House form is not simply the result of physical deter-
mination but a reflection of a number of choices that a
group has made about how it wishes to live. This as-
sumption is central to what follows. Consequently, house
forms then provide a pro-
fusion of information re-
garding the culture in which
the house form is utilized.
When regarded in this way,
the house is more than
shelter; it becomes what
Amos Rapoport describes
in House Form and Culture
as "a physical mechanism
which reflects and helps
create the world view, ethos,
and so on, of a people,
comparable to the various
social institutions (or mecha-
nisms) which do the same."2

For the Blackfeet American
Indians, the built environ-
ment provided much more
than shelter. The Blackfeet
dominated the upper Great
Plains north of the Missouri
River and east of the Rocky
Mountains, an area that is
now the state of Montana.
They had a nomadic exist-
ence and depended on buf-
falo hunting and foraging for
their means of subsistence.1
The single Blackfoot house
type—the tipi—fulfilled its
greatest role by serving as a
physical representation of
the Blackfoot world view.

The Blackfoot dwelling's
function as both an utili-
tarian and a spiritual entity
has become more clear
through the recent writings
of Native American histori-
ians and autobiographers. The opinions of these historians tend to challenge the theories that were first presented by anthropologists in the 1880s. An area that has been the subject of particular disagreement is the cultural significance of the work involved in constructing and maintaining the house form. The importance of these tasks, which were the sole responsibility of Blackfeet women, was vastly underrated by nineteenth-century chroniclers.

One such observer was United States Army Captain Benjamin Louis E. de Bonneville, whose adventures in the Rocky Mountains between May 1832 and August 1833 were later related by Washington Irving. Regarding Blackfeet women, Bonneville observed that “the duties of a wife... are little less onerous than those of a packhorse.” The anthropologist George Catlin, a contemporary of Bonneville, was rather more blunt in his appraisal. “The Crow women (and Blackfeet also) are not handsome, and I shall at present say but little of them. They are, like all other Indian women, the slaves of their husbands, being obliged to perform all the domestic duties and drudgeries of the tribe.”

It is not surprising that explorers and adventurers had little regard for domesticity. Furthermore, because

---

2 Preparation of a buffalo hide for use, an arduous process involving such tasks as scraping. Photograph courtesy of the American Museum of Natural History, Department Library Services, Negative No. 23417.

3 Softening the buffalo hide, another task in the preparation process. Photograph by Walter McClellan, courtesy of the Southwest Museum, Los Angeles, California, Negative No. MGC-134.
they were familiar only with societies in which women were supposed to be subver-
vient, these amateur anthropo-
pologists appear to have been unable to perceive the balance of power that existed between genders in the Native American popula-
tions. Similarly, they were not cognizant of the essential role that gender-specific tasks played in providing subsistence. For example, the men's work was done away from camp, and in between grueling hunting and warring expeditions, the men returned to camp primarily to rest. Women, on the other hand, did most of their work in the village, and thus visiting explorers were confronted with the sight of women keeping busy while the men rested. Because this apparent imbalance was not given closer examination, for centuries Native American women have had the reputa-
tion of being "unfortunate and debased . . . beasts of burden.""

Early anthropologists erro-
neously concluded that women had low status within the tribe due to the nature of their daily tasks. As anthropo-
pologist John C. Ewers declared in Pioneering the American West, "the Indian country of the Upper Mis-
souri was a man's world. As homemakers and housekeep-
ers, women performed scores of tasks necessary to the welfare of their families. But their role was a humble one."
A major component of the women's domestic role was the fabrication of the tepee. The once plentiful buffalo provided the skins used for this purpose. When a woman had sufficient hides prepared and was ready for a new tepee (usually about once a year), she invited close friends to join her for a specially prepared feast. Acceptance of this invitation signaled a willingness to assist in the construction process. For the most part the work was done nonhierarchically, although an older, more experienced woman might supervise the intricate phases of construction. Because the fabrication of the tepee was a cooperative task, it could usually be completed in one day.

In the sign language of the Plains Indians, work is indicated by a hide-scrapping motion, which bears witness to the extensive effort required to prepare a skin for use. Each buffalo hide took two full days of work to prepare, but since some parts of the process, such as drying the hide in the sun, took place over a period of days, the preparation time was actually much longer. A woman of average skill might be able to tan as many as twenty-five hides in a season, but it was unlikely that even a highly skilled woman could complete more than thirty hides in a season. It is crucial to note that these efforts did not go unrewarded. Women who excelled at skin
dressing were respected for both the quantity and the quality of their work. Ewers reports that older women "spoke with pride of the number of skin lodges they had made, much as the successful warrior boasted of his deeds of valor." This parallel pride of achievement is consistent with the Native American sense of balance and interdependence between males and females. In the case of the Blackfeet, the women depended on the men to hunt the buffalo while the men depended on the women to transform the buffalo hides into adequate shelters.

The buffalo hide cover, placed over a framework of twenty wooden poles, provided a dwelling that was extremely well suited to a nomadic lifestyle. The first step in erecting the tipi was to lash four of the poles together at their tips and erect them as a unit, creating a tetrapod base on which to lean other poles. Great care was taken to arrange these poles so that the tipi cover would hang properly and conform to traditional standards for appearance. Once the poles were in place, the fan-shaped tipi cover was raised, wrapped around the frame, and then pinned together using twelve-inch long wooden dowels. Erecting a tipi was a potentially cumbersome task, due to the nature of the materials: the tipi cover weighed close to one hundred pounds and the wooden poles were eighteen
to twenty feet long. Nevertheless, this task could be accomplished by one or two women. In fact, Blackfoot scholar Walter McClintock reports that "the Blackfeet women were so expert that it took them only a few minutes." Even in heavy winds, it rarely took them more than ten or fifteen minutes to erect the tipi.

While the tipi remained a relatively simple structure, minor refinements in the design were important in protecting the inhabitants from the harsh weather of the northern plains. For example, an interior lining called a dew cloth was hung by ropes tied to the tipi poles. Hanging down about five feet, the dew cloth was long enough to be weighted down on the bottom with the numerous pouches that filled the tipi. In addition to preventing rain from dropping off the poles and into the tipi, the air space between the dew cloth and the tipi cover provided insulation, keeping the tipi warm in the winter and cool in the summer. Ventilation was also increased because air rising in the tipi brought in cold air from outside, which came in under the tipi cover and rose between the dew cloth and the tipi cover. The movement of this air created an excellent draft for removing smoke from the tipi's central fire. In cold weather, sod or snow was packed around the bottom exterior edge of the tipi to prevent
excessive drafts. In hotter weather, the dew cloth and the bottom edge of the tips could be unstaked and rolled up about a foot to increase ventilation.

An average tipi was fourteen to sixteen feet in diameter and stood seventeen feet tall. A tipsi of this size required twelve to fourteen buffalo hides for its fabrication and typically housed a family of eight: a husband, one or more wives, a grown son, and two or three younger children. Because men often did not marry until they were thirty years of age, they continued to live in the lodge of their parents long after reaching adulthood. It also was not uncommon for men to have multiple wives. In order to minimize the potential disorders created by eight people living in a 150- to 200-square-foot area, traditions developed to govern the use of space within the tipi. The primary organizer of space was the central fire place, which guided traffic in a circle. Furthermore, traditions dictated that women sat on the south and men on the north. Because the doorway generally faced the east, this placement in turn regulated that women entered and turned to their left while men entered and turned to their right. In addition, proper etiquette required that someone moving inside the tipi never pass between another person and the fire place. The greatest error was to pass between the tipi’s sacred altar (located directly opposite the door) and the fireplace.

The emphasis on circular movement within the tipi was not only efficient but reflected the strong spiritual value placed on the circular form in general and the tipi in particular. The circle was considered a sanctified pattern of movement, which was believed to have no beginning and no end. Edward Curtis interprets the Native American belief in this potency: “everything the Power of the World does is done in a circle… The life of a man is a circle from childhood to childhood, and so it is in everything where power moves.” The sense of well-being that was associated with this circulation pattern is exemplified by the response to its absence. For older Blackfeet Indians living today, circular movement within the tipi is “a part of the sacred circle that many people associate with this kind of life. . . . [Modern tips which do not have a special center or traffic direction can be very disorienting and uncomfortable for those used to the old ways.”

The Blackfoot sensitivity to the circular form was reinforced by the spatial characteristics of their natural environment, the open plains. On the prairie, “one can see in all directions a continuous horizon which is more or less level. Points thus appear equally distant, and there is an impression of living inside a circular field of vision and experience.” This perception was reiter- ated on a more human scale by the circular form of the tipsi encampment, which must have formed a welcome sense of enclosure on the broad-reaching plains. Standing within the encamp- ment, rows of tipsi two or three thick embraced a large circle on the prairie and curved into one’s peripheral vision, thus experientially embracing the users of this space: Blackfeet Indians expressed this quality through metaphors such as “the sacred hoop of the tribe.”

While the circular plan of the tipsi encampment provided enclosure on one scale, the circular form of the tipsi provided enclosure on a more intimate scale. In addition, the tipsi possessed distinctive spatial qualities. Some of these qualities were discussed by Elizabeth Weatherford in an article about the characteris- tics of prairie-indian dwellings built by women. While emphasizing cross-cultural comparisons, her description of dwellings that have “no edges or planes to interrupt the flow of space” is an acute analysis of the Blackfoot tipsi. A modern tipsi dweller confirmed Weatherford’s analysis: “the roundness of our dwelling gives me a very strong feeling—which being inside of a geometric mole- cule and tumbling through the vastness of the Universe—physical or age next to ne spirit- ual everlasting age all arround: just People, Earth, poles, and tipsi covering, with a natural skylight up above and light diffused by the walls all around.”

In addition to providing a particular spatial experience, the tipsi facilitated a sense of connection between the dwelling and the surround- ing environment. One could follow the sun’s progression by the light that filtered through the semitranslucent cover, and the scents of the forest were recreated by the smoky fire and the use of incense made from sacred trees. The wildlife of the prairie also existed within the tipsi in the form of skin rugs and clothing. Furthermore, the tipsi muffled but did not eliminate the noises of the camp. Consequently, even within the enclosure of the tipsi, one felt con- nected to the surrounding community.

Because of the spiritual qualities associated with the circle, all tipsi were perceived as sacred objects. The tipsi with painted exteriors possessed even greater symbolic significance. These embellishments were not merely decorations put on the tipsi at the whim of the owner but indicated that a particular tipsi was the point of convergence for especially potent spiritual powers. Although the tipsi cover was
At night the tipis glow like lanterns in the darkness of the prairie. Photograph by Walter McClure, courtesy of the Southwest Museum, Los Angeles, California, Negative No. MCC-365.
not a sacred entity in itself, it was part of a complex of sacred objects that were believed to represent the Holy Spirits with whom the Blackfeet maintained close contact. Consequently, the tips became both a physical manifestation of faith and a location for ritual prayers. The extent of this achievement was expressed by a Blackfoot Indian's analysis that the spiritual protection of the [painted] tips meant much more than its physical protection. Thus, the tips were not just a shelter from the natural environment, a particular spatial experience, or a symbolic interpretation of the sacred circle; the tips also had the potential to become a potent source of emotional comfort and reassurance.

As the builders of this sacred entity, it would seem likely that women would have high status within the tribe. Although early anthropologists placed little value on domestic tasks, the Blackfoot culture recognized the extent to which women contributed that resulted from these tasks. In addition to constructing the tips, Blackfoot women were also responsible for preparing food and clothing, but their domestic role was not perceived as an oppressive one. On the contrary, McClintock asserts that "women considered it their vocation and allowed no interference from the men, who knew nothing about such things." This rigid distinction between roles served to amplify rather than belittle the role of women in providing for tribal subsistence.

In addition to being respected for their skill and utility as housekeepers, Blackfeet women were highly valued for their ability to give birth. The Blackfeet considered childbirth to be a clear and undisputed sign of spiritual power. As one Native American woman described it, "men have to dream to get power from the spirits, and they think of everything they can—songs and speeches and marching around, hoping that the spirits will notice them and give them some power. But we have power... Children. Can any warrior make a child, no matter how brave and wonderful he is?"

Another major indicator of women's status was the extent of their involvement in religious ceremonies. Although many of the religious ceremonies were conducted by men, very often women had an important part to play in these ceremonies. Even if the women did not actually participate in them, they were fully educated regarding this task. The fact that such information was accessible to both sexes stands in marked contrast to the women's dear domination of housekeeping tasks, in which men were forbidden to participate.

It is extremely important to recognize that the highest religious event among the Blackfeet, the annual Sun Dance, had to be sponsored by a woman. A contemporary Blackfoot woman stated that "this fact, by itself, has long helped to assure women to have a special standing in our tribe." The Sun Dance celebrated and reaffirmed the spiritual connections between the tribe and the universe and as such was a ritual of renewal and revitalization. The prerequisite for sponsorship of this ceremony is that a woman must be noble, upstanding, and, most importantly, she must have been faithful to her husband. Although in many cultures female chastity is a means of oppression, this is not the case among the Blackfeet. Rather than promoting fidelity based on the belief that women were the property of their husbands, the Blackfeet recognized that it took "great courage, a friend and will power" to remain monogamous. "The steadfast, disciplined character demonstrated by an unusual woman was comparable to the firm courage of a warrior, and indeed, the women proclaimed their chastity in the manner of men recounting their war exploits." The Blackfoot Indian woman's position of high standing within the tribe is further underscored by her status in mythology. More than mere entertainment, myths and stories taught children about the less tangible parts of their culture, such as morals, ideals, and ethics. The myths of primary importance are those that describe the origins of the tribe and its customs. What becomes clear in these myths is that the American Indian's sense of the cosmos was very much an awareness of balance. As John and Donna Terrell point out in Indian Women of the Western Morning, American Indians accept that "for apparent reasons, each [sex] was endowed with peculiar qualities and sensibilities, neither was accorded supremacy, and each was made dependent on the other for existence." Early anthropologists were able to tell us who made the tips and how many buffalo hides were needed, but they did not understand the importance of this information within the context of Blackfoot culture. Consequently, early male anthropologists reported that Native American women were disadvantaged at the mercy of their male counterparts, whereas evidence from the women themselves reveals that the role of the American Indian woman within her tribe was important and indeed essential. Among the Blackfeet Indians, the women were the builders of the tribe on many levels; they constructed the shelter, they gave birth to new generations, and in the annual celebration of the Sun
Dance they presided over a ceremony of renewal and revitalization. A traditional Cheryenne saying exemplifies the intrinsic role that women played in the well-being of Native American cultures, including the Blackfeet peoples.

A nation is not conquered until the hearts of its women are on the ground. Then it is done, no matter how brave its warriors nor how strong its weapons."

NOTES
2 After 1830, the Blackfeet people became involved with white commerce as American manufacturers discovered a variety of uses for buffalo hides. At this point, the Blackfoot economy changed from one of subsistence to one involved with surplus production. See William Farr, The Reservation Blackfeet (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1984), p. 4. The following pages focus on Blackfeet custom prior to the 1830s. Hides were fully integrated into the culture, but in involvement with the fur trade had yet to commence. The lifestyle is one of nomadic subsistence.
3 Katherine M. Weist, "Plains Indian Women: An Assess-
6 Weist, p. 260.
7 John C. Ewers, "MOTHERS of the MISSOURI: The Marginal Woman in the History of the Upper Mis-
10 John C. Ewers, Blackfoot Crafts, Indian Handicrafts, Booklet #9 (Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs, n.d.), p. 12.
12 Laubin, p. 51.
13 Ibid., pp. 55–56.
14 John C. Ewers, The House in Blackfoot Culture, Smith-
15 This is partially in response to there being many more women than men, primarily due to heavy war losses. Another impediment for po-
legamy, especially among the successful hunters, was that many hands were needed to manage a household, both on the move and in camp. See Ibid.
16 Beverly Hungry Wolf, The Ways of My Grandmothers (New York: William Mor-
17 Ibid., p. 124.
20 Beverly Hungry Wolf, p. 127.
22 The sense of reassurance provided by the tipi encamp-
ment is a function of the massiveness of the prairie. "Walking alone across the prairie quickly impresses one with the vastness of the universe and the insignifi-
ment would be particularly inviting at night, when the brightly glowing tips would contrast sharply with the darkness of the prairie.
23 Op. Cit., p. 9
26 Ewers, 1958, p. 165.
28 Ibid., p. 75.
29 McClintock, p. 8.
31 Beverly Hungry Wolf, p. 31.
32 Alice B. Kehoe, "The Function of Ceremonial Sexual Sun Dance Among the Northern Plains In-
dians," Plains Anthropolo-
34 Bataille and Sandh, p. vi.