Is Every Building Worth Preserving?

TEXT BY
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The red brick buildings of the Mount Pleasant Indian Industrial Boarding School (MIIBS), in the heart of Michigan, appear sturdy and assertive, almost ageless, but time's passing peeks through in crumbling brick, weathered roofs, and dots of graffiti. Set against fields of wildflowers and grasses, the historic site straddles a cruel past and a future that is beginning to blossom.

MIIBS was one of more than 400 federal boarding schools built across the United States, enabled by the 1819 Civilization Fund Act: legislation enacted to prevent "the further decline and final extinction" of Indigenous peoples—a decline produced by the U.S. in decades of bloody wars and broken treaties that dispossessed Native tribes and continued long after the act was passed. Boarding schools, built and operated beginning in 1860 and mostly closed by the 1980s, would take a different approach: "The next Indian war would be ideological and psychological, and it would be waged against children," wrote historian David Wallace Adams in his book *Education for Extinction*. For 118 years, the U.S. federal government removed Native American children from their families in order to "save" them, housing the children within specialized boarding schools to assimilate them into Anglo-American ways of life.

But practices within the schools amounted to a form of cultural genocide. Anglo-American dress codes and haircuts were strictly enforced; students were compelled to speak only English and practice Christianity by religious groups that carried out many schools' operations. According to the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition, an organization that addresses boarding schools' practices through public education and healing, 20,000 children attended boarding schools in 1900; the number of attendees more than tripled by 1926. Documented stories of forced labor, abuse (physical, sexual, and emotional), severe punishment, disease, unsanitary conditions, and malnutrition have surfaced publicly since closures began in the 1930s. The 2022 "Department of the Interior Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative Investigative Report" stated that at least 500 children died in boarding schools, but it notes that the count is likely incomplete because many unmarked grave sites have yet to be identified. (In a 2024 update, the report revised that figure to 973.)

For more than two decades, the Saginaw Chippewa Tribe of Michigan (part of the Great Lakes Anishinaabe peoples) has been healing the wounds inflicted at MIIBS. With architect Christian Nakarado, the tribe is turning the abandoned boarding school buildings into a multifaceted memorial to help people remember what happened and the lives that were lost or profoundly altered there. They're also turning it into a place for cultural reconnection to ensure that the Anishinaabe language and the tribe's crafts, stories, and ancestral bonds remain unbroken despite a decades-long attempt at decimation.

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The U.S. government forced thousands of Native American children to attend boarding schools like the one in central Michigan shown above in a 1910 photograph.

The United States is dotted with abandoned boarding schools that tried to erase Native American culture. Instead of destroying the one on its land, the Saginaw Chippewa Tribe of Michigan is turning it into a resource.

Nakarado first learned about the Saginaw Chippewa Tribe's endeavors in 2020 after reading an article about them in *Epicenter Mt. Pleasant,* a local digital magazine. He reached out and met with tribal leaders and agreed to work on the project pro bono. When he first visited MIIBS, something stirred in him. He grew up in Colorado but is a member of the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe, whose lands are in the Great Lakes region. When Nakarado looked at the landscape enveloping the buildings, he felt connected to the place. Marcella Hadden, the Saginaw Chippewa Tribe's historic preservation officer, interjects as Nakarado attempts to explain.

"I think it's your blood memory," she says. William Johnson, curator at the Ziibiwing Center of Anishinabe Culture, a museum and cultural center dedicated to Saginaw Chippewa history, agrees.

"'Blood memory' is a term that's not specific just to Anishinaabe people.... It's the way that people respond to their culture, letting the culture affect themselves in ways that you don't even realize are possible," Johnson explains. "It's something that triggers your understanding of who you are and where you come from."

MIIBS primarily boarded children from across the Midwest. It opened in 1893, and children were brought to the facility from across the U.S., but primarily from Odawa/Ottawa, Ojibwe/Chippewa, and Bodéwadmi/Potawatomi Great Lakes Tribes. Though official counts document only five student deaths at MIIBS, the tribe uncovered additional records and found that more than 200 children are known to have perished on the grounds, some of them buried in the nearby Mission Creek cemetery. MIIBS closed in 1933, when it became a state home for the developmentally disabled; those Indigenous children who could not return home remained there as orphans, says Hadden. After the state home closed in 2009, several of the buildings were demolished, and the site sat dormant until 2011. Then the tribe began to notice the campus's decay.

"The Mission Creek cemetery was overrun with grass and weeds," says Johnson. "We contacted the State of Michigan, and we told them, 'Our tribal chief is buried there, and former boarding school students are buried there, and tribal family members are buried there. If you don't clean that cemetery up, then we're going to clean it up ourselves.'" That prompted the state to divest from the property, and through a land conveyance, the Saginaw Chippewa Tribe took ownership of the nearly 15 acres that include the cemetery, six original boarding school buildings, and another building added after MIIBS closed. In 2018, the National Register of Historic Places designated a 320-acre historic district surrounding the school.

Hadden chaired a boarding school committee consisting of community members and tribal leaders. Its task: to decide the campus's future. But the members wanted to learn from the past before tackling the work ahead.

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Sarah Surface-Evans, now the senior archaeologist at Michigan's historic >

preservation office, was a professor at Central Michigan University when the tribe acquired the 15 acres. She began attending boarding school committee meetings after being introduced to the group through her department. From 2012 to 2019, she conducted fieldwork and research in collaboration with the tribe, community members, and her students to put together a clearer story about daily life at the boarding school.

Like many other boarding schools, MIIBS was segregated by sex: Girls' buildings included dorms, plus the home economics building, laundry, and hospital (the latter two were demolished); the boys' areas included a dorm, workshop, and barn. A gym and auditorium sat in between.

Students' classes at the Mount Pleasant Indian Industrial Boarding School were mostly vocational. Girls took cooking classes in a kitchen (above). They also worked as servants for little or no money. The campus was segregated by sex—the boys' dorm is shown below.

"Boarding schools were very structured spaces that were run almost militaristically," says Surface-Evans. Though they were called schools, they didn't focus on education, and what instruction they did provide was mostly vocational. "[Students] only had a few hours of classes per day, and then spent most of their time doing physical labor," she says. On campus, they worked in fields, cared for livestock, washed laundry, mended clothes, and did much more. Surface-Evans found that many of the girls also worked for low or no pay as domestic servants in local households. She wrote in a 2016 paper that "girls were often treated poorly and physically or sexually abused in these contexts," and their labor was exploited. "In the 1922–23 academic year, a total of $2,684 worth of goods were produced by female students working in the Laundry."

But her community archaeological team discovered objects that demonstrated students' resistance. Surface-Evans recorded oral histories told by boarding school survivors and descendants of survivors to paint a more complete picture of these objects. Her team found beads that students had smuggled in to continue Indigenous practices. From the daughter of a survivor, she learned that older female students would "lose" beads for younger girls to "find" and start their own practices in secret. On the wall of the boys' workshop they found words, names, initials, and dates carved into the brickwork. Referencing records, her co-researcher Sarah Jones was able to match 816 student names with their markings. It's the little things, Surface-Evans says, that allowed the children to create some agency. "Those initials and carvings are one of the most powerful memorials you could ever have in this space."

Nakarado has taken a similarly community-based architectural approach to the MIIBS site. "The way that I've been thinking about design is based on buildings as processes," he says, "and therefore what I focus on is thinking about a building as fundamentally an impermanent structure." This has translated into an approach that required ongoing consensus from the MIIBS community and committee to understand their priorities and concerns. They were mixed, Nakarado says.

"Even within the community, there's not a singular vision of what these buildings should be," he explains. "It's a highly charged space, and thinking about the

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future of it and changing it in any way is really a sensitive subject." Some people, he continues, have advocated for demolition of the buildings. "The counterpoint to that is that these buildings are irrefutably physical, tangible evidence that the federal program existed."

The discussion is part of the larger conversation about what should be done with spaces where contemporary Americans must confront past atrocities and reckon with their long, resonant aftermaths. Though some cities might choose to demolish sites where violent injustices took place, others have chosen to preserve them. In Fort Worth, Texas, a former Ku Klux Klan headquarters is being transformed into an arts and community center named after Fred Rouse, a Black man who was lynched by a white mob in 1921; the Old Slave Mart in Charleston, South Carolina, which was built for the purpose of selling enslaved people, became a museum.

Boarding schools were "the U.S. federal government's way to acculturate us into the larger society, but [they were] also removing all aspects of our culture," says Johnson. "We lost our language, a lot of our spirituality, our traditional ways of life, and our identity.... That enforces all the intergenerational trauma and the healing that we're dealing with today." Preservation can become a tool to reclaim agency over traumatic sites and events and to help victims and their descendants heal.

The strategy that Nakarado presented at this year's annual Saginaw Chippewa Honoring, Healing, and Remembering ceremony—a daylong event that brings tribal members and friends to MIIBS to remember the site's history and honor the students buried there—grapples with the past while creating space for cultural reconnection.

"The original idea that the committee had envisioned was to transform this place from a place of forced assimilation and cultural genocide to a place that is meant for the perpetuation of traditional art, culture, language immersion," Nakarado says. The tribe has already begun this process. It held a youth powwow last year, where children dressed "in our regalia," says Hadden, celebrated on the campus grounds; Nakarado, who speaks openly about growing up disconnected from his Indigenous language and culture, has begun to find his roots through this process. Working with Joe Syrette, an Anishinaabe Ojibwe traditional healer, the tribe built a small domed lodge in front of the auditorium building using traditional sapling construction. These acts, while seemingly minor, are revolutionary in their context.

The existing buildings are in varying conditions, some safer to be in than others, and because they are listed on the national register, the tribe has been able to obtain grants to begin remediating them for lead and asbestos. The tribe has narrowed its design focus to the workshop building, which will host events and will possibly be a space where the Anishinaabe language can be taught. The other two priority buildings—the gymnasium and auditorium—will be remediated only for lead and asbestos and be structurally stabilized. The tribe is exploring methods to "dissolve the boundaries" of each building, Nakarado says, "letting maybe the memories or the spirits out of these buildings and the land back into these buildings." While there's much planning to be done, this could mean allowing vegetation to flourish in and around structures; for other buildings, like the smaller girls' dorm, Nakarado says, ideally they will be stable enough to occupy after being preserved with a light touch. "Our guiding saying is that we want the silence inside those buildings to speak for itself."

As for creating a memorial, Nakarado told the crowd at this year's Honoring, Healing, and Remembering event that he and the committee explored many options, including bringing the campus's reflection pond—now drained and grown in with grass—back to life. But it just didn't sit right. "What most people think of when they think of a memorial, they think about permanence—stone, concrete. They think about reflecting pools. And what we'd like to do is create a living memorial," he says. A living memorial, he explains, could manifest as a community healing garden, where visitors can read the names of the 200-plus lost children and take seeds home to grow their own spaces for healing.

More than 200 students died at the school, whose hospital is shown above.

The crowd nodded while Nakarado spoke. "The Anishinaabe people and the Saginaw Chippewa have an innate sense of spirituality and a connectedness to our land. And those are leading and guiding principles on how we do our work," says Johnson. And the land always returns: Nakarado later learned that the vibrant, buzzing landscape he was drawn to on his first visit was once occupied by a barn and various buildings raised for the state home. After they were torn down in the late 20th century, nature took over again. "The land quickly returns because the land never went anywhere," he says. "The culture that the land carries—it was here the whole time." ■