A ‘border zone’ – defined as a tangible or psychological interface of social and geopolitical territories – exists at the intersection of Native and non-Native cultures in Canada. As a physical manifestation of this boundary condition, the First Nations reserve of Kahnawá:ke becomes an optimal site for an Urban Liaison center, where the process of migration from reserve to city can be facilitated. With over half of Canada’s Native population residing in urban areas, the paradox of the internal immigrant has been largely ignored. The infrastructure imposed onto Kahnawá:ke lands by the City of Montreal and the Province of Quebec offers a venue for explorations of land and identity re-appropriation. Utilizing mapping analyses of reserve land alienation in combination with transportation infrastructure movement studies, patterns of an architectural interface between two Canadian cultures will emerge. For the Kanien:keha'ka people, memory serves as history, and a reclamation of forcefully inflicted infrastructure will diffuse the palpable tension of urban transition through the border zone.

Nominations for supervisor:

1. Martin Bressani
2. Ricardo Castro
3. David Theodore
Thesis Premise: Internal migration and infrastructure appropriation

After centuries of isolation under the reserve system, Canada’s Aboriginal peoples are migrating from marginal communities to urban centers in large numbers. This transition from reserve to city occurs through a ‘border zone’ of social ambiguity between Native and non-Native cultures, politics and territories. A spatial occurrence of this ‘in-between’ phenomenon exists at the threshold between the Mohawk territory of Kahnawá:ke and the City of Montreal, where networks of civil infrastructure tear into the Kahnawá:ke shoreline from across the St. Lawrence River. An Urban Liaison Center, parasitically re-appropriating this imposed infrastructure, would become the new border zone; a venue for Kanien:keha'ka (Mohawk) situational detoxification, community identification, and urban adaptation.

Mapping evolutionary patterns of land allocation, ownership and alienation between Crown and reserve parties will provide a systematic basis for the architectural reclamation of what was once Kahnawá:ke territory. Time-based analyses of infrastructure hybridization will also be introduced to mediate between transportation and public space programming. Thus, Threshold Infrastructure is an architectural mechanism for the re-appropriation and navigation of the ‘border zone’ between the Aboriginal reserve condition and non-Aboriginal urban center. It proposes that within an area of cultural / political / territorial intersection, a public construction can act as border interface.
Primary Area of Study: Native urban Status, without registration

I got those Reservation Blues
Traded my moccasins for those
whiteman shoes
I got my feet in two canoes
I got the Reservation Blues

- Curtis ‘Shingoose’ Johnie, “Reservation Blues”

The ‘Indian’, to most non-Aboriginals, is distant in both time and place, arguably most
‘authentic’ when surrounded by untouched natural landscape. In reality, more than half
of Canada’s Aboriginal population now lives in urban centers, leaving us to interpret the
absurd contradiction of the indigenous immigrant. There is no ‘Little Indian Reserve’ in
Montreal for city acclimatization – nor should there be – like there is Chinatown and
Little Italy, specifically because Aboriginals have no pre-equipped techniques to
appropriate urbanity into their own image (Awad 2004, 54). In the film Spudwrench
Kahnawake Man, director Alanis Obomsawin confronts the notion of ‘limbo’ between
reserve and city in a historiography of Native / non-Native relations from a distinctly
indigenous vantage point (1997). Through interviews, Mohawk steel workers from
Kahnawá:ke recount the cultural conflict between working the high steel of the city and
living on the reserve. Ironically, it was the Mohawk peoples themselves who assembled
the web of foreign infrastructure that now inundates their land. Since colonization of
North America, indigenous populations have been pushed outside the limits of the city,
and now they grapple with how to position themselves back inside mainstream society.
Canadian culture is at an abrupt intersection of bipolar identities, leaving the urban
Aboriginal to straddle tradition and future, reserve and city.
Program: The anti-casino

Public construction is where public space and private programs are hybridized, and architecture crosses over into infrastructure. (Bos 2002)

When we are at the boundary of what is reserve and what isn’t we expect a casino / bingo hall / cigarette shop / protests / hitchhiking as program oozing with toxicity. A buffer is needed between the reserve and the city. A place of detoxification, identification, and adaptation; a hub for the nomad going from, or coming back to the Native community. This creates the opportunity for a hybrid Urban Liaison Center; an interface between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals – a venue other than a casino – where the border between Crown and reserve land can be a forum for exchange. A tripartite hybridism of program is proposed in which the core of a television-broadcasting center is flanked by facilities for healing and migration:

Detox: Aboriginal society is plagued by substance abuse, homelessness, violence, unemployment, and mental illness. A process of detoxification, whether physical or emotional, can become the foundation for positive progression. (1200 m²)

Heal: For First Nations peoples, “memory is history” which is why visual media such as film, digital art and television have successfully translated as modes of communication within contemporary Aboriginal society (Claxton 2005, 90; see Figure 1). A broadcasting center for Aboriginal television and a media gallery for the digital arts are programmatic vehicles for modern identity and relevance as a People. (1200 m²)

Bridge: A permanent transportation link between Kahnawá:ke and Montreal is introduced in the form of a shuttle station, parasitically attaching itself to existing infrastructure (see Figure 2). (3000 m²)
Site: Betwixt and between

Between two or more communities – reserve and urban – there exists a socially ambiguous zone, a site of articulation for the aboriginal contemporary …that is frequently crossed, experienced, interrogated, negotiated. This idea argues for a space of radical openness and ‘hybridity’, or spaces of resistance being opened at the margins. (McMaster 1998, 28)

Kahnawá:ke Kanien:keha’ka Territory (or Indian Reserve no. 14, or Kahnawake, Quebec) is a Mohawk First Nations reserve on the south shore of the St. Lawrence River, and the closest native territory in proximity to the city of Montreal (see Figure 3). The complex boundary between reserve and island indicated is the actualization of Gerald McMaster’s hypothesis, described above. This idea of a border zone is also described as a liminal, or threshold, space where “the experience is one of separation or detachment from the social structure, the cultural conditions, or both” (Turner 1969). It is this border condition that renders a palpable tension on the site, particularly where foreign infrastructures connect to expropriated Kahnawá:ke land (see Figure 4).

Kahnawá:ke territory has been appropriated, expropriated, marginalized and scarred by the imposition of the Saint Lawrence and Mercier Bridges, Highways 132 and 138, Hydro Quebec power lines and the Saint Lawrence Seaway. The site for an Urban Liaison Center is neither the reserve nor the city, but the threshold between the two – the infrastructure that simultaneously links and alienates these two entities. Having lost more than three-quarters of their land base since early colonization in the eighteenth century, the Mohawk of Kahnawá:ke can use the act and form of re-appropriating infrastructure as both a mechanism for urbanization and an impetus for modern identification.
Mode of Production: Territory and trajectory

Reservation X is a free state out of reach of the usual codifications, Reservation X cannot be identified by numbers, by ID cards, nor by a place on the map, but by something less measurable and more meaningful. (McMaster 1998, 41)

Most Aboriginals are known by or as a number: Status identification card, Indian blood quota, unemployment statistic, tax deduction, casino revenue, welfare cheque. Native Peoples are connected by much more qualitative devices, and base their collective cultural consciousness upon what they share historically. This notion forms the foundation for the first phase of a mode of production, in which the lands of the Kahnawá:ke territory will be mapped historically according to colonial appropriations and expropriations. In detailing patterns of land acquisition and ownership, a more clear sense of what comprises the boundary zone will emerge.

The second phase will involve the infrastructure situated on these lands, and more specifically, movement studies of the transportation along this civil framework. This mode is modeled after UN Studio’s “Deep Planning’ design technique executed for the Arnhem Central project in which the “type of movement, location, direction, trajectory, duration, interconnection, prominence and linkage” directly inform an “involution of public spaces out of the fabric of infrastructure” (Bos 2002). Thus, intelligence is given to the parasitic re-appropriation of space, providing logic for the connectivity and permeability of the Urban Liaison Center program.
Conclusion: Aboriginal re-appropriation of the liminal

It is postulated that Native Canadians can be facilitated in achieving an urban identity through the reclamation of infrastructure at the threshold between reserve and city. In occupying the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal territorial boundary, an assertion is made that First Nations People can obtain the status of contemporary citizen, as opposed to that of marginalized ‘other’. As a hub along the route of migration from Kahnawá:ke to Montreal, an Urban Liaison Center would provide rehabilitation resources, cultural outlets, and transportation services. Such a facility would act as a functional, and not simply symbolic, interface for contemporary indigenous nomads to navigate the process of urbanization. Modes of production including historical land mapping and infrastructure movement patterns offer sensitivity to the qualitative rationale of traditional Aboriginals, but are not naïve in acknowledging the receptivity of Native Peoples to technology and its applications. Architecture as hybridized public infrastructure construction will be used to exploit the political and social forces of tension at the border zone.
Committee and Resources:

The ranking of my thesis supervisor choices reflects profound confusion on my part regarding the methods and factors for selection. I nominate Martin Bressani first because we share common design and process strategies, and because I think we communicate very well. Ricardo Castro has been nominated in the second position because I think he has a profound understanding of the human condition, and would thus be invaluable in advising a project involving cultural interface – as mine does.

Third, I have nominated David Theodore because he forces me to challenge my ideas on a regular basis, reflecting upon tangents that are out of my scope of vision. I think all three nominations would bring different skill-sets to the table as supervisors; thus, I would welcome suggestions on how a supervisor should be picked.
List of Primary Sources:


This book of essays by artists, curators, and scholars addresses the current condition of contemporary Aboriginal art in Canada and the US, and how Native artists mediate between cultural tradition and Western criticism. The advent of video and online media has been particularly liberating among indigenous cultures, and a history of how Aboriginal artists have successfully immersed themselves in this facet of modernization is illustrated. Digital Media has been a gateway tool for many reserve communities to form a primary link with urbanity. A programmatic mode for hybridizing Native and non-Native interests is thus introduced – a niche where both cultures can exist and communicate using the same media.


An Ojibwa from Winnipeg, Johnie was greatly influenced by a 1973 confrontation between members of the American Indian Movement and the US Military at Wounded Knee, South Dakota. Becoming an activist on behalf of Native Peoples, Shingoose voices his political opinions in the form of folk songs. At a time when other Native activists held armed occupations of Alcatraz and Oka, Johnie used songs like “Reservation Blues” to protest Aboriginal injustices. The selected lyrics from this ballad cleverly describe limbo in the border zone, where Aboriginals straddle traditional Native life and the ‘whiteman’ life of the city in angst.


*Reservation X* is to be thought of as a variable or an unknown factor – a hypothetical space and an exploration community and place as an Aboriginal idea. The complexity of Native North American identity is conceptualized in the fictional *Reservation X*, with the ‘X’ alluding to the treaty markings made by First Nations chiefs in the handing over of their lands during the days of colonization. It was this hypothetical space, described by installation art, which prompted the concept of a program to bridge Native and non-Native territories. *Reservation X* is more than just an exhibition of Native art; it is a space, a place, an idea. The works compiled by leading Aboriginal artists question whether the reserve is the center or the margin, and beg the question of what this uncertain community space ought to be.

This film portrait of Randy ‘Spudwrench’ Horne captures the life of a man who is simultaneously Aboriginal, urban and politically determined – perhaps the personification of this thesis proposal. Obomsawin tells the historiography of Horne as a Kahnawá:ke Mohawk, a nomadic ironworker in large cities, and a leading figure in the Oka crisis of 1990. The film stakes Native culture within mainstream contemporary reality as both a political and artistic discourse, and specifically illustrates the Aboriginal relationship to non-Aboriginals, the city, infrastructure and land.


From the vantage point of an anthropologist, this work is an exploration of cultural rituals and how they relate to conflict and crisis resolution. Turner expands upon work done by Arnold Van Gennep at the beginning of the twentieth century regarding the idea of ‘liminality’ (after limen, Latin for threshold), which is a transition state between two phases. Passage through this liminal phase, or border zone, although not necessarily physical, can be likened to the migration of Aboriginals populations from reserve to city. The Native consciousness is at the threshold between traditional / contemporary, rural / urban, Indian / white, submissive / proactive.
List of Secondary Sources:


Appendix: Figures

Figure 1. Mike MacDonald, *Electronic Totem*, 1987 (Claxton 2005).

Figure 2. Graphic re-appropriation of Mercier Bridge infrastructure.
Figure 3. Territorial boundaries of the Kahnawá:ke reserve

Figure 4. ‘Border zone’: the interface of reserve and city infrastructure.