



HOME FOR A MILL



For the Southern Ute people, the circle of life fundamentally encompasses their world: yellow represents east, spring and infancy; red represents south, summer and youth; black represents west, fall and adult; and white represents north, winter and elder. This skylight forms a cone above the Welcome Gallery in the new museum and casts its glow on the floor below.



PHOTOS BY SCOTT DW SMITH, COURTESY OF SOUTHERN UTE CULTURAL CENTER & MUSEUM

ENNIAL CULTURE

BY MARY NOWOTNY



Perched on a terrace overlooking the Los Pinos River at the heart of a historic tribal meeting place, the Southern Ute Cultural Center & Museum in Ignacio, Colo., is the newest jewel in the cultural heritage of the Southwest. The new facility celebrates the living heritage of Native people who have lived in the area for thousands of years.

“This has always been the gathering place for the Mouache and Capote bands that make up the Southern Ute Indian Tribe,” says Marvin Cook, board member of the new center and former executive officer of the Southern Ute Indian Tribe. It is the natural place for a facility that the tribe can always call home.

NATIVE PLACES

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The building, in southwestern Colorado, is also an architectural reflection of its people's powerful connection to land. It melds contemporary materials with the structure and forms of traditional indigenous architecture. It draws on the materials, shapes and textures of the landscape.

While the architectural design was the brainchild of Johnpaul Jones, principal of the Seattle-based Jones & Jones Architects and Landscape Architects, Ltd., the true visionaries for the new museum were the Ute people themselves. Tribal members of all ages contributed their ideas.

The design of the new 52,000-square-foot museum began to take shape when groups of Southern Ute tribal members were invited to express their views about what they wanted their cultural center to look like. Schoolchildren at the Southern Ute Academy Montessori School were given clay and markers to craft what they viewed as a museum that "wouldn't be yucky." Tribal elders made it clear they wanted safe storage for treasured family artifacts. Board members asked for a space which the Southern Ute people could always call home.

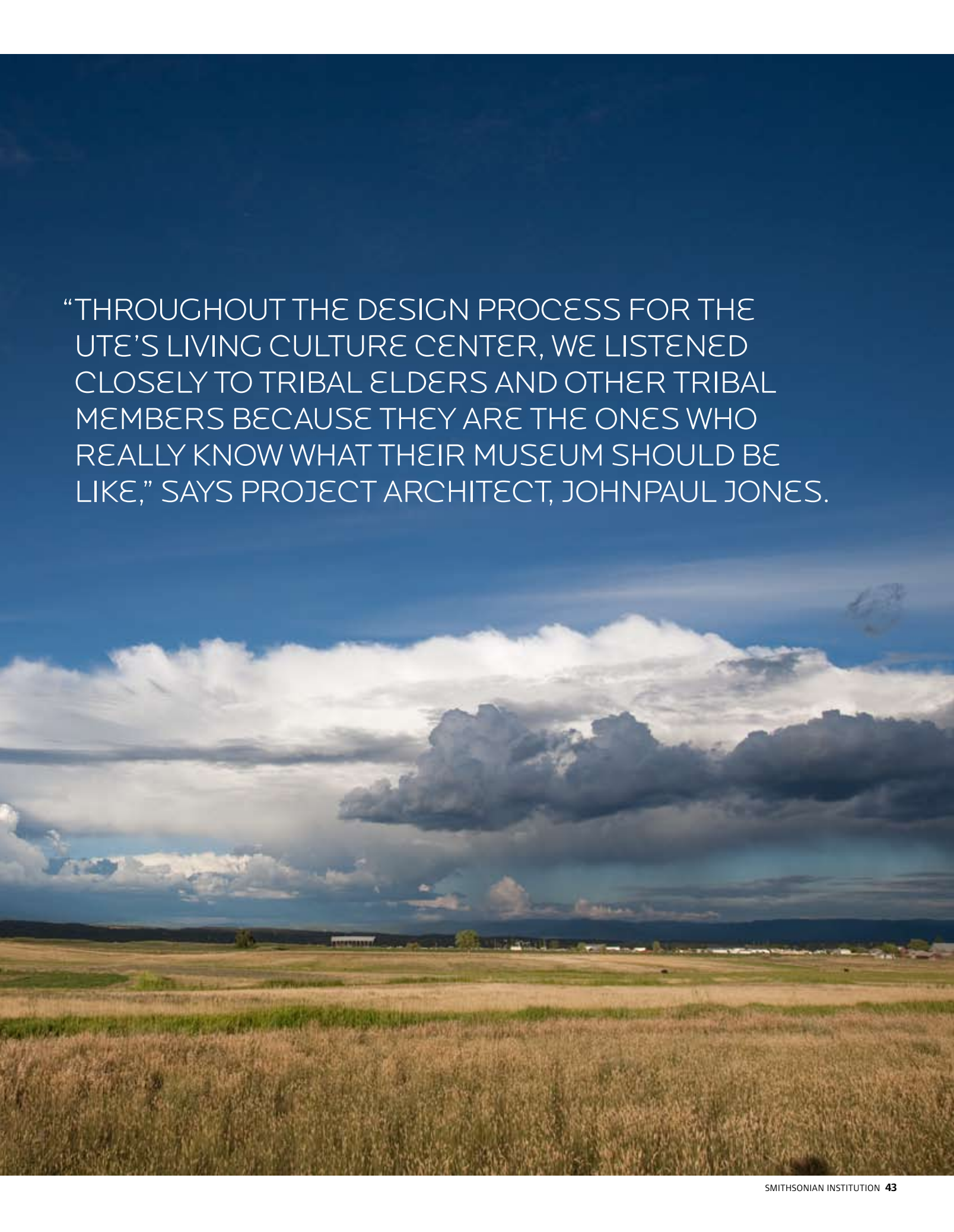
"Throughout the design process for the Ute's living culture center, we listened closely to tribal elders and other tribal members because they are the ones who really know what their museum should be like," says Jones.

Jones, of Cherokee-Choctaw heritage, was one of the lead architects for the National Museum of the American Indian on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. It was at that museum's 2004 opening that Jones became involved in the Southern Ute project. He met tribal elder Alden Naranjo, and their conversation turned to the tribe's mission to conserve and promote its history and culture.

Jones took his cues from tribal philosophy as well as from the shape of the tribe's early structures. The iconic Welcome Gallery that



This is Old Spanish Trail country, crossed routinely by traders of the 1800s who may have travelled by horse or mule. They carried blankets and other woolen goods to the West Coast and herded fresh horses and mules back to Santa Fe.

A landscape photograph showing a wide field of tall, golden-brown grass in the foreground. In the middle ground, there are some buildings and trees. The sky is a deep blue with large, white and grey clouds. The text is overlaid on the upper portion of the image.

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Ute basket-weavers from White Mesa, Utah, are considered to be living cultural treasures and represent a long-practiced artistic tradition. Their baskets will be exhibited in the new museum's Temporary Gallery when it opens in June. From time to time, these women will be on hand to share their weaving and design knowledge with museum visitors. They are, clockwise from this page: Adoline Eyetoo, Alice Lehi, Shirley Denetsosie, Stella Eyetoo and Annie Cantsee.





forms the center of the museum is constructed of high-performance translucent glass panels set into galvanized aluminum frames. Another layer of aluminum slats wraps the structure to form a shape reminiscent of a tipi or, even in some viewers' eyes, a woven shawl enshrouding the shoulders. The two wings on either side of the museum's entrance reach around in an arc as if to enfold and embrace visitors from the moment they arrive. The configuration is meant to say, "You're welcome here. Now let us tell you our stories."

From the very beginning, Jones and his design team looked for ways to incorporate the circle of life as a recurrent theme. Not only does the building's curved form aim to link generations, but it also ties the space to the cardinal directions, seasons, equinoxes, solstices and other events of the year. Explains one Southern Ute tribal member, "There's four of everything – four directions, four colors, four divisions of life and four seasons."

The four-paned skylight that caps the conical structure above the Welcome Gallery – made of translucent wedges of red, yellow, black and white – represents components of Ute life as well as the four worlds of many indigenous people: the natural world, the earth, its plants and the cycles of the solstice and equinox; the animal world that shares messages with mankind; the spirit world, in which all things are alive; and the human world, where knowledge is transferred.

The stunning addition to the landscape includes a state-of-the-art museum, a multimedia room, permanent and temporary exhibit rooms, arts and crafts classrooms, and gathering spaces for tribal and community functions.

The museum's collection includes hundreds of recorded interviews and songs as well as more than 1,500 artifacts from Ute and other Southwestern Native cultures. The extensive permanent collection includes a wide range of material cultural objects. Among them are historic photographs; baskets created for their utilitarian purposes as well as their beauty, particularly many pieces made by the White Mesa basket-weavers; ceremonial dance regalia; paintings of Natives by Ute Indians; beaded and silver jewelry, belts and hair pieces; musical instruments, including flutes, drums and rattles. Items from long ago are also well represented, including pre-17th century artifacts such as lithics, sherds, tools, pots and arrowheads; stone



axes, awls and other tools; water jugs, bowls and other pottery, and weapons used for hunting and other purposes.

Ute material is unusual in that, while other tribes were creating objects for the tourist market, most Ute Indians' objects continued to be utilitarian. Berry baskets, water jars and beaded items were made to be used in daily and ceremonial life, but they were also remarkable for their artistic craftsmanship. The Southern Utes are noted for their intricate beadwork, and their color combinations and designs are particularly distinctive.



Great care is taken to preserve these objects. “What truly distinguishes the new Southern Ute Cultural Center and Museum is our commitment to state-of-the-art artifact conservation,” says Lynn Brittner, who has been executive director of the museum for the past 10 years. “To ensure that artifacts are preserved for future generations, each display case and all storage areas are climate controlled and monitored for appropriate temperature and humidity.”

Additional objects are on loan from other institutions, particularly the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian. Some of these artifacts have never or rarely been seen on exhibit before. Other materials are on loan from the Colorado Springs Fine Art Museum, the Colorado Historical Society, the Ute Historical Pass Museum in Woodland Park, Colo., the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture in Santa Fe, N.M., and the Museum of Western Colorado in Grand Junction, Colo.

The museum’s Oral History Library houses recorded tribal interviews and songs on a database. Tribal members and visitors can use the library’s computer lab to access the recordings easily and hear them in high-definition sound quality. Many of the recorded stories are integrated with exhibits in the museum so that visitors can hear tribal members’ stories told from their point of view in their own words. A storytelling room enables tribal members to record their oral histories and add to the collection.

The museum’s 8,000-square-foot permanent exhibit space includes interactive exhibits intended to preserve cultural knowledge, values and artifacts for future generations.

Dynamic, multi-sensory displays engage the visitor at every level. A motion-activated interactive horse invites brave riders to experience and appreciate the Southern Ute Indians’ considerable accomplishments in horsemanship. An authentic 18-foot-diameter buffalo-hide tipi, constructed by noted craftsman Larry Belitz, beckons visitors to a storytelling space within.

These exhibits are not just about history, but about a living culture. From the recreations of camp and reservation life to celebrations of traditional ceremonies, the material objects and dominant images represent the vibrancy of Southern Ute culture, past and present, as well as their continuous connection to the beauty of the landscape that is their traditional territory. ✨

Mary Nowotny is a freelance writer in Durango, Colo., who serves as media coordinator for the Southern Ute Cultural Center & Museum.



PLACES TO VISIT

The new Southern Ute museum (succm.org; 970-563-9583) is located in one of the most culturally rich and historic regions of the country, and many other landmarks are within driving distance. The Old Spanish National Historic Trail, which once connected northern New Mexico settlements near or in Santa Fe with Los Angeles and southern California, crosses the Southern Ute Indian Reservation and leads to numerous Native sites.

From 1829 to 1848, this trail served as a significant Mexican trading route, where mules carried blankets and other woolen goods to the west coast and New Mexico traders herded fresh horses and mules back to Santa Fe. Today’s visitors can explore the diverse scenery of the Southwest – from subalpine forests on 10,000-foot passes to sea-level deserts – and absorb the area’s cultural diversity. More than 20 tribes still live along the route as do the direct descendants of the Spanish colonists who moved into northern New Mexico long before the Pilgrims arrived in the east.

From Ignacio, visitors can drive reservation roads that approximate the old route, and then follow U.S. Route 160 west to Mancos. A trip northeast on Colorado Highway 184 offers opportunities to stop at the Public Lands Office near Dolores and the nearby Anasazi Heritage Museum before heading west to U.S. Route 491 across the Colorado border and on to Moab and Green River, Utah.

After your visit to the Southern Ute Cultural Center & Museum, consider visiting:

MESA VERDE NATIONAL PARK

The nation’s largest archaeological preserve inhabited by ancestral Puebloan people more than 1,200 years ago. visitmesaverde.com

UTE MOUNTAIN TRIBAL PARK

Settled by ancestral Pueblos about A.D. 400. utemountainute.com/tribal-park

CANYONS OF THE ANCIENTS NATIONAL MONUMENT

Managed as an integral cultural landscape featuring the Anasazi Heritage Center. blm.gov/co/st/en/nm/canm

CHIMNEY ROCK ARCHAEOLOGICAL AREA

The highest and most isolated community connected to Chaco Canyon, a hub of ceremony, trade and administration from A.D. 850 to 1250. chimneyrockco.org

AZTEC RUINS NATIONAL MONUMENT

Once a cultural capital inhabited by ancestors of Pueblo people. nps.gov/azru

SALMON RUINS MUSEUM

Chacoan site built in the late 11th century and homesteaded in the late 1890s. salmonruins.com

LOCAL TRAVEL INFORMATION:

- Durango La Plata County Regional Airport: flydurango.com
- Sky Ute Casino Resort: skyutecasino.com
- Durango Area Tourism Office: durango.org
- Regional Vacation Planner: mesaverdecountry.com
- Colorado’s Official State Vacation Guide: colorado.com