

# Building Back



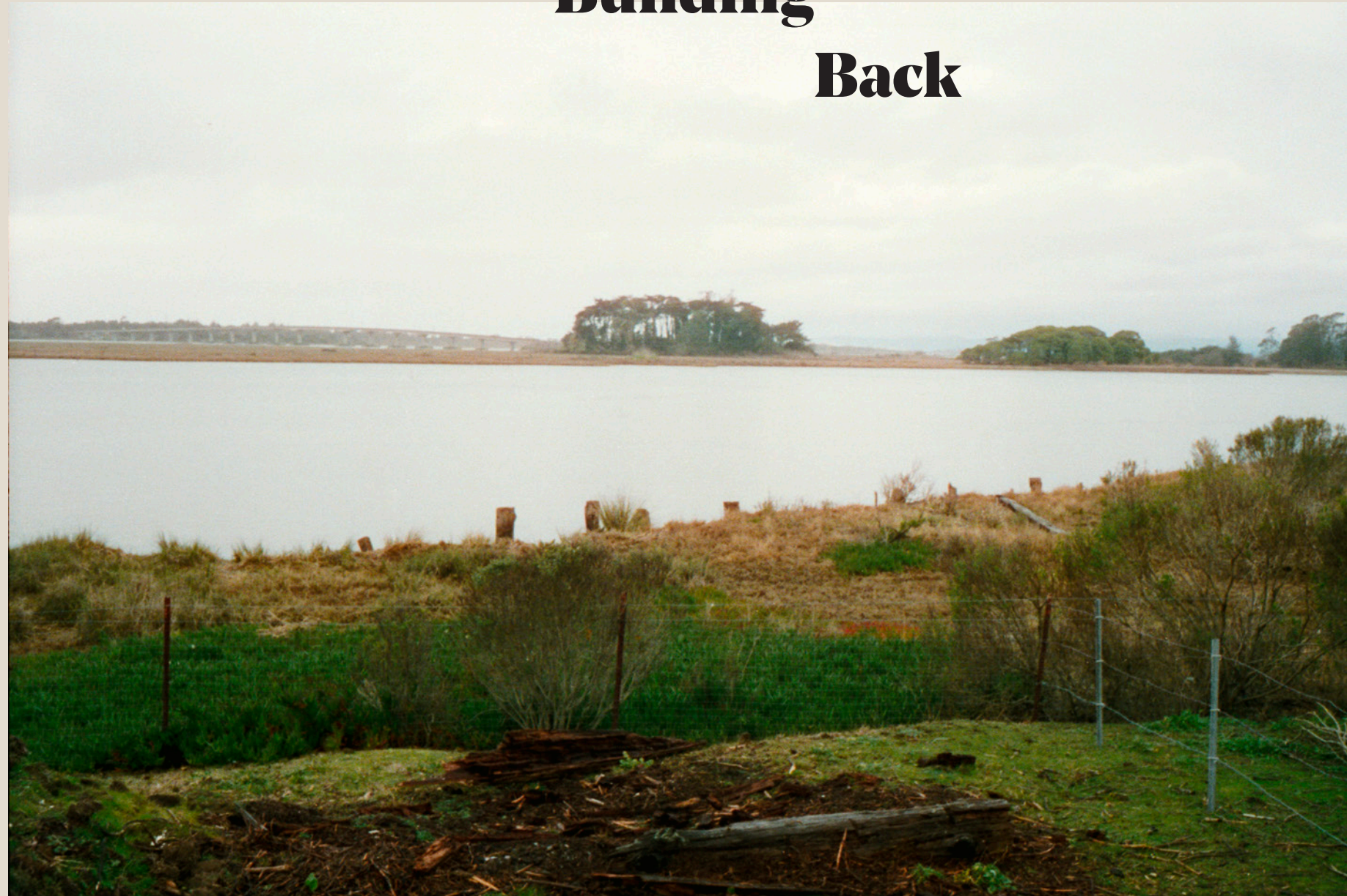
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**Piece by piece, the Wiyot Tribe has been reassembling its ancestral territories in Northern California. Now, it's using a land trust to create affordable housing so its community can stay.**

On the coast north of San Francisco around Eureka, California, the Wiyot Tribe has spent decades reclaiming its ancestral lands. Tribal chair Ted Hernandez

(above and below) and tribal administrator Michelle Vassel (above) are leading the effort, monitoring land in the area, like this former village site (above). In 2019,

the tribe finally regained control of Tuluwat Island (right, in distance), the site of a massacre of Wiyot people in 1860 and the center of the tribe's universe.



**In early February, a light rain sprinkles** across the windshield of Michelle Vassel's forest green Prius, an official vehicle of the Wiyot Tribe. She's driving south along the CA-255 bridge toward Eureka, a coastal city in Northern California, passing Tuluwat Island. Ted Hernandez, chair of the Wiyot Tribe, sits in the passenger seat, observing the island—the sacred cultural center of the tribe's cosmological universe. He and Vassel, the tribal administrator, are surveying the ancestral lands the tribe has recovered in the last 20 years.

In the evenings, Vassel says, some unhoused people walk north across the

two-lane bridge to make camp or find shelter on one of the islands in the middle of the bay or farther north in Samoa, a forested peninsula across the waters. They then walk back to Eureka the next day for social services.

Tuluwat Island sits in what is now Humboldt Bay. Many Wiyot people lived on the island until 1860. That year, a group of white settlers interrupted the Wiyot Tribe's World Renewal Ceremony on the island, killing scores of Wiyot people, mostly women, children, and elders—an act so vicious, it earned the city the nickname Murderville by newspapers in San

Francisco and New York. Afterward, the bay was full of blood, Vassel says. For more than 150 years, the island remained out of Wiyot hands until the tribe began purchasing it piece by piece in 1999. Now, the tribe owns most of the island and has created a historic connection with the people of Eureka.

"This has been an intergenerational movement to heal the island, to heal our people, to heal our community. Today we make history together," Hernandez said at a news conference among Eureka's city leaders the day the last land was returned in 2019. "We changed their story." >





Stable, long-term housing in Eureka (above), as in the rest of California, is increasingly out of reach

for many. That's why Vassel and others started the Dishgamu Humboldt Community Land Trust,

which is creating permanently affordable housing on land under Wiyot tribal control around the city.

"I like to think I just happened to be one of the lucky ones that was alive and here when that happened," says Vassel. "But, you know, work had been done for generations getting to that point."

While returning land to tribes is a major achievement, it isn't a silver bullet solution to the many problems facing the Wiyot and other tribes across the country. Even when land is returned, many Native people still can't afford to live close by, something especially true in California, where in January the overall median home price exceeded \$751,000, according to the California Association of Realtors.

"Our people are being priced out of the local housing market, so just think about that, the depth of that," says Vassel. "The people that have been here for hundreds of thousands of years can't afford to live here anymore—and that's happening all across California in Indian Country."

So the Wiyot Tribe is not stopping at just getting land back. After years of preparation, in February 2020, it took the historic step of creating the first community land trust (CLT) developed under tribal law in the United States.

CLTs are nonprofit development corporations representing residents of a certain area. The trusts use private and public

funds to acquire and manage land on behalf of their constituents to create things like public amenities or housing. Residents can own or rent housing on CLT land but cannot own the land and usually live on CLT property using ground leases, which often last 99 years. Perhaps the most beneficial part of a CLT is that when a trust buys the land, the land permanently leaves the market and the CLT is able to keep rental or mortgage rates low on its housing units. The first community land trust in the U.S. was founded by civil rights advocate Robert Swann in 1970 to give Black sharecroppers an opportunity to collectively own the land they worked. As of 2021, there were over 260 CLTs across the country, according to the Georgetown Climate Center.

Vassel says the tribe founded the Dishgamu (pronounced DISH-gah-muh, meaning "love") Humboldt Community Land Trust to create sustainable, affordable housing for members of the Wiyot Tribe and other residents of the area and to reintroduce public green space to the city's urban and industrial areas. The trust seeks to develop projects on the tribe's ancestral homelands by using regenerative economic principles that follow less extractive and more environmentally and

socially positive business models, like restoring and repurposing older, underused buildings. Every proposed project, land acquisition, community program, grant application, and conservation plan must receive tribal council approval. The fledgling land trust is an experiment in tribal leadership and management—there's no blueprint for this kind of organization and ownership. Tribal leaders see it as an opportunity for healing between the Wiyot and Eureka communities and a way to provide responsible land stewardship during a time of crisis for many seeking affordable housing in California's out-of-control market.

"I think society has forgotten how to take care of its people," says Hernandez.

Sipping tea around a table in downtown Eureka's historic Sarah Carson House, Vassel and Hernandez are joined by David Cobb and Kristen Crooks, advancement manager and project manager, respectively, for Dishgamu Humboldt. Crooks wears a baseball cap stating, "You Are On Native Land." They are surrounded by long velvet window drapes and hardwood floors, and a staircase down the hall has a

curved wooden banister—relatively lavish styling for what will be affordable housing. Once a house catering to Airbnb tourists, then an end-of-life care center during the Covid quarantine, and now an asset of the land trust, the Sarah Carson House, more than 160 years old, will soon board unhoused youths while they find their footing. During a tour, Cobb gets excited over the prospect of a child or young adult leaving a precarious situation to live in not only a safe space but one with such fanciful, Victorian excess.

In late 2022, Dishgamu Humboldt received a \$14 million grant from the State of California to create this transitional housing, affording the organization the funds to acquire the Sarah Carson House plus another, nonhistoric Victorian home and a commercial office building in downtown Eureka, a stone's throw from the bridge to Tuluwat Island. Tentatively named the Jaroujiji Youth Housing Project, the endeavor is at the heart of the trust's current plans.

Cobb first met Vassel before the pandemic while campaigning for the city's return of Tuluwat Island to the Wiyot Tribe and organizing rallies to save the sacred site Tsakiyuwit, on Bear River Ridge south of Eureka, from a wind farm developer. Then, during 2020's Covid-related supply shortages, the two were putting together personal protective equipment packages to distribute to the community when Vassel had an idea. "She said, 'David, we keep showing up for each other in reaction to things,'" Cobb recalls. "What would it look like if we imagined proactively, you know, doing something?" The pair began researching how a tribally led land trust could serve the community.

The Sarah Carson House is a modest manor painted baby blue and pastel pink and encircled by a white picket fence and pristinely manicured garden of flowers, berries, and rosebushes. Each of the five fully furnished bedrooms has a gilded placard showing a name like Bohemian Bliss. Because of historic building codes, the house will have minimal remodeling done. It's a small and locally loved fixture of Eureka history, one redolent of westward Anglo expansion, booming timber extraction, and gold rush mania. But outside its picket fence, the land and people tell a different story.

The United States settler-colonial project's centuries of war, massacres, and military and settler encroachments resulted in countless land grabs that left tribes

with less than 2 percent of their historical lands within the contiguous United States. Since then, tribal nations have campaigned to recover their ancestral territories. But reversing the theft of Indian land is no easy feat.

After the 1860 massacre, Tuluwat Island operated as a dry dock and a ship-repair site for nearly 120 years. Throughout that time, the Wiyot Tribe was effectively landless. Tribal members temporarily lived on reservations in Klamath, to the north, until a church group purchased 20 acres south of Eureka for some remaining homeless Wiyot people in the early 1900s, creating what is now known as the Old Reservation. The Wiyot village on Tuluwat fell into disrepair, and toxic chemicals from the dry dock bled into the soil. Hunks of metal littered the ground. In 1961, the federal government terminated the Wiyot tribal status, ending any recognizable tribal sovereignty and protection in the eyes of the U.S. government, but the tribe regained its federal recognition in 1981 after filing a suit for unlawful termination. Then, in 2000, the tribe bought 1.5 acres of the contaminated site on the island and began cleaning them up itself.

Recovering land doesn't just happen. Although it's not unheard of for generous individuals or families to donate or cheaply sell their properties back to tribal nations, most of the time, tribes must exhaustively negotiate, campaign, or lobby for the return of their lands. Often, it is a decades-long, even centuries-long, endeavor. Tribal land acquisitions accelerated throughout Indian Country after the passage of 1988's Indian Gaming Regulatory Act, which allowed tribes to erect casinos on reservation territory and enjoy a new stream of revenue to fund their governmental services. But the Wiyot Tribe has no casino and funds its government largely through grants. Members of the tribe have spent decades extending their hands, showing Eureka residents good faith and winning them over to achieve the tribe's goals. "There's lots of people that came out and helped," says Crooks. "And those people became our strong allies," adds Hernandez.

Vassel and Hernandez say they were taken under the wing of former tribal chairwoman Cheryl Seidner, who put on art sales and musicals to raise over \$100,000 and purchase the initial 1.5 acres on the >



The historic Sarah Carson House (above) is one of three underused buildings in Eureka that will be

turned into transitional shelter as part of the land trust's initial Jaroujiji Youth Housing Project.



island. “The whole community participated in getting the money for us because they bought our T-shirts,” says Vassel. “Maybe they bought a watch, maybe they showed up at a concert, or maybe you’re an artist and you donated a piece of art, but a lot of people in this community helped raise that money by participating in some way.” As public support grew, the tribe led the cleanup of the property and held annual community candlelit vigils to help heal the long-ignored and shame-filled history between the city and the Wiyot people.

In 2004, Eureka deeded the Wiyot Tribe 40 acres surrounding the 1.5-acre island lot, the first land returned voluntarily by a U.S. city to a tribe, instead of via litigation, lawsuit, or court order. Meanwhile, the Wiyot Tribe’s ecological restoration continued. In 2013, the tribe received a Superfund grant from the Environmental Protection Agency, which agreed to work with the tribe to remediate the soil and restore the village site, as well as hire cultural monitors to supervise the cleanup.

Finally, in 2019, the city returned over 200 acres on Tuluwat to the Wiyot Tribe.

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The commercial office building that’s part of the Jaroujiji project has a funky mansard roof with large wooden shingles, an obvious sign of 1970s construction. The road in front of it is an on-ramp, with cars driving to and from the bay bridge that crosses Tuluwat Island. Down the street, a woman set up shop next to a gas station,

selling flowers under a canopy tent, while some city residents are walking the street, looking for shelter from the rain.

Remodeling of this and the two other buildings is on hold until likely this fall as Dishgamu Humboldt works with Uxo Architects, a worker-owned architecture and design firm, to draw up plans for 39 bedroom units across the sites, accompanied by plenty of green space and common areas for the residents, as well as offices for behavioral health practitioners. Replacing a parking lot, a Native medicinal and food garden will bond the commercial building and the third building, the non-historic Victorian.

The Victorian is also being remodeled to provide housing. Rather than focusing on new construction, the Jaroujiji project is much more about repurposing older buildings and outfitting them with upgraded appliances and heating-and-cooling systems.

“One of our major philosophies is not cutting down or getting rid of green space in order to develop land when there’s tons of properties right here in already developed land that need love,” Vassel tells me. “Some of them, like the [commercial building]—that’s an old business building that’s got no life right now, and there’s a lot of them around that are empty.” The only new construction planned is for two small ADUs, one behind each Victorian.

“There’s this idea of returning love to unloved spaces,” says Alice Armstrong, an architect at Uxo, over a video call in early February. “We think it’s really important that a project like this avoids maybe some >

“I think society has forgotten how to take care of its people.”

TED HERNANDEZ, WIYOT TRIBE CHAIR



Kristen Crooks, program manager at Dishgamu Humboldt, stands in the garden of the Sarah Carson House (left). The garden will serve as a space for youths to connect with nature—a respite from the city’s sea of parking lots with minimal greenery.

Dishgamu Humboldt’s advancement manager, David Cobb, and Crooks survey a richly decorated bedroom in the Sarah Carson House (above) that will provide a home for youths needing shelter.







Dishgamu Humboldt will also convert an empty commercial building (above) in Eureka by the

bridge to Tuluwat Island and another Victorian in the city (below left), in addition to the Sarah

Carson House (below right). Uxo Architects is working with the land trust on sustainable

designs to adapt the structures into housing that will foster a sense of community.

pitfalls of leaning toward more carceral environments or more controlling environments. We would really like to counter that kind of status quo that we've seen in some other projects."

The units will accommodate children ages 15 through 17, as well as young adults ages 18 to 25, many of whom need more life skills and are just getting out on their own. (By law, these age groups must be separated, so their units will not intermingle.) As Vassel notes, there are extended state foster care programs for

those aging out of the system at 18 and assistance to get them an apartment, but the waiting lists are usually long. Others may not have a job or adequate income to rent an apartment. A student living in a car while taking classes at the nearby College of the Redwoods could need something safer, while another may not want to go to a different city for services. A Jaroujiji case manager will work with each youth to create an individualized plan that meets specific wellness and cultural goals and needs by assisting with

things like housing or making a job-hunt plan, which could help them stay integrated with their community.

"If you go anywhere around town, you can see there's a need in our community," says Vassel. "We know that in our county, there's no real services for children who have had a lot of trauma in their life and end up in the foster care system or even with extended family."

Most Wiyot youth, she says, who require in-depth mental or behavioral healthcare and temporary housing services have to



go to cities hundreds of miles away, like Santa Rosa or San Francisco. "To get these younger generations interested, we have plenty of [Wiyot tribal] departments that can take them in as interns so they can learn a skill and then maybe they'll get interested and say, 'Hey, I like being a tribal preservation officer. I'm going to go to school for this. I'm going to go to college,'" says Hernandez.

Vassel and her colleagues say that the Jaroujiji project is about returning care and love to the area and its people. It's part

responsibly within the limits of the land?" are guiding how Dishgamu Humboldt leaders articulate their vision. Animals and the rest of the natural environment are stakeholders in their projects, so what does it mean to steward the land in a considerate way for all of them? All-electric appliances, on-site solar energy generation, and other sustainable technologies are all being considered for Jaroujiji and potential future projects. Uxo and Dishgamu Humboldt also designed a conceptual model for a six-story, mass timber, multifamily

end up mired in a lot of extractive practices along their supply chains."

While the land trust is busy with the youth housing project, and Tuluwat Island rests gently in Wiyot care, the tribe has been working on returning another Wiyot village site to its stewardship: a wooded area along the coast in Samoa, the peninsula across the bay from Eureka. With its access to the beachfront, the space will help the Wiyot gather food from the bay. Recovering land doesn't end, and neither does reclaiming culture.



After identifying a desire for higher-density housing in local community engagement sessions, Uxo Architects and Dishgamu Humboldt designed mass timber, multifamily affordable buildings (right) as a thought experiment for what the future of Eureka could look like.



of the Wiyot Tribe's mission as an environmental and social steward of the region, and it is not acting alone.

Uxo Architects began working with Dishgamu Humboldt in 2021, assisting with the trust's state grant application for the youth housing project and other grants and conducting research on sustainable building materials for prospective affordable-housing projects in Eureka. The land trust and architects seek to engage with the Wiyot Tribe's cultural department to see how tribal values and culture could map onto architectural plans. Questions like "How does this project work

affordable-housing project in Eureka that could use reclaimed forest products for its structure at some point in the future.

"We're still parsing those connections and opportunities to push this idea of green construction further than the industry is seeing it right now, and part of that has to do with material choices, supply chains, using local materials wherever possible," says Ashton Hamm, founder and architect at Uxo. "Site-planning strategies are a big part of that in terms of maximizing natural ventilation, natural daylight—passive strategies rather than really technology-centric strategies that tend to

Looking out at Tuluwat Island from Eureka, Vassel and Hernandez recall a former owner of the island who was trying to build a ranch on it, boating cows over, even though there would be no source of drinking water and ocean tides sometimes submerge most of the island. The ranch didn't work out, but it did start an erosion process on the island's northern end. "It's the natural world—it has a balance to it," says Vassel. Hernandez agreed. From where they stood, the site of the annual candlelit vigil for those lost in the 1860 Wiyot massacre, they could see a rainbow had formed. ■

RENDERINGS: COURTESY UXO ARCHITECTS