

An Introduction to Native American Architecture

The Seminole chickee—a seemingly simple structure with a storied history. Perfected in the swampy Florida Everglades, this open-sided thatched-roof structure can be created from as few as two building materials. Cypress posts provide the framework, and interwoven palm fronds provide a covering. Despite this basic description, it should become clear throughout this book that both the architectural and cultural significance of the chickee lies beyond its outward appearance.

In perhaps the simplest of terms, and for purposes most befitting of this text, architecture can be described as “nothing more and nothing less than the gift of making places for some human purpose.”¹ What is often misunderstood is that, in fact, all buildings can be considered architecture. The beauty of the above definition lies in the fact that it does not limit the use of the word to descriptions of grand monuments per se, but implies that it can also refer to the everyday buildings around us. As stated by the architectural historian Spiro Kostof, “all past buildings, regardless of size, status, or consequence, deserve to be studied.”² I dare take this a step further and state that all buildings in general, not just those of our past, deserve to be studied because they hold some level of significance in that they help tell the story of humankind. The mistake many architectural historians of the past made was that they focused almost solely on “buildings of evident substance”³ or world-renowned monumental works. Kostof points out that “delight is an elusive thing that may apply to the random and unstudied as it does to the calculated designs of the professional.”⁴ Many architectural historians in recent de-

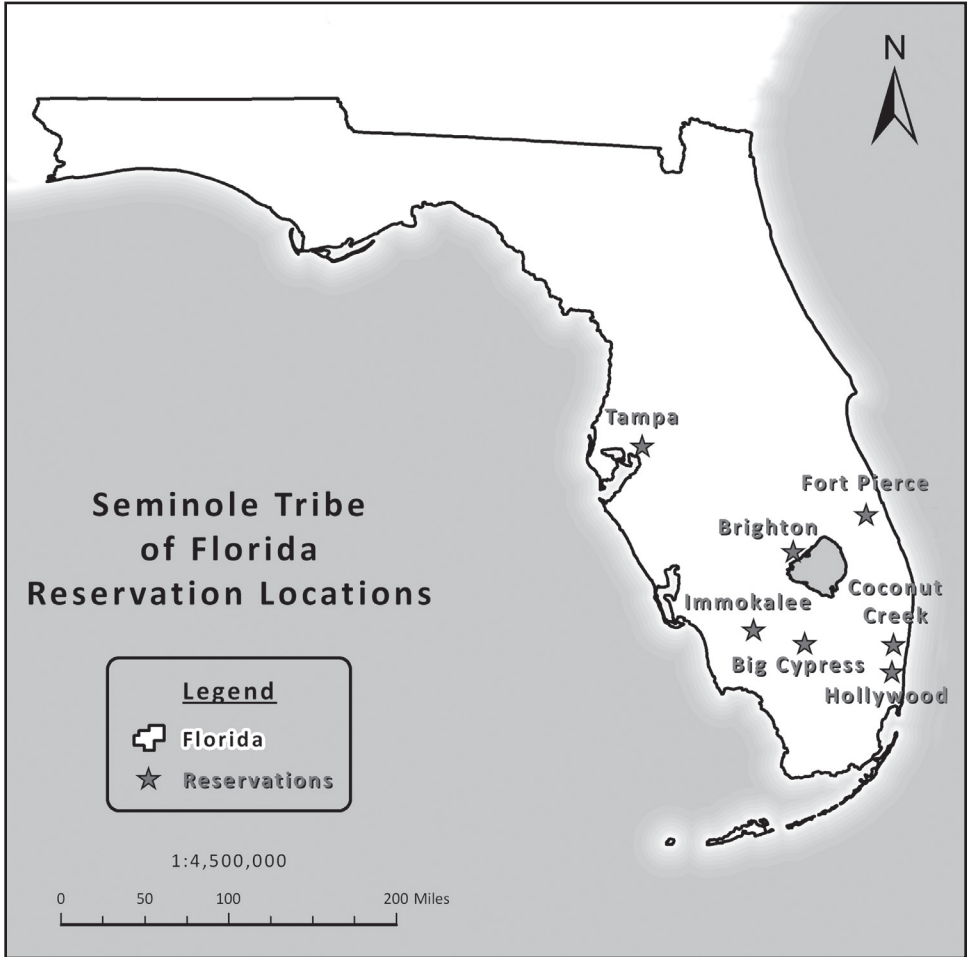


Figure 1.1. Map of the Seminole Tribe of Florida reservations. Created by Juan Cancel, Tribal Historic Preservation Office chief data analyst.

ades, myself included, have shifted our focus beyond what has already been studied, beyond the obvious, to other, perhaps lesser known, or at least less commonly studied, forms of architecture.

Notwithstanding a few “monumental” exceptions, Native American building types as a whole are often overlooked in the field of architectural history. These structures are not built by famous architects, they typically do not feature the most modern or advanced building materials or construction techniques, and often they are not even built to stand the test of time—all components that help make a building architecturally “significant.” Instead of defining the significance of Native American buildings in these shortsighted terms, I suggest we take a further look at what truly makes architecture “significant” and successful. All Native American structures were crafted for a specific human purpose, often one that goes beyond a utilitarian shelter.

The anthropologist Peter Nabokov and the architect Robert Easton spent years studying the architecture of American Indians. In their comprehensive work on the subject, aptly titled *Native American Architecture*, they examine not only *how* structures were built (a typical way to evaluate architecture) but also, and perhaps more relevant, *why*. They break down stereotypes, including that these structures are too simple to be of architectural significance, to show the complexity of American Indian architecture. Throughout their decade-long study, they focused on the many ways in which structures varied from region to region and from tribe to tribe. They also highlighted the common threads that tie them all together yet make them stand out from non-Native architecture.

American Indians did not necessarily view their homes in terms of permanence as much as in terms of practicality. Many times the building techniques themselves were more significant than the end result because the ways in which structures were built were a direct reflection of cultural belief systems.⁵ Since Native Americans more or less inhabited specific cultural areas and often had limited means of transportation, they looked to their environment for available building materials. Nabokov and Easton point out that “Indians had no choice but to build with raw materials from the land around them.”⁶ However, this does not mean that if other groups were given the same materials and environment, the outcome would be the same. Humans have different life influences, different tastes, different upbringings, different

values, different opportunities, and different priorities. Whether these factors are conscious or subconscious, they are undoubtedly reflected in our buildings and in our homes.

Amos Rapoport discusses how culture, human behavior, and environment affect architecture in his book *House Form and Culture*: “Materials, construction and technology are best treated as modifying factors, rather than form determinants, because they decide neither what is to be built nor its form.”⁷ Many tribes had access to the exact same natural building materials, but their dwellings were different because they incorporated their cultural beliefs into the structures they created. As outsiders, it is often hard to pick up on these elements because they are not always straightforward. We might see the Seminole Tribe’s seal or medicine colors incorporated in their buildings, for instance, but it could actually be the elements that are less obvious, the building techniques or arrangement patterns, that truly reflect a belief system. It is impossible to deduce these characteristics from a simple architectural survey where we focus on the physical or outward traits of a building. As Kostof points out: “And then the historian must go beyond this established reality of the buildings to understand what they are, how they came to be, and why they are the way they are.”⁸ That is to say, we must look beyond a building’s physical attributes to truly understand the meaning of the architecture.

When conducting an architectural survey, it is common practice to focus on the character-defining features of a building—the exterior materials, structural system, architectural form or shape, windows, doors, porches, roofs, and the presence of any other stylistic details such as moldings, columns, arches, or brackets, to name a few. Since Native American structures are typically less ornate, we tend to look strictly to the building materials, structural system, and building shape when creating architectural descriptions. By failing to look beyond the surface, however, we often overlook the true significance of a structure.

As a study of a specific type of Native American architecture, this book examines both the physical and the undeclared. Not only is it important to describe what a building looks like, it must also be understood why it looks a certain way. As an architectural historian, it is second nature for me to break down buildings into their smallest physical components. This first step of describing architecture helps us to better perceive the question of *why*.