

REFLECTION IN ACTION

Freirian Praxis in the Northern Cheyenne Youth Restoration Art Project (R.A.P.)

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ABSTRACT

The construction of youth identity is a double-edged sword. Increasing media demonization of youth is coupled with the fact that youth represent the most actively targeted group of consumers in the marketplace. These social constructions fail to provide a space for youth to articulate their diverse fears, desires, and identities. In the case of youth on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation in the United States, this lack of agency is complicated by stereotypical dictations of “native” identity and the lack of specific Northern Cheyenne references in mainstream culture. In short, Northern Cheyenne youth are doubly exiled. The Northern Cheyenne Youth Restoration Art Project (RAP), a new community arts and design program in Lame Deer, Montana, is a response to the contemporary condition of Northern Cheyenne youth. The aim of Youth RAP is to bring art back into the spaces of everyday life as a guiding force for future generations. Youth RAP centers on a unique transcultural collaboration between local youth, a Northern Cheyenne artist, and university faculty and students. While there has been an upsurge of service learning in landscape architecture schools in recent years, few examples exist that extend beyond the confines of university campuses or the limitations of academic priorities and agendas. This paper presents the case of Youth RAP to illustrate the use of community-based design and art as a vehicle to explore issues of identity, landscape, and civic engagement, while designing and constructing communal spaces on the Northern Cheyenne reservation. As such, the case presents a place- and identity-based approach that integrates learning and service in a community setting. Paulo Freire’s concept of praxis is introduced to describe a model of design pedagogy that is participatory in nature, and requires mutual engagement, collaboration, and reflection. YouthRAP works to transcend traditional modes of education and recognizes that knowledge occurs and develops in an arena of negotiation. As knowledge born out of collaboration and mutual engagement, this project functions on multiple levels:

- **Social:** an art-based approach provides a vehicle of agency for Northern Cheyenne youth to communicate their world to others.
- **Cultural:** this process-driven project illustrates the fallacious stereotypes of native people by revealing the rich complexity of hybrid and transcultural identities.
- **Educational:** design-build projects are both a material product and a site of discourse between native and non-native epistemologies, youth and adult realms.