

Revitalizing the FAM Mound

Cricket Kaya | First Americans Museum

Introduction

At First Americans Museum (FAM), we educate the public about the unique cultures, diversity, history, contributions, and resilience of the 39 First American Nations in Oklahoma Today—many of which were removed from homelands following the Indian Removal Act of 1830. FAM is a 175,000 square foot facility on the shore of the Oklahoma River, in what is now known as Oklahoma City. In its planning phase, FAM architects consulted with over 80 cultural advisors, finding consensus that the museum must “be a place that rewrites the stories of the past and present in the words of American Indians, and becomes a forum for the shaping of the future... in our own voices, on our own terms.” Reconstructing a mound to cradle the stories held within the building became central to the architecture of FAM. In response, we constructed a 275,000 sq foot 21st Century Mound to surround our museum campus. Today, we face a joint crisis of uncertainty in arts funding and ecological sustainability, but the mound continues to protect us and our mission in transformative new ways. This year, the mound is the catalyst for a future of innovative sustainability at First Americans Museum. The following narrative provides the history, cultural significance, public engagement potential, and symbolism that contextualize our decision to move forward with a revitalization of this treasured ecosystem.

History of Moundbuilders

The entire FAM building represents cyclical Indigenous architectural design, acting as a celestial calendar. Like the cosmological structures of our past, the 21st Century Mound functions as a celebratory site for solstice festivals. As the sun sets on the mound in the winter, light pours through a tunnel, illuminating the festival plaza in a glorious light. Throughout the year, the sun crawls up the mound until it reaches the peak on the eve of summer solstice. Thousands of visitors come to FAM to experience this phenomenon at no cost. It is an important time of reflection and intention for our communities. This relationship to sun and sky through celebratory architecture is known to Indigenous communities across North America and beyond. However, Indigenous people have rarely been credited for constructing such marvels.

When European settlers first witnessed the mounds of North America, they assumed the structures were built by ancient, mysterious people who were in no way connected to the tribes

they encountered during their lifetime. The attempted erasure of Indigenous knowledge—including moundbuilding—served a purpose among settlers to justify removal. Such narratives continue to this day, undermining Indigenous knowledge, and giving credit to fantastical beings, aliens, or even a lost race of giants. This dominant narrative led to generations of state-sanctioned archeological digs that disrupted or even flattened the mounds to uncover cultural items. Today, many of the surviving sites are undergoing public scrutiny to comply with the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) to return funerary objects and human remains to their living descendants.

However, not all mounds served as funerary sites— although this is a common misconception. Across the tribes, mounds had different purposes for the people who built them. Today, mounds are a source of celebration, a sense of home, and a symbol of unwavering resilience in the face of erasure. At large, cosmological architecture stands as a reminder of our connection to Earth and sky, tying us to one another and to the natural world. At First Americans Museum, the Mound serves these purposes, but has a difficult history of its own.

Land Resilience at FAM

The land on which the museum was built endured centuries of degradation under colonial expansion and encroaching urbanization. The building is nested in the original homelands of the Wichita and Affiliated Tribes and the Caddo Nation, who are moundbuilders. Economic and cultural significance of the area is also known to many Plains Indians, including the Apache, Comanche, Kiowa, Osage, Quapaw, and Tonkawa. The Indian Removal Act of 1830 significantly altered the cultural landscape of the region, resulting in the establishment of Indian Territory and the designation of the land as the assigned territory of the Muscogee (Creek) and Seminole. In 1889, the Oklahoma Land Run opened the western half of the state for colonial settlers, dissolving Native land ownership in the area to be managed by the new settler state. An Oil Boom followed in 1897, turning the land into the largest oil well site in Oklahoma. When the boom ended, the wells were decommissioned but the area became a hazardous dumping ground until the end of the 20th century. In the next few years, the State of Oklahoma and the City of Oklahoma City designated the river-side location to be the new site of the American Indian Cultural Center and Museum (AICCM)-- our former name. After nearly a decade of remediation work, the museum earned the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Pheonix Award, which recognizes the transformation of contaminated land into productive, community-benefiting uses.

Mound Restoration Plan

Once safe to build on, 45,000 semi-truckloads of earth were brought in to build the FAM mound. It was initially seeded with a mix of native wildflowers and grasses. Since that time, non-native plant species have encroached. The mound is heavily thatched with dead vegetation and lacks the biodiversity needed to maintain a healthy grassland ecosystem that supports pollinators. The US Fish and Wildlife Service estimates that the Eastern Monarch Butterfly population has decreased by at least 80% in only a few decades, and habitat loss is among the key factors for their decline. This year, FAM is collaborating with the Tribal Alliance for Pollinators (TAP) to restore our 21st Century Mound, and introduce a mega-pollinator habitat to support the butterfly migration.

The Tribal Alliance for Pollinators is a Native-led nonprofit that unites traditional ecological knowledge with cutting-edge technical resources to create an innovative model for conservation and restoration on tribal lands. It provides hands-on training and technical support for tribes that want to help threatened pollinators and preserve the native plants that serve as the foundation for Indigenous, cultural, medicinal, and culinary traditions. The native plant seed bank created by TAP is the largest in Oklahoma, with 267 species of native plants. TAP was born out of the groundswell support generated by Tribal Environmental Action for Monarchs (TEAM), a coalition of seven tribal partners – Chickasaw, Seminole, Citizen Potawatomi, Muscogee Creek, Osage, Eastern Shawnee and Miami Nations—who began restoring monarch habitat on their lands in 2015 with the assistance of Monarch Watch and the Euchee Butterfly Farm. During the first three years of the TEAM project, the coalition restored over 60,000 milkweeds and 40,000 native wildflowers on 2250 acres of habitat. Tribal Alliance for Pollinators is the largest Native-led grasslands restoration organization in North America. Together, FAM and TAP propose an incremental plan of site remediation and native plant restoration that will restore the FAM mound to ecological health while also increasing the visual appeal of the mound.

Economic Impact

After over three decades of state advocacy and fundraising, First Americans Museum (FAM) became a financial reality in what might be the most tumultuous time to open a museum in recent history—2020. Still, a small staff of Native curators and dedicated leaders made it

happen. In just one year, the team engaged all thirty-nine tribes in Oklahoma to create an innovative, 175,000 square-foot facility that re-defines what museums can be for Native people. Despite doubt from all corners, tribal citizens across Indian Country came together to celebrate the grand opening in September of 2021. We had achieved a great feat of intertribal resilience and systemic justice. But then, it was time to operate: a process many of our early leaders did not have the capacity to prepare.

Dr. Kelli Mosteller (Citizen Potawatomi Nation) joined First Americans Museum (FAM) as the Executive Director after the museum suffered three years of operational leadership turnover. Bringing fifteen years of leadership in cultural institutions and a lifetime of community work in her own tribal nation, Dr. Mosteller was prepared to steward FAM into a new chapter of financial sustainability and public engagement. Since the beginning, she has been focused on making FAM more fiscally resilient. However, nobody could have prepared for the nation-wide cuts to federal funding. We are acutely aware of this long-term threat to our institution and to our tribal museum partners across the country. It became clear that finding a model for grassroots engagement through public revenue was the strongest answer to this challenge. In response, we engaged our staff to prepare a multi-year project that would re-orient every part of our museum campus towards the public. Of course, the star of this show will be the mound.

Research in museum studies shows that emphasizing accessible public spaces can encourage community engagement. This public engagement is key in grassroots revenue generation that will help sustain the museum. Outdoor access creates more frequent, low-barrier opportunities to increase attendance, encourage repeat visitation, memberships, rentals, vendors, food and beverage, sponsorships, and event revenue. In practice, it strengthens the museum's role as a "third space," building community trust and relevance beyond ticketed exhibitions. Over time, this diversifies our revenue to be both community-owned and operated, resilient to the fluctuation of admissions and fundraising.

Dr. Mosteller brings experience in successful pollinator habitat restoration and community-centered conservation efforts. She is a founding partner of the Tribal Alliance for Pollinators, where she established a tribal community garden to grow and distribute pollinator plants to the public. Kelli also led the restoration of twenty acres of sanctuary land to be enriched with native species, work that brought together Indigenous knowledge holders and ethnobotanists in a genuine partnership. This combination of traditional ecological knowledge

and innovative leadership is the driving force for the Mound revitalization, stewarding First Americans Museum into a new era of sustainability for both the museum, our tribal museum partners, and the land on which we reside.

Community Impact

FAM is uniquely positioned for this project. Our connection with the 39 tribal nations in Oklahoma today is a conduit for mentorship and shared new models for financial sustainability. Our Oklahoma City campus offers visibility and a central location for cultural teachings about medicinal plants, and demonstrating prairie restoration to diverse audiences. Through a multi-phase effort encompassing over 275,000 square feet, the restoration process will engage up to 500 volunteers culling invasive species and reintroducing native plants, setting us up for long term success. Together, we are not only restoring native habitat on the FAM Mound, but we are also creating a living classroom for our children and families. Transforming the Mound into a living exhibit that educates visitors about the deep cultural significance of these plants to our communities aligns with FAM's mission of honoring the 39 tribes in Oklahoma. The Mound project will position FAM to champion this work at a scale that will make a generational impact. It is a small act, but it reminds us that every small choice can help restore balance. The FAM Mound is a part of that balance. It is not just land. It is a teacher—a place where our children can come to learn who they are, where they come from, and how they fit into the balance of our world.

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