A GUIDE TO THE WALTER SOBOLEFF BUILDING
Welcome to Sealaska Heritage Institute’s Walter Soboleff Building—our Box of Knowledge.

This cultural and research center is dedicated to the sharing and study of the ancient Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian cultures of Southeast Alaska.

It is owned and operated by Sealaska Heritage Institute, a Native nonprofit conceived by clan leaders, traditional scholars, and elders and founded in 1980. Its mission is to perpetuate and enhance Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian cultures. The institute has been on the forefront of documenting and revitalizing endangered languages and cultural traditions and pioneering programs that promote cultural diversity and cross-cultural understanding. Our dream is to make Juneau the Northwest Coast art capital of the world.

Thank you. By purchasing this booklet, an admissions ticket, or art from the Sealaska Heritage Store, you are supporting programs that perpetuate and enhance Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian cultures.
PHOTO CREDITS
This booklet is dedicated to the destitute man who was the first individual to donate—what might have been his only dollar—to the Walter Soboleff Building.
DR. WALTER SOBOLEFF, 2009.
THE LEGACY OF WALTER SOBOLEFF

The building is named for Kaajaakwtí (Dr. Walter A. Soboleff), a Tlingit of the Yéíl (Raven) moiety, L’eeneidí (Dog Salmon) clan.

He was born in the Tlingit village of Killisnoo in 1908. In May 2011, Dr. Soboleff “Walked Into The Forest” at age 102, but his accomplishments and people whose lives he touched live on.

He was a wise man who was dear to the Sealaska family. He served as Sealaska Heritage Institute’s Chair almost as long as the institute has been around. He was a spiritual leader. An educator. A traditional scholar. And a fluent Tlingit speaker who helped language students up until the last days of his life. He practiced our traditional Native values, especially Haa Shuká—honoring our past while preparing a better future for our children’s children.

He cherished his non-Native friends as well and belonged to many civic organizations. He was the first pastor in Juneau to open his church to all people—Natives and non Natives—at a time when segregation was the norm.

The Walter Soboleff Building is a physical manifestation of Haa Shuká and the ideals he championed. We miss him dearly, but we are forever grateful that this giant of a man walked this Earth.
ABOUT THE BUILDING

Monumental Art

At the Walter Soboleff Building, all three tribal groups of the region are represented in monumental art made by some of the best artists of our time. It is the largest installation of Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian art in the state.

The huge, 40-foot panels on the exterior were designed by Haida artist Robert Davidson, an internationally-celebrated master artist whose numerous totem poles stand in sites in Canada and the United States and whose art is in the collections of many major museums. The installation was based on his original painting “Greatest Echo,” which the artist donated to SHI’s Tináa Art Auction, a fundraiser for the building.

The design represents a supernatural being called the “Greatest Echo”—a theme chosen by Davidson because Dr. Walter Soboleff, the building’s namesake, “echoed the past to bring it to the present,” Davidson said. The design was replicated in metal, a medium recommended by the institute’s Native Artist Committee.

Upon entering the foyer, visitors will see an enormous carved-and-painted Tsimshian clan house front by
Tsimshian artist David A. Boxley, an internationally-recognized master artist. At almost 40 feet wide by 15 feet high, Boxley’s piece—which he made with his son, Tsimshian artist David R. Boxley—is thought to be the largest, carved-and-painted Tsimshian house front in the world.

The Boxleys’ design was inspired by the style and complexity of old Tsimshian house fronts. The center of the house front tells the Tsimshian story *Am’ala: Wil Mangaa da Ha’lidzogat* (*Am’ala: He Who Holds up the Earth*). A figure—*Am’ala*—is shown as a giant supernatural being who represents the land. The Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian people are represented along the top. *Am’ala* is on his back balancing the world on a stick propped on his chest. It is said that when *Am’ala* coughs, an earthquake ensues. A tiny door in the belly of *Am’ala* leads into the clan house, formally named *Shuká Hít* (Ancestors’ House) in a ceremony.

The sides of the house front depict the four Tsimshian crests—Raven and Killerwhale on the left and Eagle and Wolf on the right. The secondary crests—Frog, Grizzly Bear, Beaver, and Black Bear—are represented in the eyes of Raven, Killerwhale, Eagle, and Wolf respectively. The circle design on the left side was copied from an old photo that showed the remains of a Tsimshian house front from the 1800s. The circle was the only piece of the design that remained on the old front, and the Boxleys featured it in their work to honor the old Tsimshian carvers.
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: ARTIST PRESTON SINGLETARY (MIDDLE) AT THE UNVEILING OF THE HOUSE SCREEN DURING THE GRAND OPENING CEREMONY OF THE WALTER SOBOLEFF BUILDING. TRIBAL ATTENDEES AT THE UNVEILING OF THE SCREEN. APPRENTICE ALISON BREMNER WAS ONE OF FIVE ARTISTS CHOSEN TO HELP PRESTON SINGLETARY CREATE AND INSTALL THE SCREEN.
The interior clan house features a spectacular glass screen flanked by two house posts made by Tlingit glass artist Preston Singletary. Preston has become internationally celebrated for his innovative creations, which use a medium not known in pre-contact times.

Singletary’s piece is the largest glass screen in the world, measuring 17 feet wide and 12 feet high at its peak and rendered in carved, amber-and-black glass.

The screen is flanked by two, glass seven-foot posts depicting Eagle and Raven warriors. The institute requested that warriors be incorporated into the design because they symbolize the protectors of our land and culture. Native people in the region were historically formidable in war, but they also became combatants in political, legal, and educational battles, where they fought for land claims and civil rights.

Singletary’s installation was supported in part by an ArtPlace America grant, which included funds for apprentices to help create and install the screen. The mentor-apprentice approach was historically integral to the Northwest Coast art, as it was the way knowledge was passed down. In modern times, this practice was almost lost, but Sealaska Heritage today is incorporating it into art programs operated through the institute.
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: ARTIST WAYNE PRICE ADZING A CEDAR BOARD FOR THE BUILDING. ADZED CEDAR APPEARS THROUGHOUT THE BUILDING, INCLUDING ON POSTS, THE WALLS OF THE CLAN HOUSE, AND ON THE HOUSE FRONT PANELS. PRICE ADZED ALMOST EVERY DAY FOR FIVE MONTHS DESPITE A VERY BLISTERED HAND.
Adze Work

The building also features cedar boards that were hand-adzed by the award-winning Tlingit artist Wayne Price. Adzing produces a texture that is commonly seen in Northwest Coast art, canoes, clan houses, and ceremonial objects. But it represents more than a texture. Adzing is at the very heart of Native culture.

“Once we learned how to use an adze, we got our clan houses, our totems, our dugout canoes,” Price said. “Everything came from our ability to adze. There was no other tool. That was the chainsaw. That was the saw mill.”

Price adzed almost every day for five months despite a very blistered hand. At the end of the project he had made nearly one million adze marks on more than 3,200 square feet of wood!

The staff so enjoyed the constant, rhythmic—almost hypnotic—sounds of the adzing that SHI made an audio recording, which will be played in the building on occasion.

The hand-adzed cedar is prevalent throughout the building, including on the clan house, the main staircase, and on the house front panels.
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: FORMLINE DESIGNS IN THE GLASS AWNING DESIGNED BY STEVE BROWN. THE MARBLE USED IN THE BUILDING IS NAMED APHRODITE AFTER THE GREEK GODDESS OF LOVE BECAUSE OF THE CREAMY PINK COLORS AND FOSSIL PATTERNS THAT SOMETIMES SUGGEST VALENTINE HEARTS. BASKETRY PATTERN INLAID INTO THE FOYER FLOOR.
Other Artistic and Cultural Elements

The glass awnings were engraved with formline designs made by Steve Brown, a formline expert and author who serves on the institute's Native Artist Committee. The term “formline design” describes the unique shapes that give Northwest Coast art its distinctive look. When illuminated from above, the designs in the awnings are cast onto the building and sidewalks.

The doors to the main exhibit feature large depictions of Raven and Eagle—the moieties of the Tlingit and Haida. Raven and Eagle also are two of four main crests used by the Tsimshian. The Raven and Eagle were designed by Robert Davis Hoffmann, an acclaimed Tlingit artist.

The copper accents seen throughout the building also have cultural significance, as copper—often displayed in the shape of a domed shield or tináa—was historically a symbol of wealth.

Basketry patterns are inlaid into tiles on the exterior facade and interior floors and walls. In some areas, very rare, 400-million year old Aphrodite marble tiles sourced from Prince of Wales Island in Southeast Alaska were used. We selected marble from our homeland to demonstrate the strength and antiquity of our culture.
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: MEMBERS OF THE T’AKDEINTAAHN CLAN SINGING A YÉIK (SPIRIT) SONG DURING THE UNVEILING OF THE GLASS SCREEN IN THE CLAN HOUSE. CHILD IMPRINTING HIS HAND INTO A CARVED HANDPRINT OF HIS GRANDFATHER, ALBERT KOOKESH, DURING THE GRAND OPENING CEREMONY. A SMALL DOOR IN THE HOUSE FRONT LEADS INTO THE CLAN HOUSE.
Clan House

The Walter Soboleff Building includes a clan house, which was given the name Shuká Hít (Ancestors’ House) during the grand opening ceremony in 2015.

The space is modeled after the traditional clan houses historically seen throughout Southeast Alaska. It includes a house front with a tiny door, which historically would have put hostile intruders at a disadvantage. It includes a central “fire pit” and tiers for communal activities. A traditional clan house would have included a wooden house screen with posts on one side, but—in a nod to the modern world—we have rendered them in glass. The space is planked in cedar and the walls are hand adzed, as in a traditional clan house.

In the corner of the clan house is the carved hand print of former Alaska Senator Albert Kookesh with his grandchild’s hand imprinted in red. The Council of Traditional Scholars, which guides programs at Sealaska Heritage, wanted to pay special tribute to Kookesh for his many contributions to the Native community and the state and to recognize his special relationship to Dr. Walter Soboleff. The placement of a handprint or “X” in a clan house is an ancient practice.

The space is open to visitors and used for presentations, performances, and community events. Exhibit cases on
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: BILL THOMAS OF THE GAANAXTEIDÍ CLAN TEMPORARILY TRANSFERRING CLAN AT.ÓOWU TO SHI PRESIDENT ROSITA WORL FOR THE BUILDING’S EXHIBIT SPACE, GRAND OPENING CEREMONY. SCHOOL CHILDREN TOURING THE EXHIBIT SPACE.
the back wall feature art and ethnographic objects from the institute’s collections.

Exhibits

People often learn about Native cultures through museums and the stories told there. But, however well meaning, there is something lost when people outside of a culture attempt to tell the story of a culture. This is one of the things that most excites us about the Walter Soboleff Building: It will be a place where Native people will tell the Native story. We have named the experience “True Southeast.”

The space features a permanent exhibit showcasing the four core cultural values of the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian and how those values continue to shape the lives of these cultural groups.

The exhibit, titled Enter the World of the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian Peoples, also features the display of highly valued clan possessions that are integral to traditional ceremonies.

These objects are known as clan at.óowu, meaning that which was paid for, usually with the life of a clan ancestor. Clan at.óowu, including regalia, ceremonial objects, crest designs, geographic sites, spirits, names, stories,
LUKAAXÁDÍ CLAN LEADER NATHAN JACKSON, WHO IS THE NAMESAKE OF THE EXHIBITS SPACE AT THE WALTER SOBOLEFF BUILDING.
and songs, are worn or ritually presented during a *ku.éex’* or ceremony. *At.óow* embody the history of the clan and the past event by which they are claimed as clan property, as well as the spirits of clan members down through the generations that have held onto the objects and passed them on.

The exhibit presents *at.óowu* belonging to several clans and elucidates their central significance to the ceremonial life and identity of clans. These living objects are on loan to Sealaska Heritage for the duration of the exhibit but may be withdrawn by clans that own them if they are needed for ceremonial purposes.

The exhibit space is named for the Tlingit master artist Nathan Jackson, who serves on the institute’s Native Artist Committee and guides SHI’s art programs.

Jackson learned to carve in the 1950s at a time when Native people were in danger of losing traditional knowledge. Since 1967, he has been creating masks, panels, house posts, totem poles, and jewelry using traditional Tlingit Northwest Coast formline design in his own unique style.

Jackson’s goal is to ensure that the traditional art forms are not lost. He was designated a national treasure by President Bill Clinton.
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: PATRON IN THE SEALASKA HERITAGE STORE, WHICH SUPPORTS ARTISTS AND PROGRAMS AT THE INSTITUTE. ARTISTS IN THE ARTISTS-IN-RESIDENCE SPACE, WHICH WAS NAMED FOR HAIDA MASTER ARTIST DELORES CHURCHILL. PADDLERS PLACING A CANOE IN THE SPACE FOR MONUMENTAL ART OUTSIDE THE BUILDING.
Artists

The main level includes a room near the exhibits area for an artist in residence. This is a dedicated area for artists studying Northwest Coast art and pieces from SHI’s ethnographic and art collection.

This space is named for the Haida master artist Delores Churchill, who serves on the institute’s Native Artist Committee and guides SHI’s art programs.

As a teacher, Churchill has been instrumental in revitalizing the endangered ancient practice of spruce root weaving throughout the region. In recent years, SHI sponsored her to study an old woven Tlingit hat that was found in a melting glacier. Through that research, she discovered a weaving technique that had been lost.

The exterior of the building includes a large, secure alcove for artists to make monumental art, such as totem poles and dugout canoes.

The main level includes the Sealaska Heritage Store, which sells Native art and souvenirs. The sale of Native arts and crafts perpetuates our arts and culture and contributes to a sustainable economy in economically depressed communities that lack large commercial
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: ETHNOGRAPHIC OBJECTS ARE STORED IN A CLIMATE-CONTROLLED FACILITY ON THE LOWER LEVEL OF THE BUILDING. VISITING SCHOLAR GIVING A LECTURE. SHI STAFF WITH AN OLD PANEL THAT WAS BOUGHT AT AUCTION BY THE ANNENBERG FOUNDATION AND DONATED TO SHI SO THAT IT COULD BE RETURNED TO THE TRIBES.
enterprises and employment. The revenues derived from the store are re-invested back into art, education, and cultural programming sponsored by SHI and help support the operations of the building.

Collections and Research

SHI houses rare books, historical photographs, audiovisual recordings, manuscript materials, and ethnographic and art objects that document the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian cultures.

SHI makes these materials available to the public by appointment for educational and research purposes and to promote scholarship of Native cultures.

Collections are located on the lower level of the Walter Soboleff Building and housed in a large, climate-controlled space. The facility includes space for researchers to study collections, as well as room for scholars enrolled in the institute’s Visiting Scholars Program.

In 2014, the archive was named for Tlingit Native rights hero William L. Paul, Sr., who was a major force in Alaska history and is recognized as the father of Alaska Native land claims. The archives currently houses more than 5,000 historical and contemporary audio and audiovisual recordings documenting the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian language, culture and history. Most of these recordings are unique and cannot be found in other libraries, archives, or repositories.
TOP: EARLY SCHEMATIC BY MRV ARCHITECTS. BOTTOM: THE SITE INFAMOUSLY KNOWN AS "THE PIT" AND THE SITE AFTER IT WAS PURCHASED AND LANDSCAPED BY SEALASKA.
THE ROAD TO THE WALTER SOBOLEFF BUILDING

The idea to build a Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian cultural and research center was conceived in the 1990s. Staff at Sealaska Heritage Institute spent years developing the concept and talking to policy makers and potential funders about the best approach to moving forward.

Prior to raising funds, we knew we had to demonstrate publicly that our cultural programs were sound and that we had a solid reputation in the field. In the late 1990s, the Board of Trustees moved to transform the institute from a focus on “preservation” of our language and culture to one of “restoration and enhancement.” The objective was to integrate our language and culture into institutions serving Native Peoples and to further promote cross cultural understanding—recognizing that our cultural survival was also dependent on people’s attitudes towards Native culture. We began to grow by leaps and bounds, sometimes having two people to a desk, and we recognized that we needed a new home to do our work. The only question left was where to build.

Then in 2004, the Skinner Building in downtown Juneau burned to the ground. Situated directly across from Sealaska Plaza and in the heart of the tourist district,
the site offered an optimal location for the building. The lot sat idle for several years. Overgrown with weeds and surrounded by an unsightly fence, it was infamously known in Juneau as “The Pit.”

SHI began speaking publicly about its intentions to build a cultural center in 2005. In 2010, Sealaska, which founded the nonprofit Sealaska Heritage, purchased the lot with the intention of donating it to the institute for the new building. Sealaska first enhanced it with landscaping so it wouldn’t be an eyesore in the community during the fundraising drive.

Shortly after, the institute set a fundraising goal of $20 million to build the facility and launched a fundraising campaign. A study by the research firm McDowell Group found strong support in Juneau for Sealaska Heritage Institute and for a new cultural center.

In 2010, SHI embarked on a three-tiered process to select an architect that involved Sealaska, the Central Council of the Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska, the Tlingit and Haida Regional Housing Authority, the Alaska Native Brotherhood and Alaska Native Sisterhood, and SHI trustees and staff. The winning designer was MRV Architects, which was tasked with designing the building based on the objective of recognizing our past and our
MEMORIAL FOR DR. WALTER SOBOLEFF. ABOVE LEFT: SHI PRESIDENT ROSITA WORL ANNOUNCING AT DR. SOBOLEFF’S MEMORIAL THAT THE BUILDING WOULD BE NAMED FOR HIM. ABOVE RIGHT: CLAN AT.ÓOWU LAID OUT AT THE MEMORIAL.
path into the future. The Juneau firm had done restorative work on clan houses in the past and had even donated historical photos of clan house restorations to our archives years before.

In May 2011, SHI’s longtime Board of Trustees Chair, Dr. Walter Soboleff, Walked into the Forest at the age of 102. During his memorial, the institute announced the new building would be named for him. (See “The Legacy of Walter Soboleff”)

Also in 2011, MRV Architects unveiled the design for the building, which was to be clad in yellow cedar and modeled after a traditional clan house. The design included a clan house inside the building complete with cedar walls, tiers and a “fire pit” in the center—much as you would have seen in old clan houses many years ago.

But the design led to some hitches along the way. The project site was located in Juneau’s historic district, which requires property owners to adhere to a Victorian-era design.

SHI had to challenge a proposal put forth by a historical commission that would have required the institute to use Victorian-era materials, such as beadboard, on the
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: BUILDING UNDER CONSTRUCTION WITH STEEL FLOOR DECKING GOING IN. STAFF MOVING INTO THE NEW BUILDING. GROUNDBREAKING CEREMONY, 2013, WITH DAVID KATZEK, PAUL MARKS, AND ROSITA WORL.
building in lieu of yellow cedar.

Ironically, the oldest architectural style in the region was not acceptable under the rules governing the aesthetics of the historic district!

Juneau’s assembly fixed this conundrum by removing the project site from the historic district, thereby allowing the building to retain the look called for in the design.

By 2013, the institute had raised most of the $20 million needed to construct the Walter Soboleff Building. SHI hired Dawson Construction, and in August of that year we broke ground.

The construction phase lasted from late 2013 to Spring of 2015, and the institute’s staff moved into the second story in December of 2014 while work on the rest of the floors continued.

The grand opening ceremony was May 15, 2015. It included a formal program for dignitaries and donors, a canoe welcome ceremony, and a traditional ceremony.
THE TRADITIONAL GRAND OPENING CEREMONY OPENED WITH COMMENTS BY CEREMONIAL SPOKESPERSONS.
INTEGRATING TRADITIONAL VALUES INTO THE OPENING CEREMONY

The following piece by SHI President Rosita Worl offers a behind-the-scenes look into the planning of the grand opening ceremony for the Walter Soboleff Building in 2015. It was a complicated affair—different from the traditional ceremonies that usually are not conducted in public. Yet, similar to traditional ceremonies in that the event included ceremonial elements. SHI’s Council of Traditional Scholars, which guides the institute on cultural matters, spent more than a year planning the grand opening ceremony.

Worl is Tlingit, Ch’áak’ (Eagle) moiety of the Shangukeidí (Thunderbird) Clan from the Kawdliyaayi Hít (House Lowered From the Sun) in Klukwan. She also holds a Ph.D. in anthropology from Harvard University and an honorary Ph.D. in science from the University of Alaska Anchorage. She has served as president of Sealaska Heritage Institute since 1998 and oversaw the transformation of the institute from an organization dedicated to preserving oral traditions to the restoration and enhancement of our languages and culture.

The Sealaska Heritage Institute Council of Traditional Scholars (Scholars) began meeting with the SHI executive team in mid-2014 to plan for the Grand Opening Ceremony.
SEALASKA HERITAGE SPONSORS THE BIENNIAL CELEBRATION, A MAJOR DANCE-AND-CULTURE FESTIVAL IN JUNEAU. THIS IS A SECULAR EVENT, NOT A CEREMONY. ELDERS AND CLAN LEADERS HAVE BEEN INSISTENT THAT CEREMONIAL PRACTICES SHOULD NOT BE CONDUCTED AT CELEBRATION.
of the Walter Soboleff Building. Very early in the discussions, it became apparent that a separate ceremony would need to be held for the public acknowledgment of organizations, officials, and donors who contributed to the building’s construction and for those who played a major role in its success. A distinction between what became known as the “formal” and “traditional” ceremony emerged. Yet the team was very emphatic that the traditional protocols surrounding the welcoming of visitors needed to be included in the formal ceremony and then repeated again in the traditional ceremony.

As the Scholars began their deliberation to identify the rites that are held for their clan house dedication ceremonies, they were silent about the fact that they would be conducting spiritual ceremonies that are held only within the Native community. The Elders and clan leaders have been insistent that ceremonial practices should not be conducted in the biennial Celebrations (dance festivals) that are sponsored by the SHI. The concern was not that they are public events, but that Celebration should not take the place of traditional ceremonies that are hosted by clans. The Grand Opening Traditional Ceremony was viewed differently in that it is a celebration of the completion of a significant building owned by Native Peoples. The Scholars begrudgingly came to the realization that it would not be possible to include all elements of a traditional house dedication, held to celebrate the completion of the construction of a clan house, in a single-day event.

They also recognized that their planning would have to consider the space limitations of the building and clan
THE DANCE GROUP, AANGUN YATX’I (ANGOON CHILDREN) DANCERS, WAS INVITED TO LEAD THE CEREMONY IN HONOR OF DR. WALTER SOBOLEFF. THE GROUP IS COMPRISED OF CHILDREN FROM ANGOON, DR. SOBOLEFF’S HOMETOWN, AND MANY OF THE DANCERS ARE FROM HIS CLAN OR CHILDREN AND GRANDCHILDREN OF THE L’EENEIDÍ (DOG SALMON).
house. It was evident that all the participants and visitors would not be able to witness the ceremonial rites that would take place inside the building. Finally, because of the time constraints, the Scholars had to prioritize the ceremonial activities in which the singing and dancing could be done.

The Scholars were insistent that the original clan owners of the land on which the Soboleff building was constructed—that included the Auke Raven L’eeneidi and the Eagle Wooshkeetaan—were recognized. They also recognized the Yaxtéhittaan’s assertion that they had emerged as a separate and distinct clan from the L’eeneidi, and thus a spokesperson from this group should also be present.

Two of the members of the Scholars, who also serve as the Raven and Eagle ceremonial leaders in Sealaska and SHI events such as the biennial Celebration, were also to be included in the “traditional welcome.” Additionally, in recognition of Dr. Walter Soboleff, for whom the building is named, the Scholars felt it was important that a representative of his clan should be included and thus the clan leader of the Angoon L’eeneidi was invited to participate. The team also recognized that a broad representation of the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian whose histories and circumstances had bound them together was necessary.
Wooch Yax

Guiding every ceremonial rite is the necessity to ensure social and spiritual balance and harmony. This protocol requires the participation of a representative from an Eagle clan as well as a Raven clan in each rite or ceremonial activity. The Scholars had to be certain that if a Raven spoke, the comments had to be followed immediately by comments from an Eagle. If an Eagle sang or danced, a Raven must immediately follow with a song and dance. Violating this cultural principle could lead to social or physical illness within the group.

Native spirituality

A fundamental belief of the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian is that everything within the world and universe has a spirit. In one of the Scholars meetings chaired by Dr. Soboleff several years ago, we were reminded of this tenet when he knocked on the table saying, “Everything has a spirit, including this table.” Native Peoples have spiritual and kin relationship with animals, many of which serve as crests of clans; and places on the land are regarded as alive with spiritual life.

Thanking and feeding the Spirits of the Trees

One of the first rites identified by the Scholars was the need to thank and feed the spirits of the trees since cedar had been used to construct the building. The building is cloaked in 40-foot-high panels of yellow cedar. They wanted to be certain that they acknowledged and thanked the spirits of the cedar for allowing their use in the
construction of the building. During the ceremony, food was transferred to the tree spirits through fire.

**Ganka s’íx’i (Feeding the Ancestors)**

Another important rite in house building ceremonies is the *Ganka s’íx’i* (Feeding the Ancestors). The ceremonial leaders hold up a bowl filled with food and other goods and call out the names of ancestors, which are then repeated by all participants. The Fire Bowls are then given to individuals of the opposite moiety from that of the deceased. For example, if the name of the deceased was of a Raven clan, the Fire Bowl would be given to an Eagle who had a special relationship or friendship with the deceased. Through this rite the spirits of the deceased are called to participate in the ceremony. They enjoy the foods in the Fire Bowls when consumed by someone from the opposite moiety. On some occasions, rather than using the Fire Bowl, the food may be burned in a fire to transfer the food to the spirit world.

**Yéik (Spirit) Songs and Yéik utee (Imitating the Spirits)**

Clans have special relationships with the spirits represented in their crests. They also have special spirits
YÉIK UTEE (IMITATING THE SPIRITS) SONG DURING THE SHUKÁ HÍT CLAN HOUSE NAMING CEREMONY.
that are often called on to provide protection. Spirits are called through clan songs and through dances in which dancers imitate the animal represented in a shakee.át (headdress) while dancing behind a blanket. Through these activities the spirits participate in the ceremony and the dancers become one with the spirit.

The Clan House

While the building is named after Dr. Soboleff, the Scholars felt that it was necessary for the clan house to have its own name. They were unanimous in their decision that it should be named Shuká Hít, reflecting the bonds with our ancestors and with future generations. Shuká Hít is often simply translated as “Ancestors’ House.”

The Scholars had a longer discussion about whether an “X” or handprint should be left as a “marker” in the clan house. The use of a “marker” is an ancient practice, and they are often found throughout Southeast Alaska on rocks or other natural features to signify clan ownership of land. The mark is placed in the corner of the clan house. In some communities an “X” is used while in others, a handprint is used. Further, in some communities the mark is put in all four corners of the clan house while in others the mark may be put in only one corner. Over a period of two meetings, the team decided that a single handprint would be put into one corner of the clan house, in part because of the time limitations.

The discussion of whose handprint should be put in the corner extended over two meetings. The Scholars
CHILD MARKING AN “X” IN THE CLAN HOUSE DURING THE TRADITIONAL CEREMONY.
identified a number of prominent and worthy individuals who had contributed not only to the construction of the building but who had worked tirelessly on behalf of the Native community.

After a long discussion, the team selected Albert Kookesh, who had served as the Chair of the Board of Directors of Sealaska when the decision was made to construct the building; who was formerly a State Senator; and who had a long and illustrious history of service to the Native community through the Alaska Native Brotherhood and the Alaska Federation of Natives. They also thought it was appropriate because of Albert’s close relationship with Dr. Soboleff.

The Scholars went further and proposed a new innovation based on the ancient cultural value of Haa Shuká that unites current generations with our ancestors and ties us to younger and future generations. They decided that within Albert’s carved handprint, a “grandchild” who would also be a great grandchild of Dr. Soboleff, should also put his or her print. Albert later reported that he put the names of all his grandchildren on slips of paper and placed them in a hat, from which he pulled out one name.
THE SCHOLARS DECIDED TO SELECT A YOUNG MAN, ISHMAEL HOPE, TO BE THE FINAL SPEAKER IN THE TRADITIONAL CEREMONY.
Closing Speech

The cultural values of *Haa Shuká* and *Haa Latseen* played into the decision to select a young man to be the final speaker in the traditional ceremony. Ishmael Hope had already demonstrated the qualities of an emerging leader through his work, education, and commitment to his family and community. The Scholars were also greatly influenced by Hope’s ability and progress in learning to speak the Tlingit language.

Native Perspectives and Practices in the Inaugural Exhibit

The Council of Traditional Scholars also served as advisor in the development of the inaugural exhibition in the building. Discussion of the Grand Opening Ceremony and the exhibition often overlapped. One hallmark of the exhibit is the display of clan hats and other *at.óowu* that had been loaned by clans for the exhibit. During the planning stages for the exhibit, SHI issued a public call to clans inviting them to put their clan hats in the inaugural exhibit. In discussing the opening ceremony, the team elected to have a period in the ceremony during which individuals would transfer their clan hats to SHI for the exhibit. Initially, it was thought that the transfer could occur in the exhibit area itself, but the Scholars had to again deal with space and time limitations, and considered that not all of the public would be able to see the event.

Significant in this event is the recognition that not all ceremonial regalia are clan-owned. The Tlingit have a highly developed legal system of property ownership
CLAN MEMBERS PARTICIPATING IN A CEREMONIAL SERVICE TO TEMPORARILY TRANSFER CLAN A.TÓOWU TO SHI.
and have complex rules governing clan ownership of clan at.óowu. However, in the more recent period, the concept and practice of individual ownership of ceremonial regalia has emerged. Individual ownership of ceremonial regalia and objects are made more complex by the indisputable fact that the crests that are depicted on individually-owned ceremonial regalia continue to be owned by clans. The crests continue to be considered clan at.óowu despite that the actual object (regalia or clan hat) may be owned by an individual. In this ceremonial activity, both clan and individual hats were loaned for the exhibit. In conformance with cultural protocols, a response or acknowledgment by someone of the opposite moiety from those loaning their hats was made.

In another instance, ceremonial service was involved in the (temporary) transfer of clan at.óowu to SHI. Ceremonial service, performed to assist one moiety by members of the opposite moiety, is a common practice that is seen primarily in the round of memorial rites. Formerly, it was practice that pervaded all aspects of life even to the point of retaining someone from the opposite moiety to put eye glasses on an individual when it was the first time that the individual would use eye glasses.

In preparing to loan clan at.óowu to SHI for the exhibit, the Shangukeidí clan leader retained three Ravens to
SHI PRESIDENT ROSITA WORL, AUTHOR OF THIS ARTICLE, AT THE GRAND OPENING CEREMONY.
provide ceremonial service. They were paid to unpack the clan collection, witness the signing of the loan document, and then re-pack those items that were not selected for use in the exhibit. The ceremonial service was accompanied by oratory and singing from both the Eagles and Ravens to ensure social and spiritual balance.

Conclusion

The integration of both traditional and modern architectural design into the Walter Soboleff Building was seemingly an easy task in contrast to the infusion of traditional practices into a new and public activity. The development of the Traditional Grand Opening Ceremony demonstrates that the ancient culture of the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian is continuing to evolve. In planning the Grand Opening Ceremony, Native Peoples were consciously grappling with ways to integrate their traditional cultural protocols and practices into contemporary, public events and institutions that traditionally were dominated by others. The ultimate outcome of their efforts is unknown as of this writing, but no one can dispute that the planning and organization of this event reflect the survival of their traditional values, and their will and determination to bring their culture into the 21st Century.
SHI OPERATES MANY PROGRAMS, INCLUDING (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP) THE BIENNIAL CELEBRATION, A MAJOR DANCE AND CULTURE FESTIVAL, CULTURAL ORIENTATIONS FOR TEACHERS, AND ART PROGRAMS TO PERPETUATE NATIVE ART PRACTICES SUCH AS CARVING AND WEAVING.
SEALASKA HERITAGE INSTITUTE

Sealaska Heritage (SHI) is a regional Native nonprofit 501(c)(3) founded in 1980.

SHI was conceived by clan leaders, traditional scholars, and Elders at the first Sealaska Elders Conference in 1980. During that meeting, the Elders likened Native culture to a blanket. The late George Davis (Kichnáalx–Lk’aanaaw) of Angoon spoke these words:

“...We don’t want what you did here to only echo in the air, how our grandfathers used to do things... Yes. You have unwrapped it for us. That is why we will open again this container of wisdom left in our care.”

These wise traditional leaders told the new leaders that their hands were growing weary of holding onto the metaphorical blanket, this “container of wisdom.” They said they were transferring this responsibility to Sealaska, the regional Native corporation serving Southeast Alaska. In response, Sealaska founded Sealaska Heritage to operate cultural and educational programs.

SHI’s mission is to perpetuate and enhance Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian cultures and to promote cultural diversity and cross-cultural understanding. The institute runs many programs, which are supported by donations and sales at the Walter Soboleff Building. Donations are tax deductible.
A CHILD LOOKS AT PIECES IN SHI’S BIENNIAL JURIED ART SHOW AND COMPETITION, ONE OF MANY ART PROGRAMS OPERATED BY SEALASKA HERITAGE INSTITUTE.
Native People
CRAFTING
The Native Story

Proceeds from art sales benefit artists and support art education and cultural programs at Sealaska Heritage Institute.

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