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# Seeking Sustainability and Affordability:

## Native American Housing in SE Portland

by Leah Gibson    Imagery courtesy of NAYA

**O**n the early morning of Monday, October 8th, a lone flatbed truck pulled out of a parking lot of a warehouse in Aumsville, Oregon. The air was crisp with the beginning of fall, the sunlight still hidden behind trees as the truck began its trek up I-5.

The cargo was the first of nine modular housing units being delivered to a lot at 9707 SE Holgate in Portland, about an hour away.

Modular housing construction is an

alternative method to conventional construction that has been proven to reduce cost and delivery time and increase sustainability and green workforce jobs and training opportunities. For this project, each unit is built in a rectangle box shape, identical in interior and exterior design, and is built to be stackable. The hope, with this specific modular construction style, is that the reduced cost, time, and risk will increase opportunities to build more affordable and sustainable housing in Port-



land in a way that is less costly and more efficient.

While the units were being built in the Blazer Industries Inc. warehouse in Aumsville in August and September, the lot was being prepped and the foundation poured exactly to fit the measurements of the modular apartments. By the time the modular units were ready to leave the manufacturer's warehouse to make the short journey to Portland, the foundation was ready for them to be placed.

By the end of the day, the entire first set of three two-bedroom units had been placed and stacked. As each module arrived, a large crane lifted it off the back of the truck and gently set it down into place. By the end of day two, most of the one-bedrooms were done; on the final day, the last one-bedroom and the three studios

were secured. Compared to conventional construction time, weather issues, disruptions, and waste, this project was a breeze.

Portland news media outlets proclaimed “Affordable Housing Built in Three Days,” which is misleading. Although the modules were put together and set in the foundation within three days, the total length of time to construct the project from pouring the foundation to finishing the stairs is estimated to take approximately five months. The design time took about four months; it also took about four months to secure the proper permits. With design, permits, and construction time accounted for, the project totals 13 months altogether. Compared to traditional stick-built affordable housing complexes, which normally take about 18 months from design to completion, this amount of time is exemplary.

**T**he project, called Kah San Chako Haws (*Kay-Sahn-Chahko-Hahz*, meaning “East House” in Chinook jargon) is an effort of the Native American Youth & Family Center to create truly affordable housing for Portland urban Indian community members. And with the demand growing for affordable housing and funding becoming less available, this type of project is coming about at the perfect time.

The Native American Youth & Family Center, or NAYA (*Nay-uh*) Family Center, is a social services agency serving the Native American community of Portland with culturally specific programming, activities, and services for Native youth and families. NAYA Family Center’s mission is “...to enhance the diverse strengths of our youth and families in partnership with the community through cultural identity and education.” NAYA is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization that was established in 1974 by a group of parent volunteers

who were concerned about the futures of their youth. The organization officially attained nonprofit status in 1994 and serves its clients with everything from youth advocacy to emergency clothing, food, and domestic violence support to community economic development services, such as home ownership and financial wellness coaching and microenterprise development. It even operates a private, culturally specific, tuition-free high school, called the Early College Academy.

NAYA operates from a set of nine core values that guides the work of its staff and was chosen by Native community members, including youth and elders: respect, balance, pride, giving, community, tradition, kindness, accountability, diversity, and leadership. NAYA has also adopted the Relational Worldview Model, developed by the National Indian Child Welfare Association, and translated it for use in providing social services for the Native community of Portland. This service delivery model ensures that Native community members are being served holistically, rather than only treated with basic needs. For example, if a family comes into NAYA in need of food, they will not only receive a food box, but will also learn about potential job opportunities, go through the NAYA clothing closet for interview clothes, find out how to get free health care for their children, and pick up a flyer for the next community cultural event.

**T**he Native American community of Portland is the ninth largest urban Indian community in the nation. Over 380 tribes are represented in this community of over 38,000 Native people, many of which are multi-tribal and/or multi-ethnic. There are twenty-eight Native organizations in the Portland area, owned and run by Native people; of

these organizations, over \$50 million in combined revenue goes to the city's taxes, businesses, and services.

The city of Portland rests on old village sites of the Chinook, Multnomah, Clackamas, Kathlamet, and Tualatin Kalapuya, among others. All of these tribes were affected by disease, relocation, assimilation, and termination after non-Native contact. Over 60 Oregon tribes were terminated during the 1950s, including the Klamath, Siletz, and Grand Ronde, which have since fought to have their federally recognized tribal status reinstated. The site that NAYA now operates from at 5135 NE Columbia Blvd.—which used to be the Whitaker Elementary school—is actually a historical Chinook village site, where many Chinook families made their homes along the Columbia Slough. Before NAYA moved in to the new building from their old one on Mississippi Avenue, they asked Chinook tribal representatives for their permission to occupy the site and invited them to a traditional land blessing ceremony to seal the deal. In 2009, NAYA officially purchased the building and land from Portland Public Schools. Over the course of eight years during the move from their old building to the purchase of the new one, NAYA went from a five-person staff and a \$215,000 budget to a staff of 100 and a budget of over \$8 million.

Today, the Native community of Portland still suffers from the affects of termination, assimilation, relocation, boarding schools, and other forms of racism and bias, leading to diaspora, extreme poverty, mental illness, substance abuse, and health issues. However, resiliency is a key quality of this community. Despite the fact that the Native American poverty rate in Multnomah county is 34% compared to 12% in the white community and the unemployment rate is 70% higher for

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- kindness,*
- accountability,*
- diversity,*
- leadership*



Natives than white people, there is much being done on the city, county, and state levels to ensure that Native people receive access to much-needed resources in a culturally appropriate way.

Kah San Chako Haws, the leader in affordable, culturally appropriate housing for Native Americans, is one example of efforts to help lead Native families to self-sufficiency and overall well-being. Native people are overrepresented in the total homeless rate in Multnomah County by 350%, making up 9% of the overall rate—a number that has been increasing in the past few years, rather than declining. Of the total Multnomah County residents in poverty, Native people make up 6.8%; however, only half that amount receive public housing and only 4.4% receive tenant vouchers to ensure that they do not end up homeless. Compound these numbers with a lack of affordable housing, discrimination, and other inequities, and the Native community has a major housing crisis.

Although Kah San Chako Haws is only nine units, it represents the opportunity that is available to begin seriously addressing Native housing concerns. First of all, it is owned, operated, and constructed by Native Americans. Secondly, modular housing affords the ability to create quicker, cheaper housing options to address the growing numbers of people in need. Third, Kah San proves that it all can be done sustainably.

Kah San Chako Haws is one of four housing establishments that NAYA has developed in the past five years. In February of 2008, Sawash LLC was developed by NAYA Family Center and included three housing units—Ceel Ocks, Nelson Court, and Tistilal Village. These affordable housing developments began providing the Native community of Portland

with culturally appropriate affordable housing options. Kah San Chako Haws is a continuation of this theme with a focus on modular construction, which promises to house more people in a fraction of the time with fewer costs than conventional construction, with a land acquisition twist for the Portland urban Indian community thrown in.

**R**ey España, one of the primary leaders in affordable housing for Native people in Portland, has served as the director of the community development department at NAYA Family Center for over eight years. Prior to NAYA, Rey worked for Multnomah County and has a history in community development in the Los Angeles area.

The designer for the Kah San Chako Haws project, Stuart Emmons, coincidentally knows Rey from a string of development projects they worked on together back in Los Angeles in the 80s. The pair goes way back...as far back as 1984 in Santa Monica. Rey was a project manager for the city's economic development department, and Stuart represented the architect on a project called the Kent Edwards building, a senior center which has since won design awards, and projects like the Daybreak Center for survivors of domestic violence.

Every project the pair has pursued has always had a strong human interest factor. What is most unique is their approach is that, during the planning process, they ask, How can we push the limits, how can we make this better than it's been done before, and how can we really help people? Often, the people who will be living in the buildings that they develop come from hard places. For this reason, Rey and Stuart aim to build dignity into the design and development of the project. With this unique perspective, they have

*Every project [that Epaña and Emmons] have pursued has always had a strong human interest factor.*



won awards and have been recognized up and down the West Coast for their work.

One of the last projects they worked on was once called the Saint Julian, now the Simone Hotel, a 110-unit housing complex for Los Angeles' homeless. A multi-million dollar endeavor, the project began with absolutely pure intentions and backing from multiple funders, but got bogged down over the course of four years by political issues and complications. What started out as a grand plan to get 1,000 of the city's homeless off the streets every year for ten years was abandoned after only four years. The Simone Hotel is now the only proof of that endeavor.

"The designers, the builders...they were all friends of ours," says Rey, reminiscing. "We had it all together."

"We had the billionaires behind us," chimes in Stuart. "And we had the biggest oil company in the country behind us, and still..."

"In four years," continues Rey. "That was the only thing we ever built."

Disappointed by the process, Rey and Stuart felt that there had to be a better, faster, and cheaper way to create housing for low-income people. The seeds for NAYA's modular housing project were already being sown, and Rey hadn't even heard of NAYA yet.

Not long after the Simone Hotel, Rey left California for greener options—literally. The day that the two opened their last project together—the Kent Edwards Center—Rey had a job interview in Portland.

"I just kind of slipped out."

After losing contact with Stuart and his other L.A. friends and colleagues to join the growing movement in economic sustainability in Portland, Rey got connected and began working for Multnomah County.

One day about five years later, Rey was walking by a building next to his workplace and took note of a very interesting wall. It was slanted.

"I said to myself, *I don't know anyone else who would think of something like that,*" says Rey. He knew that Stuart had a particular penchant for curved walls and hadn't seen that specific style of architectural design done by anyone else.

A few days later, he was in a Greek deli downtown when he heard a joyful shout and turned to see a familiar face, one he never expected to see again. Stuart, unknowingly, had followed him to the Northwest.

"Portland is the last place I would have expected to see Rey," says Stuart. "He's an L.A. guy." After catching up a few moments, Stuart revealed that he was working for SERA Architects in the very building that Rey had noticed a few days earlier. Stuart was the designer of the curved wall. Their reunification seemed destined.

The rest is history in the making.

Stuart is not a stranger to making history. With a Master of Architecture degree from Harvard University, over 25 years of architectural experience, and 15 years of experience owning his own architecture business, Stuart is well known for his talent in California and in Portland. He's designed everything from firehouses to beautiful homes to the Deschutes brew pub in the Pearl—and now, modular housing.

"I just like to build things," says Stuart. He remembers his interest in architecture began when his father bought him his first drawing board when he was very young. In fact, Stuart's earliest inspiration for modular housing occurred when he attended Expo 67, the 1967 International and Universal Expedition, also known as the Category One World's Fair held in Montreal,



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Canada. He was 12. What he remembers most was an attraction called *Habitat 67*, a model construction of modular dwellings made of concrete stacked on top of each other, designed by Moshe Safdie.

**W**hat sets Stuart apart from other talented architects is his passion for helping people in need. When he designs a project, he really thinks about the people who will be living there. What are their needs? What are their challenges? During the design process, he aims to get in the heads of the people who will be inhabiting the space, whether it is an elderly widow or a homeless man just getting off the downtown streets.

Stuart says that one of his strongest early influences was his first architectural design instructor at the Pratt Institute in New York—the late Harry Simmons, an African American architect in Brooklyn—who opened his eyes to affordable housing and the impact it could make in people’s lives.

“He said, it’s not about how cool-looking the kitchen is, it’s about the people,” says Stuart. “I want to make an impact. This is the kind of work that feeds my soul. Rey has been a great influence on my work as well, and his vision, kindness, passions and generosity are truly exceptional. He is a great man, and I am blessed to call him a close friend of mine.”

This keen sense of humanity is what has inspired both Stuart and Rey in the implementation and design of Kah San Chako Haws. From the modular style to Stuart’s insistence on including dishwashers and Rey’s passion for energy efficiency—which will cut renters’ utility bills drastically—this project stands out from other housing projects. Both of them stress that, after their experience with the Simone Hotel, the most important thing

is that they are able to find a way to match up housing and tenants faster.

Rather than getting entangled in politics and land acquisition issues, the project is slated to take about 13 months from start to finish, compared to the approximately 18 months of time that housing developments normally take—and Rey says that time can be cut to even 11 months. As of mid-November, the NAYA construction team—made up of Native American community members and staff who are committed to workforce training—was doing workforce training on the siding of the units. Other finishing touches on the project will occur between now and the end of January. The plan is that the apartment complex will be move-in ready January 31, ensuring that more Native community members are helped faster.

The complex will serve tenants who are eligible to receive Section 8 housing assistance and meet other eligibility requirements. The housing is being built primarily to serve the Native American community’s elders, single mothers, youth aging out of foster care, and families. Applications are currently being processed.

Kah San Chako Haws is the first of its kind in the Pacific Northwest and is one of the first affordable, multi-family, multi-story projects in the nation. Although there have been other modular housing projects, this is the first that is made up of stacked modular units in an apartment style. It is a pilot project, which is intended to be replicated as funding is secured for land and construction. The beauty of modular housing is that a complex can be built as large or as small as the space affords, meaning that if land can only be purchased in parcels, the developers don’t have to wait until they find a big enough space. For example, if two lots can be purchased near each other, but

*The housing is being built primarily to serve the Native American community's elders, single mothers, youth aging out of foster care, and families.*



there is a plot of land in between that the landowner doesn't want to sell, the developers don't have to find another area to purchase. They can develop on the two available sites and then, if the landowner in the middle changes his or her mind later, great. If not, they can still start developing the available area.

In fact, Rey and Stuart have been eyeing a site right across the street from NAYA, where there is a lot for sale that would be perfect for Native community members who also receive—or could potentially receive—extensive services at NAYA, as well. And although there is enough opportunity and funding available for affordable housing projects such as this one, there isn't much available for land acquisition. In fact, Stuart says that land acquisition funding actually held up Kah San Chako Haws for a year.

“With the Portland Development Commission support, and now the Portland Housing Bureau, the money's really incredibly generous, and we're really thankful for their contribution,” he says, “but we couldn't use any of their money to buy the property. We need to get a trust of money that we can use just for land acquisition. This project will fit on individual lots, and that alone will really ease up land acquisition.”

Rey has another perspective on land acquisition from the Native worldview. Historically in Native cultures, indigenous people share land rather than owning it individually, whereas other non-Native communities consider land for equity and profit.

“Modular construction as a housing type on top of land that could be held in perpetuity is an interesting land trust model,” says Rey. “Modular construction associated with other ways of owning land is a good fit for the Native commu-

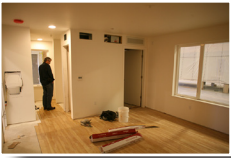
nity. For example, we could secure property and put the land in a land trust.” That way, the land would be kept always in the Native community and controlled by the Native community. “The actual housing piece of it could be sold, and then you have a shared equity model.”

The project also offers an interesting investment opportunity for potential public and private investors. Modular construction affords the ability for potential investors to do quality construction and reduce costs while, at the same time, cutting construction time in at least half. That way, they can begin filling up the units and collecting rent in a quicker timeframe than traditional stick-built housing projects. While traditional affordable housing complexes normally cost about \$200,000 a unit, Kah San Chako Haws units ran about \$190,000 each and could be cut down to \$150,000 each in the future. It helps that the designs for future units simply need to be tweaked and perfected a little, rather than completely redesigned for each project, which will save time as well as money.

**M**ore than just talking the talk, Rey and Stuart are committed to the walk, which leads to more affordable housing in less time, and affordable doesn't mean that modular housing looks cheap or is made with cheap materials. From the finish on the floor to the drywall finish and the casework, Stuart has taken extra care to design the units to impress.

In fact, even City Commissioner Nick Fish was impressed when he visited recently and pointed out the extra light that flooded the rooms through the bigger windows that Stuart designed. Kah San Chako units have big windows that let in extra light and a great cross flow of air; beautiful finishes; energy-efficient ap-

*More than just talking the talk, Rey and Stuart are committed to the walk, which leads to more affordable housing in less time.*





pliances, fixtures, wiring, plumbing, and insulation; extra lighting; and extra attention to the layout so that rooms feel larger and more comfortable. Furthermore, unit cost is reduced by the exchange of bigger windows for decks, the elimination of parking, and scaling down common areas and circulation. Based on recent modular projects in the nation, similar projects could save about 6-to-15% in costs from traditional housing construction projects in the future.

The site is located very close to the rest of Portland by the new MAX green line, thereby encouraging public transportation for community members who will inhabit the space. Additionally, there are parks and schools nearby, as well as shopping, healthcare, and workplaces. For these reasons, Kah San Chako Haws is perfect for families and working parents.

The modules are 12-to-15-foot wide and 30-to-60-foot long for ease in truck transportation. Studios are 400 square feet; one bedroom units are 711 square feet; and two bedrooms are 875 square feet. The one- and two-bedroom units are made up of two modules each, while studios are constructed of only one module. The reason for the mix of apartment layouts is to show the stability of the module construction for future multi-family housing projects.

The units are finished in the warehouse before being transported, including paint, flooring, and all fixtures. Once the modules are connected on site after transportation, they are “touched up,” and stairs, roofing, and siding are constructed. Rey and Stuart hope that, in the future, some of these touch ups can also be done in-warehouse. The studio units are also sized to be pilot designs for very low-income and homeless community members.

In addition to the beautiful design and

spaciousness of these modular units, the project scores a Gold Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) rating—just twelve points shy of making Platinum. The reason? Heat pumps. While the studio units do have the type of heat pumps required for the Platinum LEED rating, the one and two bedrooms do not.

“We were trying to save a little money on heating,” admits Stuart. “For another \$20,000, we could have made these way more energy-efficient. But at the time, we had to hit a budget.” Rey and Stuart both plan to make it Platinum next time.

**B**ut a Gold rating is still a great step in sustainability. In addition to the heat pumps in the studios, Kah San Chako Haws sports installation materials that were all harvested locally and sustainably, energy-efficient lighting, low-water plumbing fixtures, and Energy Star appliances. The modules were also built without the use of toxic glues. Additionally, the units were built in a sterile environment and away from wet weather, meaning that the opportunity for mold, mildew, and other construction-related issues will not be as common with this project as with traditional construction projects. Kah San Chako Haws’ energy efficiency will end up costing its tenants much less in utility bills and health risks in the long run.

In the future, Stuart and Rey hope to tweak the designs of the units to allow for further energy efficiency, while also hoping for a faster time frame. Rey says that they experienced some challenges that won’t be an issue for future projects, such as finding the right manufacturer, perfecting the design, and dealing with transportation-related legal matters and liabilities. Now that they’ve been through the process, the developers can concen-



trate on streamlining the process to get people housed as quickly as possible.

It helps that the manufacturer, Blazer Industries Inc., has had plenty of experience in modular housing already. In addition to Kah San Chako Haws, they've constructed modular homes, stores, and schools. They've been in business since the 1970s and got their start by building

toilets. The project team also includes Walsh Construction, the general contractor; the development consultant, Guardian Affordable Housing Development, LLC; the structural engineer Tornberg Consulting; sustainability, Earth Advantage; and financing, the Portland Housing Bureau, Meyer Memorial Trust, Capital Pacific Bank, State of Oregon, and Home Forward.

While NAYA chose to construct the units specifically in SE Portland due to a funding opportunity in the Lents urban renewal area through the Portland Development Commission, it has also been aiming to do more outreach to Native community members who live and work in that area. Southeast Portland, in fact, has the second-largest demographic of Native American community members, after the North Portland/St. John's area.

Rey says, "The Native demographic has shifted to SE Portland, so it all worked out well for us that PDC's funding concentrated on that area. Therefore, the housing is placed in a well-represented Native community already." NAYA also recently acquired the former Foster Elementary site in the Lents area and plans to run an early learning center for preschool-aged children and an intergenerational hous-

ing project for foster youth modeled after Bridge Meadows in Portsmouth. In the Lents area, more than 12% of the Native community is under age five.

So far, Kah San Chako Haws has received awards from the Portland Housing Bureau and the Meyer Memorial Trust, along with additional financing from Capital Pacific Bank. The project is setting a precedent for future affordable housing projects specifically designed for Native American community members and other low-income people in Portland by reducing costs and delivery time while increasing quality and sustainability.

Rey and Stuart are just getting started. With this pilot project well underway and near completion, they already have their sights set on potential property to continue building, in addition to the lot across the street from NAYA. The plan is to keep building upon this pilot project to make each subsequent project better, faster, cheaper, and more efficient. What remains the driving motivation is the lack of affordable housing for Native American community members in need.

"This has been a personal journey for us since 1988, building shelters and all that, not seeing enough housing built," says Stuart. "And there are not thirty people on the streets—there are hundreds of people on the street. To break the cycle of poverty, it's all about housing."

"We've proven initially that we can get quality housing for less," says Rey. "So we'll see how the community responds... but I think we're on to an idea." **M**

*Leah Gibson (Ojibwa Lakota) is a freelance writer and a Portland State alum. She holds a master's degree in writing through the Portland State book publishing program. Leah was raised in Portland and has strong roots in the Portland metro area.*

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