

Cardinal rules

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Mike Thomas/Yukon News

Architect Douglas Cardinal was in Whitehorse to reveal his plans for a Ross River Dena Council project.

Douglas Cardinal sure knows how to work a room.

Just as the attention of the 70-odd guests was waning, Cardinal's cheekbones pulled tight and his eyes sparkled as he got ready to share a joke.

He was talking about achieving Ikea-like modularity with quality wood.

No flimsy Ikea-like pressboard material.

No drywall.

Yawn.

“People were saying you need an Indian-proof house: one you can beat the hell out of.”

The crowd laughed. He'd recaptured their attention.

In architecture, it pays to know your audience.

Cardinal is the designer of the Canadian Museum of Civilization on the Ottawa River and the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington DC.

Thursday, Cardinal was in Whitehorse to deliver a \$187,000 design package to his latest client, the Ross River Dena Council.

As the standing-room-only crowd sipped complimentary wine and tea, and ate bannock and moose stew courtesy of Ross River's Mary John, Cardinal charmed them: first with war stories and then with a new plan for Ross River's old village site.

In a sense, Cardinal was returning to his small-town roots.

Cardinal's first major commission out of architectural school was St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church in Red Deer.

Like many of his age and of his descent — part Blackfoot — Cardinal attended Catholic residential school in Alberta before attending architectural school in Texas.

There, the human rights movement helped him rediscover his culture and his confidence.

He returned to Alberta and designed St. Mary's in 1968, which featured his trademark sweeping splines.

It was "an act of love and forgiveness," he said.

Another architect altered the church in the mid '90s.

Many, including Cardinal, assert the addition defaced his original plan. In fact, Cardinal's firm launched an intellectual property lawsuit over the matter, but rising legal costs forced him to abandon it.

Now his landmark church is set to grace a postage stamp on May 10th. Canada Post has chosen an angle that obscures the offending addition.

Cardinal, who is 73, also entertained the crowd with a tale about an impatient Pierre Trudeau, who removed a frigate from the defense budget to cover the costs of Cardinal's Canadian Museum of Civilization.

Trudeau wanted the building to proceed without delay.

Cardinal found himself adding to an eventual inventory of 15,000 computer-aided sketches on an ongoing basis, during the construction phase.

Trudeau wanted the museum finished while he was still in office.

The 93,000-square-metre project was finished in 1989.

After that, Cardinal tackled the Smithsonian Institute.

However, the project soon became a bureaucratic nightmare and Cardinal had a hard time dealing with the constant interference and revisions.

He was fired in 1998 midway through the design process for the Smithsonian's 24,000-square-metre National

Museum of the American Indian.

It took him five years to pay back the contract-default charges.

“They’ve now asked me to come back and renovate it.”

But he’s now moving in different circles.

“I thought I needed a break from governments,” he said. “It’s all about power and control and money. It was exhausting.”

And then he presented his designs for Ross River.

Well, not exactly “his” designs.

One of Cardinal’s strengths is his refusal to impose structures on people, as architects are often wont to do.

Cardinal demands feedback, and encourages clients to contribute.

That’s how Ross River’s Kaska Dena Council won him over.

In 1997, Ross River’s economic development office discussed the possibility of developing a new sustainable community with the Yukon Housing Corporation.

Besides being short on housing, the town was running short on space.

Through that process, the band’s economic development director John Michael Etzel came across a brochure on the northern Quebec community of Ouje-Bougoumou, Cardinal’s groundbreaking foray into community planning in the mid-‘90s.

Etzel requested Cardinal’s services.

He accepted almost immediately.

“The people of Ross River, they saw Ouje-Bougoumou and said, ‘That’s a model we want,’” said Cardinal.

Besides being a big economic generator — Cardinal says tourists will go out of their way to see a “real Indian village” — the Cree of Ouje-Bougoumou have experienced leaps of success in employment rates, home ownership, and post-secondary attendance rates.

The investment in Ouje-Bougoumou in the ‘90s extended beyond architecture, but good architecture can play a part in a community’s success.

“It tends to be underrated,” architecture critic Trevor Boddy explained from his Vancouver home.

“In Canada we spend too much on infrastructure and not enough on architecture, place-making and civic space.

“By making those things you can help redefine or refocus a community the way that paving streets doesn’t.”

When there’s no sense of community, of ownership, that’s when things fall apart, said Boddy.

You can shape your environment, but in turn it shapes you, according to an old adage.

Now the author of the Globe and Mail's Dwelling column, Boddy also wrote a biography of Cardinal, which was published in 1990. It was declared Alberta's book of the year.

"One of his real innovations is not so much the curvy-wurvy buildings, it is a way of meeting with the community and talking with them, what architects call 'programming' — coming up with a list of what's needed," said Boddy.

But what of the \$187,000 fee that Cardinal commanded from the Ross River Dena Council for this so-called "programming"?

"I think it's money well-spent because in some ways what he does is a kind of psychoanalysis of the community."

Ross River chief Jack Caesar even used the word "assess" in describing what Cardinal did for them.

Ross River's economic development office successfully applied to Indian and Northern Affairs' Target Investment Program.

In July, Cardinal paid a visit to Ross River.

He understood from the start that the community has deep-seated problems.

"It's because they were so badly treated," said Cardinal. "They were in a traditional area and then they were out hunting and gathering as a community. While they were away, the Canadian government just took all their houses and put them in a row in Ross River. Then they took their children."

What really caught his attention though, was the Dena Council's desire to make a difference for their children.

Though Cardinal's style could almost be called feminine — curvaceous bands, stacked cylinders, domed atriums — he has recently become explicit in how feminine needs influence his work.

He cites his Basque wife and deceased Blackfoot grandmother as his two greatest sources of inspiration.

And so, for Ross River, 50 homes are laid-out in sinuous lines; roads and cars are banished to the outside giving children clear paths to walk within the community.

Kitchens face play areas.

The organic inward-looking layout of the subdivision encourages interaction in the core, where the "living artist centre" and visitor hub is situated.

The modular octagonal homes were designed for low-energy, low-impact living in a northern environment.

Innovative sewage treatment technology limits groundwater impacts.

Ground-source heating and insulation allow the homes to approach zero-energy consumption.

Cardinal designed the walls so that they could be made out of small wood panels, introducing the possibility

they could be made locally.

Rooms and sections can be added, re-arranged or partitioned.

A similar “Cardinal house” on the firm’s website is budgeted at \$120,000 per 1,400 square feet of living space.

With designs in hand, the Ross River Dena Council has entered the second phase, defining construction costs and logistics and a hefty round of fundraising.

And Cardinal is moving to new projects.

Before Ross River, he was in Kamloops.

Next, Cardinal ventures to another Cree First Nation north of Saskatoon.

Each time he works with a new nation, he says, his ideas evolve and his understanding of the people grows.

“I still feel I have a lot to learn,” he said. “I still feel like I’m the oldest living teenager on the planet.”