

Hamilton

## These architects are infusing Indigenous values into galleries, campus buildings across Canada

Two Indigenous-led firms are focused on securing a 'real voice in the design of our built environment'

[Candace Maracle](#) · CBC News · Posted: Jun 21, 2022 2:59 PM ET | Last Updated: June 21



Smoke Architecture, based in Hamilton, Ont., is one of the firms involved in the design of Centennial College's A-Block building expansion, slated for completion later this year. (Illustration submitted by Eladia Smoke)

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What role does Indigenous architecture play in the process of reconciliation?

The recent work of two design firms in Ontario show it is not just about Indigenous spaces but also designing places where everyone can benefit from Indigenous values and principles by integrating them into spaces across Canada.

One of those firms is Two Row Architect.

Brian Porter is the principal architect of the company, based in Six Nations of the Grand River. Established in 1992, this year marks Two Row Architect's thirtieth year.

"We're not necessarily interested in Indigenous representation, we're more interested in incorporating Indigenous values ... We try to have it ingrained in the design," Porter says.

"That means things like the directions of the prevailing wind having a physical impact on the way the building's laid out. The direction it's facing. Its connection to the ground. Its connection to the sky. We think about sustainable mechanical systems and electrical systems and decreasing our carbon footprint."



Brian Porter is the principal architect of Two Row Architect, based in Six Nations of the Grand River. (Submitted by Brian Porter)

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Porter says architecture that was part of Indigenous tradition is "still the best work that's ever been designed."

He asks how that can inform their work today: "How can we take some of these ideas and incorporate them in a meaningful and honest way?"

The firm is aptly named after the Two Row Wampum belt, which signifies a centuries-old agreement between settlers and Indigenous peoples.

Porter's designs take inspiration from traditional Indigenous spaces, often defying the industrial, masculine, orthogonal conventional principles of architecture.

The firm's original focus was working for Indigenous clients, on-reserve. Porter says he's had the privilege of working with 50 or 60 of the Indigenous communities in Ontario. They've been invited to do even more projects recently.

In April, the Art Gallery of Ontario [announced](#) Two Row Architect would lead the design, alongside two other firms, of a 50,000 gross-square-foot expansion.

- ['My existence is resistance': Indigenous graduates in Hamilton reflect on what empowers them](#)
- [SIX NATIONS BUREAU Meet the team behind NDNs on the Airwaves, a new web series set at a radio station on the rez](#)

In September, the firm will also begin construction at the Faculty of Law, University of Victoria. This coincides with the university's newly offered [joint degree program](#) in Canadian Common Law and Indigenous Legal Orders – the first of its kind in the world.

Their design offers a contrasting feminine and contemporary aesthetic to the structure. One that embraces the landscape around it with fluid lines and glass and adapts the current space to one that is more culturally appropriate.

"We work in close association with mainstream firms," Porter says. "They're bringing their values and we're trying to bring Indigenous values to the table. There's a realization that we're sharing the same resources, sharing the same path and we're trying to work towards sustainability and stewardship."

## **Bringing women's voices into the fold**

Another firm leading the way when it comes to incorporating Indigenous traditions into building design is Smoke Architecture, an all-female, award-winning group in Hamilton.

Indigenous voices have long been alienated from the way Canada has been built and organized, even within their own communities, says Eladia Smoke, the firm's principal architect.

Her firm intends to reconcile that.

"Our focus has been on providing a place for Indigenous and in particular, Indigenous women, to have a real voice in the design of our built environment. Canada's built environment is for the most part, a colonial institution and Indigenous presence has been really sublimated in the vast majority of the environments we've created for ourselves on this continent," she said.



Smoke Architecture is an all-female, award-winning company based in Hamilton. From left to right: Julie Bédard; Marie Keele; Chelsea Jacobs; Freedom Stone; Jennifer Kinnunen; Larissa Roque; and Eladia Smoke. (Submitted by Eladia Smoke)

"We're seeing the effects of coming at the built environment from an extractive point of view. I think it's past time for us to start thinking about how humans can be a part again of that symbiotic relationship of life systems and how the built environment can reflect and embody that."

Eladia Smoke grew up in Obishikokaang Lac Seul First Nation near Sioux Lookout in northern Ontario.

For her, design is a storytelling process between the architect and those who will inhabit the space, whom she considers to be the experts of that space. Through dialogue, a narrative is formed and then is embodied in the architecture.

**“I think it's past time for us to start thinking about how humans can be a part again of that symbiotic relationship of life systems.”**

*- Architect Eladia Smoke*

In a conversation over Zoom, Smoke spoke of one such example — a 150,000 gross-square-foot [expansion](#) of Centennial College's A-Block building in Scarborough, slated

for completion later this year.

She described the design narrative as "seed, growth, culmination, and balance."

"Where the main entry to the building is in the direction of the east, associated with sunrise and new beginnings. We rise with the natural topography of the land through this beautiful corridor that has both Anishinabek and Haudenosaunee Creation stories represented," she said.

The group is working with two female Indigenous artists. The Haudenosaunee Creation story is depicted from west to east and the Anishinaabe from east to west, representing the two different directions each nation carries out its ceremonies.

Each Creation story is represented on vertical panels echoing the flowing creek behind the campus, giving prominence to the forgotten waterway.

Through the main corridor, the juxtaposition of the Creation stories on vertical panels and the creek are visible. Learning spaces create informal student gathering zones inside and are mirrored on the outside, lined with timber, glass and Indigenous gardens.



The Centennial College expansion includes a space built according to the Anishinaabe roundhouse. (Illustration submitted by Eladia Smoke)

The heart of the space is built according to the Anishinaabe roundhouse, which opens to an interior courtyard.

This leads to an administrative suite modelled after grandma's kitchen, a space for feasts and gatherings. As you exit the building, basalt columns are sculpted and positioned to emulate a wampum belt.

What is unique about this space is that it was not commissioned by an Indigenous organization, nor is it designed only for Indigenous peoples. But rather, it will be a central space for everyone to gather, Smoke says.

Indigenous spaces tend to be less prescriptive and more flexible than typical work environments, she added. Further, multi-functional spaces traditionally allow for ceremony and other social gatherings. The pandemic has demonstrated a need for multi-use space.

Indigenous building is also lauded for its integration with its surrounding landscape and working with the climate in mind. Smoke Architecture is no different.

Its net-zero designs not only include building exteriors which work with the environment but also use carbon-sequestering materials such as mass timber structures, thermal glass spaces, photovoltaics, and rainwater recapture.

## **Architecture as a tool for reconciliation**

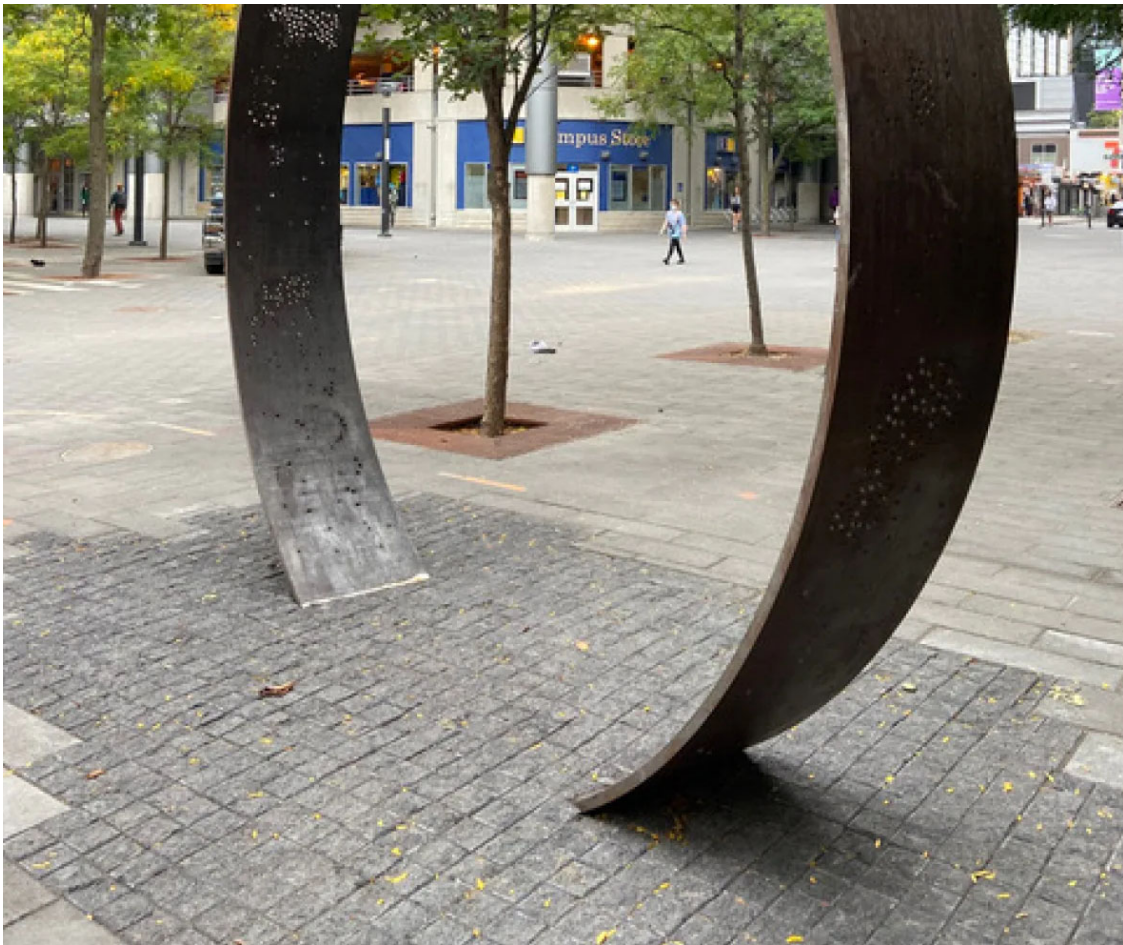
A recent Two Row design provides another example.

Last year, Toronto Metropolitan University (then called Ryerson University), commissioned Two Row Architects to design a monument dedicated to the Dish with One Spoon territory, upon which the campus sits in downtown Toronto.

Porter wanted something impactful and meaningful. A large-scale public artwork was built, known as the Ring installation.

The sculpture evolved through the university's Truth and Reconciliation Strategic Working Group in collaboration with members of the university's Indigenous community and Two Row Architects.





Last year, Toronto Metropolitan University commissioned Two Row Architects to design a monument dedicated to the Dish with One Spoon territory. The result is known as the Ring. (Submitted by Brian Porter)

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The tiny perforations in the Ring represent the Seven Grandfather Teachings and their animal symbols: Humility, Courage, Honesty, Wisdom, Truth, Respect and Love. Surrounded by the constellation Pleiades, the pictographs also depict the lunar moon phases.

The Ring is positioned deliberately so that its opening faces east, representing creation and new beginnings; and west, representing knowledge and wisdom. The exterior of the steel sculpture has been left untreated, to weather in the elements over time.

The use of a ring — a piece of jewellery in need of care and maintenance — is no coincidence. It is similar to the silver covenant chain, used to depict the ongoing relationship between the Haudenosaunee and the Europeans.

The silver chain acknowledges the relationship was to be "pure, strong and untarnished" but also signifies a need to polish and tend to these relations over time — something the designs of Porter and Smoke are also doing in their own way.