

What is a Kiva

Early archeologists concentrated on recovering artifacts and exposing the architecture at Anasazi sites. As they worked, they encountered circular chambers partially buried within the structures along with some large, free-standing stone circles near major pueblos.

Determining what these circular chambers were and how they were used was hampered by the fact that most excavators simply disposed of the refuse found within. Fortunately, a handful of excavators were accompanied by Hopi workers who carried with them accumulated cultural knowledge. When asked, the Hopi said something on the order of “we call them kivas and we hold ceremonies in them.” The name, “kiva,” stuck as did the mistaken belief that they were exclusively ceremonial chambers. Fortunately, modern excavations have told us a good deal more about how kivas were used.

Kivas as Family Rooms

Modern excavators have been surprised to find the remnants of daily living in many kivas. Broken ceramics, discarded stone tools, animal bones, plant stalks, and pollen top the list. All have been found on the floor rather than in the fill above. This suggests that these items were tossed aside in the course of daily living rather than deposited after the kiva was abandoned. In addition, careful excavations also identified socket holes in the floor where looms were installed.

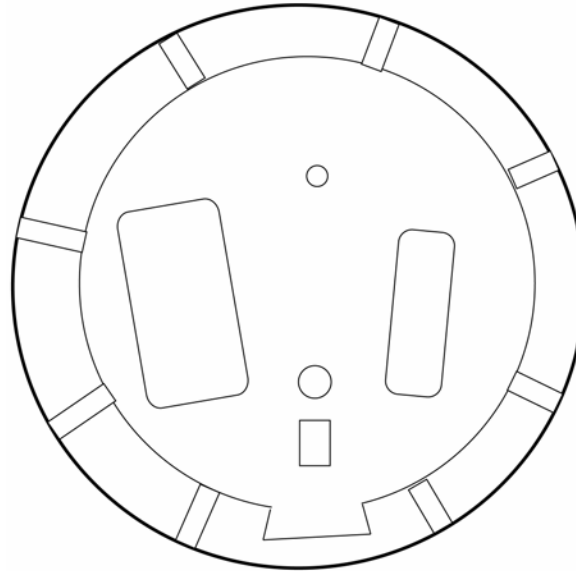
What does this tell us? It tells us that kivas were more than ceremonial centers. Of course ceremonies were conducted in the kivas, but kivas also doubled as work areas and social centers. In other words, kivas were akin to modern family rooms. They were cleaned for special events and used for mundane, daily activities the rest of the time.

You may wonder why occupants chose to conduct their daily activities in the semi subterranean chambers. The answer can be found in the prevailing climate of the southwest; viz., bitterly cold in winter and scorching hot in the summer. The natural insulation provided by layers of earth protected occupants from temperature extremes and created spaces where routine activities could be carried out in relative comfort. Interestingly, modern studies indicate that a kiva could be heated with only 40% of the energy required to heat a comparably sized above ground room.

Key Features

Individual kivas vary somewhat in size and shape, but several elements appear common.

- Features: bench, entrance, fire box, floor drums, air vent and screen, niches



- Differences: shape (circular, key hole, square); 4, 6, 8 pilasters (sometimes 10); High pilaster/low pilaster

Types

We aren't sure how the ancient occupants classified kivas, but archeologists recognize three types. Family kivas are the smallest. They are generally less than 10 yards in diameter and are situated adjacent to a single room block. Clan kivas are intermediate in size, roughly 10 to 20 yards in diameter, and positioned near two or more room suites. Finally, great kivas are over 20 yards in diameter and are generally located away from room suites. Some were located in central plazas while others were completely outside the structure.

Great Kivas and Colonies

Archeologists have logged roughly 200 Chacoan outliers, all of which have great kivas. Remarkably, they have also recorded another 200, or so, isolated great kivas without associated villages.

This is a peculiar finding and has yet to be fully explained. I am fond of Cynthia Irwin-Williams' speculation. She believed that building a great kiva was the first step in colonizing an area. If the local residents joined in the ceremonies, a great house would be built to house the Chacoan colonists. If the local residents shunned the new residents, the Chacoans would abandon the kiva and move on.