The Bella Bella Big House
Heart of our Culture
Stepping up to strengthen our Identity
Heiltsuk Big Houses

Big Houses were the physical, social, ceremonial, political and spiritual centres of our universe for thousands of years. During the winter ceremonies the house is a sacred box of treasures that radiates the songs, dances and history of the family. It was the place where stories and traditional customs were passed on. During non-ceremonial times the Heiltsuk house stored provisions, provided warmth and shelter from the elements.

History

Each house has a nuyum, which translates as 'story', and resident families identify with a particular oral narrative. Members of each household recite their specific nuyum to acknowledge hereditary chiefs, lesser chiefs and noble family members and their influence on social, political and economical issues. Each nuyum cites ancestral origins to specific creations, hereditary names, ceremonial privileges, rights and title to resource sites.
A Big House at our modern village site in Bella Bella has only existed in our dreams. Bella Bella was established in the late 1890s’ and early 1900s’. As a survival strategy Heiltsuk Chiefs choose to amalgamate into one village over time they adapted and adopted western style houses. Our ceremonial, social and political customs and practises within the Big House were outlawed. Under the colonial pressure our leadership also adapted our social practises.

As we continue to decolonize we are going back to the customs and traditions that sustained the Heiltsuk people for millennia. The construction of the Big House will be a milestone for us on many levels. It is the no. 1 community priority of current Heiltsuk leadership, it is an important symbol and structure validating that we have come through one of the darkest moments in our history.

To make this dream a reality, past generations of Heiltsuk initiated the first fundraising campaigns over 25 years ago and began to design the building. The work we are undertaking today is simply the final step in this work. It is the culmination of their foresight and dedication to create a home for our spirits, our regalia and our teaching, a ceremonial space, that allows us to pass down our stories, protocols and gvi’ila’s-laws as we carry out our potlatches and feasts – a pulsing heart of our culture. This house will tell the stories of our four families for generations to come.
**The Building**

Our Big House will have the capacity to seat 600 people and will be built in our traditional style. To make it comply with all safety and sanitary regulations additional measures will be taken that are expensive, but necessary. The blueprints for the building are completed and the project is ready to be put out for tender with an estimated overall budget of $2M.
The substantial costs accrue not just from the size of the building, but also from the cost of contractors, materials and resources associated with building a Big House that must meet all government standards.
Benefits

The raising of a Heiltsuk Big House in Bella Bella is a critical step to strengthen our social and cultural life. It will empower us to bring the cultural teaching we do out on the land back into our community. It will support self esteem of young people learning and practising cultural and ancestral laws.

Currently potlatches and feasts occur in the Bella Bella multi-purpose community hall. The new Big House will once again allow us to practise our customs in a ceremonial house. It will help us to return the culture and the laws around Big House protocols and gvi’las back to our nation, and strengthen them as a central part of daily life and economy.

The construction of the Big House will help building capacity and employment in our community. Much of the building will be constructed by our local workforce and carvers while the wood will be milled in our local sawmill. We believe that this project is essential to the strength and vitality of the Heiltsuk Nation, and we are committed to making it work.

Cedar from our territory
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**Call for Support**

We are asking for funding support to help fulfill our dream building the Big House. Your support will strengthen our community now and the future generations. It will improve the quality of life, validate, give hope, a strong sense of identity, purpose and meaning through affirming who we are as Heiltsuk people.

The Heiltsuk Hemas (Hereditary Chiefs) and the Heiltsuk Tribal Council are proud to support Qatuwas 2014.

As our elders teach us: Giving is receiving.
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