standards.** In 1978, the U.S. General Accounting Office stated that HUD ". . . does not meet Indian needs because its program requirements were designed for urban metropolitan areas." In fact, HUD's "minimum property standards" at that time applied uniformly to all HUD-financed housing in locations as different as Chicago, Illinois, Anchorage, Alaska, Honolulu, Hawaii, and Window Rock, Navajo Nation.

In order to qualify for federal loan assistance, Native Americans have had to comply with these minimum property standards. As a result, very few loans for the construction of individual homes have been approved. In Arizona, for example, of 1,390 applications for Veterans Administration loan assistance made since World War II, only two have been approved.

. . . the problem. . . is that in order for a veteran to be eligible for a loan under the HUD Minimum Property Standards, his home site must be on an improved lot equipped with running water and utility sources, and located on an all-weather road. Only the two Navajo applicants whose loans were approved had homesites on an approved lot. (Schreire, 1978, p. 8)

**Building Materials.** HUD has been extremely reluctant to allow alternatives to the "standard" building materials. The use of log construction in the Pacific Northwest finally obtained approval, but adobe in the Southwest is still forbidden:

The government's regulations may be pricing Indian housing right off the market. According to HUD's latest figures, making adobe conform to . . . standards (being sheathed in insulation and water proofed with an asphalt additive) means a cost increase of \$20,000 per house. . . adobe dwellings built to government specifications are so expensive that HUD won't finance them! And if HUD won't build adobe housing, the market for it will suffer. So will Indian adobe laborers. (*Indian Truth*, 1980)

Two important roles of adobe are in energy conservation (see below) and, as discussed later, in culturally-appropriate modes of building.

**Transportation.** If building materials are produced or purchased off-reservation, they must be transported to the site selected by the responsible IHA. Fuel costs, which had doubled just prior to the Stanton Report, have doubled once again since that time, adding to the cost of housing. In the case of the Hopi, for example, a large part of the increase in cost of HUD units (from \$53,000 to \$80,000 in recent years) seems attributable to the cost of transporting materials. (Schnorr, 1981)

**Energy Consumption and Energy Conservation.** The Stanton Report contains little concerning the costs of heating and cooling homes. By 1977, panic over the "energy crisis" of 1973-74 had entirely abated, and the oil shortage of 1979 had not yet occurred. Home heating fuel costs of 40-45¢/gallon seemed stable and affordable (if only barely for some people); and they still constituted a relatively small portion of total household costs among most middle-income families, although the impending crisis was already recognized by some agencies, e.g., Navajo Housing Authority, 1975. By late 1979, in fact, home heating and cooling costs had risen once again, by 150% or more; in the far north, the increases were truly astronomical:

The costs of energy in rural Alaska is (*sic*) escalating at an exorbitant rate. Costs of up to \$3 a gallon for fuel delivered in many villages are forcing rural Alas-

kans to commit an even larger proportion of their income to energy and transportation. This problem causes the most serious threat ever to the continued existence of remote communities. . . State and federal agencies have been very narrow in their response to this crisis. They have responded simply by expanding their welfare system. (*Tundra Times*, 1981)

For Indians living on reservations in such northern states as Montana and Wyoming, fuel costs of \$300–\$400/month were not unusual during the winter of 1980–81. In Alaska, weather conditions were more severe and costs were undoubtedly very much worse. Similar cases have been documented for the arid desert regions of Arizona (Schnorr, 1981).

A few solar experiments have been attempted on reservations, but the vast majority of HUD-built homes are characterized by little concern for either orientation or insulation. The use of such apparently energy-conserving materials as adobe is effectively forbidden in HUD financed housing. No wonder that Santa Fe architect William Haney, who used adobe brick in the design of housing for Indians, was moved to say: "I'm convinced HUD was created to avoid building housing. . . They 'handbook' adobe to death with rules that don't have any relevance." The oldest house in the United States, standing for over 700 years, is made of adobe, yet:

. . . HUD contends that adobe brick just isn't up to snuff. . . the government's chief criterion for acceptability is resistance to changing temperatures. . . Indians and other adobe lovers argue that it can take advantage of the sun without complicated solar collection machinery. The bricks store the sun's heat for nighttime use in winter, and cool off enough at night to provide relief from the blazing summer sun. (*Indian Truth*, 1980).

The problem is well-summarized in the subheadline to a recent article (Frazier, 1980): "Material Used for 9,000 Years Fails to Satisfy HUD; 'It's Just a Slab of Mud.'" Ironically, HUD's San Francisco Office of Program Planning and Evaluation lauds adobe's energy-saving qualities (Mackey, 1980), while HUD's Office of Indian Programs denies these same qualities by requiring the addition of expensive insulation. HUD requirements not only increase cost; they negate one of adobe's major virtues: its

heat storage capacity. "The worst thing you can do is block heat transfer with insulation." (Architect William Haney, quoted in Frazier, 1980)

On related fronts, however, some small progress was being made. Alternatives to oil fuel were being considered, for example, and there were signs that wood-burning stoves would no longer be classed as "luxury" by Washington. By late 1979, however, there were other signs, detailed in Section III, that these progressive directions would soon be reversed.

### Cultural Adaptiveness and Cultural Suitability

The "white" departmentalizes and separates everything. They have boxes for everything. They dissect and segregate their whole society and this is what they want the Indian people to buy.

—Gerry Backanaga,  
Director of the Pine Point  
Experimental School, Minnesota

In the face of construction problems, high maintenance costs, and seemingly insurmountable problems of energy consumption in reservation Indian housing, it is perhaps small wonder that questions of cultural suitability have faded into the background. As the opening quotation from Hehaka Sapa indicates, the initial reaction of Native Americans to the White man's houses was far from enthusiastic. Yet many surveys have suggested that Indians now want free-standing, "ranch style," tract homes—before they get them—but respond less favorably after living in them for a while (and paying the associated costs). The findings of Sadalla *et al* (1976) and Snyder *et al* (1976) point to a possible reason: Indians *do* want such conveniences as hot and cold running water, electric lighting, stoves, refrigerators, bathtubs, showers, etc., but perceive these modern (and energy gobbling) conveniences as inseparable from the *form* of houses occupied by people who have such things.<sup>3</sup> And, as "outside work," such as cooking, moves indoors, as in the case of the Hopi (Schnorr, 1981), desires for older cultural forms are combined with concomitant desires for more interior space.

In fact, the Anglo free-standing tract house is designed for the stereotypical Anglo-American family, and is remarkably ill-suited to any other family structure: it requires too much work to be maintained by a one-parent household, but also has no



place to accommodate the extended family, frequent long-term visitors, or multiple generations. Kitchens are too small and too segregated from the rest of the house. Room design is too inflexible to allow multiple uses. These and other problems are often related to the "minimum property standards" restrictions summarized in an earlier section.

Similar restrictions are applied to the use of culturally-appropriate building materials. Returning once again to adobe:

. . . the rules on adobe use are an interference with ancient pueblo culture. "It's our tradition," says Ike Martinez, director of the Indian Housing Authority for New Mexico's northern Pueblos, "but we've had to advise all the tribes we can't build adobe anymore."  
(*Indian Truth*, 1980)

On many reservations, a cultural renaissance has taken place over the past five to ten years. The result has been that the most traditional Indians are now likely to be the young and the very old:

In order to support their survival, Navajo elders' traditional way of life must be maximally preserved. When this means building a hogan. . . near the relatives and family to facilitate independent living, this should be done. . . The Navajo extended family unit remains very strong, but it is under extreme pressure to meet both traditional Navajo societal expectations as well as Anglo family norms. . . Sometimes this may mean that although a modern home is built for the elder family member, the older person will move out into an inadequate shelter. . . (or) to an urban Navajo community. . . when they would prefer to live independently in a hogan on their own land. (Lundberg, 1979)

In considering the requirements of different age groups, too, there has been only a little progress. A consortium of Navajo and federal agencies, for example, has been organized by Dr. Karl Menninger to advocate the construction of homes, hogans, and other appropriate housing environments for the elderly. With this encouragement, HUD and the former Department of Health, Education, and Welfare sponsored the beginnings of a "Group Home Demonstration Project," consisting of fifty units for five southwestern tribes. As of early 1979, however, no homes

had yet been constructed. And, as Section III of this article indicates, the future of projects fully dependent upon federal funds now appears rather dim.

At the settlement scale, HUD has been influenced by the socio-economic segregation typical of Anglo-American neighborhood development. There are some, however, who have seen the need to combine low, middle, and high income housing. The Navajo Division of Community Development's "Housing Development Report," for example, "calls for integrated housing projects where 'rich, poor, handicapped, elderly, all can live.' Only this way, the report claims, will the Navajo clan system be preserved." (Schreier, 1978, p. 5) The situation is worst in those areas where rental housing is assigned to Navajos based upon the order of request, with no regard for clan membership.

A more hopeful sign, in the twilight of the 1970s, was the apparent trend of thought among some HUD personnel to the support of locally-determined building codes and standards (uniform codes relating directly to health and safety were, of course, to remain in force). As indicated in the following section, however, this hope, too, was destined to be short-lived.

III. As the Carter years drew to a close, a HUD document entitled "An Evaluation of the High Cost of Indian Housing" suggested policy directions for HUD-sponsored Indian housing in the 1980s. Some observations were similar to those stated or implied in the Stanton Report, e.g., suggestions for sorting out conflicting jurisdictions among governmental agencies, and lamentations at additional housing costs occasioned by material haulage and Davis-Bacon wage rates.

But, on the whole, "High Cost" is a reactionary document. It examines wood stoves as an alternative heating source, for example, then suggests that they be disallowed on the basis of an average capital cost of \$600/unit. An informal and admittedly non-random sample of stove manufacturers in the Pacific Northwest (where wood stoves are most justifiable) indicates a considerably lower capital cost for stoves in the non-luxury range; further, such organizations as the Oregon-based Aprovecho Institute, devoted to the development of culturally-appropriate technology, teach people how to build stoves for themselves that cost almost nothing. But even if stoves *were* as expensive as "High Cost" indicates, the "pay-back" period would be less than one winter season in many areas of the northern United

States of America, and no more than two months in remote but forested areas of Alaska.

The report suggests that "carports" be disallowed in many areas. In fact, however, carports are only sometimes used for cars. In houses inhabited by large families with little storage space, carports provide needed external storage—of wood, for example—sheltered from rain. "High Cost" further proposes that accommodation of the extended family, culturally-adaptive exterior and interior design, and locally-determined codes and standards, are no longer affordable.

Whether Indian reservation housing is in fact more expensive than comparable housing in neighboring off-reservation areas depends upon how housing costs are calculated. Some other reports suggest that, all things being equal, Indian housing is no more expensive. Rather, the problem appears to be that *less*, in terms of housing quality, is actually delivered. Whatever the situation, accepting the recommendations of "High Cost" would appear to be a major step backward in the development of housing suited to the needs of Native Americans.

IV. The announcement of the Reagan administration budget cuts in mid-1981 turned much of the foregoing into history. HUD's budget has been cut and will be cut still further, and it now seems likely that HUD's involvement in Indian housing will soon end completely. In fact, it is projected by some, e.g., Feather, 1981, that the cuts in federal programs for Indians will exceed 80% at some time in the not-too-distant future.<sup>4</sup> Some of this may be absorbed by "block grants," whose extent and effect is still unknown.

There is considerable concern over actual and potential loss in federal funding within Native American communities; but, given the dismal performance of the federal government in the area of Indian housing, there seems little wailing or gnashing of teeth over impending reductions in this exercise of the government's "trust responsibility." Indeed, some tribes, nations, and non-tribal Indian organizations view the loss of federally-sponsored reservation housing as a blessing in disguise, making the development of alternative approaches absolutely necessary, and encouraging creative innovations in this area. In the recent past, imaginative architectural solutions by or for Native Americans have been largely in public buildings: schools, community and ceremonial centers, governmental complexes, etc.

Housing is the likely next area for innovation. Isolated experiments with new approaches were already underway in the late 1970s (e.g., Gardner, 1980), in such areas as subterranean housing and limited solarization. Both the Black Hills Alliance and groups working on the Hopi-Navajo partitioned lands have pointed to needs for development of approaches stressing self-reliance and mutual aid toward self-sufficiency. Early in 1981, the Lakota Nation established "Yellow Thunder Camp" in the Black Hills as an experiment in community-level appropriate technology, and as a demonstration of cooperative efforts toward self-reliance by Native Americans and concerned non-Indians working together.

Housing has always been an important symbol to Native Americans. In the past, it was symbolic of the federal government's fulfillment of—or, more often, failure to fulfill—its trust responsibility to Native Americans. In the future, it may be symbolic of cultural restoration. Certainly, it will represent quite strongly the determination of Native American people to "do for themselves."

#### NOTES

1. Valuable comments on an earlier version of this manuscript were provided by Dr. J. Schnorr of Northern Arizona University.
2. The research reported here was supported in part by a grant from the American Indian Studies Center at UCLA.
3. Some Navajos continue to maintain two houses, a "standard" house in a Navajo town and a "substandard" hogan often in an isolated area. Cultural conflicts in house form are, thus, partially resolved by isolating one form from the other.
4. Cuts of at least 50% are now being experienced but almost all urban Indian programs and reservation programs are expected to follow suit.

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