



ARCADIA

Shaping Country
Cultural engagement in
Australia's built environment

Research report by Arcadia Landscape Architecture

Acknowledgement of Country


We recognise the First Nations People of Australia and celebrate their continuing cultural practice and Connection to Country. We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we live and work, and pay our respect to Elders past, present and emerging.

We thank in particular the Indigenous Knowledge Holders involved in the creation of this report and its featured projects. We recognise the spatial expertise held by First Nations people and the long-standing practice of Indigenous land management, science and architecture. We acknowledge the role that the built environment holds in shaping Country and our responsibility to improve, unlearn and repair.

We are proud that we live in the country with the world's oldest continuous living cultures, and we commit to playing our part as allies to First Nations people across Australia.

Always was, always will be.





“Until the processes we use to design our built environments are adapted to include community, culture and Country,” says renowned Budawang/Yuin spatial designer Dr Danièle Hromek, “colonisation of our spaces will continue.”

Executive Summary

For years, the built environment has been used as a tool for colonisation – to displace First Peoples, assimilate Western identities and stake claim to land. Recent years have seen a marked shift in the industry’s awareness, acknowledgement and action towards reconciling our work with its context. But at some level we have struggled to move past what leading historian Mark McKenna calls “ornamental recognition of Indigenous Australians.”

What needs to be done on a cultural and industrial level before that adaptation is achieved? And how exactly do we do it? This is what this report by leading landscape architecture and urban design practice Arcadia seeks to examine and shift. Working closely with Dr Hromek, as well as Yuin woman and landscape architect Kaylie Salvatori, we have sought to present:

- / The value of an Indigenous-led and Country-centred approach to design
 - / How we can increase collaboration with First Nations Knowledge Holders on individual projects
 - / The importance of Indigenous representation within the industry as a whole
 - / And a responsibility to ensure ongoing economic engagement with First Nations communities.
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This is not an optional evolution

Recent changes to legislation in the NSW Government’s Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979 (EP&A Act) dictate that Aboriginal heritage must be protected and maintained by design professionals. This has resulted in changes to the Design Guide for Schools and a new guide yet to be released for the Healthcare sector which address the need for Indigenous-led design.

“At the Australian Institute of Architects’ 2019 National Architecture Conference,” says Dyrirbal gumbilbara bama architect and academic Carroll Go-Sam, “there was a call for architecture to reconfigure its relationship with Indigenous knowledge, not only by necessity but also as a means of enriching the built environment. Indigeneity is now firmly on the agenda.”

As active curators of space, it is our responsibility to ensure we understand our canvas. The best way to do this is by collaborating with First Peoples themselves, throughout and beyond the lifecycle of a project. To look beyond just the recent history of a site, or its current uses, and to uncover and include its true essence in our work. We hope that this report will extend beyond our corner, and spark conversations in all sectors, roles and responsibilities within the built environment.

“The field of landscape architecture is something of a front-runner in terms of pre-reconciliatory progress, as there is synergy between our design philosophies and the way First Peoples think about and respond to the land. In our sector, there is no hiding behind walls in terms of our connection to Country when each and every element of our designs interacts with a site that was, and always will be, Aboriginal land.”

**Alex Longley,
Director at Arcadia**

“If we are truly going to start designing for this place, we need to start including the longer narratives of this place – the narratives that go back to before time can be measured – in the design of the place. To me, this means ensuring Country is lead architect and First Peoples are narrators and interpreters for all projects – not just those with perceived Indigenous values or relevance.”

Dr Danièle Hromek

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“Country has a relational methodology, by which I mean that we, people, are related to all things through Country, including flora, fauna, earth, rocks, winds, elements – from the most diminutive microbe to the amorphous ocean. This methodology of relationships keeps everything in balance, as no single entity is privileged above another. This includes humans. The methodology of Country can – and, I believe, must – be incorporated into the methodology of built environment design.”

Dr Danièle Hromek

A note on language

Our approach

We’ve approached this report by examining our relationship to all members of the built environment – First Nations people, fauna and flora, clients, local communities, the wider industry and the concept of Country itself. This relational approach allows us to explore the true barriers in our engagement with each of these factors, and how we can form deeper, more meaningful bonds and solutions that go both ways.

First Nations People

Arcadia’s preferred terminology is First Nations as it conveys the diversity of cultures found across the territory we now know as Australia. In addition, the choice of First Nations supports Indigenous sovereignty, acknowledging the complex systems of governance that are and were in place prior to colonisation.

British invasion, colonisation

Arcadia emphatically rejects the softening of language when referring to British invasion and processes of colonisation. It is a trend for these processes to be referred to as “arrival” and “settlement”, however the softening of language perpetuates myths of terra nullius and denies First Nations people their history and suffering endured.

What is Country?

Palyku woman Ambelin Kwaymullina says that “for Aboriginal peoples, Country is much more than a place. Rock, tree, river, hill, animal, human – all were formed of the same substance by the Ancestors who continue to live in land, water, sky. Country is filled with relations speaking language and following Law, no matter whether the shape of that relation is human, rock, crow, wattle. Country is loved, needed, and cared for, and Country loves, needs, and cares for her peoples in turn. Country is family, culture, identity. Country is self.”

Collaboration, not consultation

When we talk about cultural engagement, we are not speaking of consultation, or simply seeking permission from First Peoples to do things as planned. We are advocating for deep collaboration, relationship and co-design to great better outcomes for projects, communities, our sense of identity, and Australia’s path of reparations.

Not yet reconciliation

Unfortunately, Australia hasn’t yet reached a point where reconciliation feels celebratory, although we can celebrate progress. “There can be no reconciliation without justice,” said Gungalidda Elder Wadjularbinna Nullyarimma. “When all of these issues are dealt with, reconciliation will happen automatically.”

Custodianship, not ownership

Ownership is a Western ideal used to strengthen colonial pursuits. We’ll talk instead about custodianship – a responsibility to care for Country, and to enable First Peoples to care for their land. We will also move away from talking about ‘our’ First Peoples or ‘our’ land as though these belong to ‘us.’

01. Engaging with Knowledge Holders

First Peoples originated from Country and are therefore **essential interpreters** to truly knowing a place.

Dr Danièle Hromek

With an eons-old understanding of Australia's landscape, fauna and flora, and an ongoing care for and relationship with the spaces we work in, First Nations people are an essential part of the design team.

Anyone already amplifying Indigenous voices in the built environment would know that co-designing spaces with local Knowledge Holders makes for better outcomes on all levels:

- / Indigenous-led designs are richer in meaning and narrative
- / Spaces are more sustainable on an environmental level
- / Materials chosen are longer-lasting and more climate-resilient
- / Designs become far more relevant to communities and inclusive towards end users
- / Projects become more successful economically
- / Cultural awareness across the industry improves
- / Conflicts are fewer and further between; and
- / Projects also become inherently unique, as they are based on a localised story and vision of the First Nations people in that area.

But while its benefits are irrefutable, instigating cultural collaboration is a new concept for many professionals, partly because of access to relationships and resources, and partly because of a lack of confidence in how to go about it.





What gets in the way?

Representation of First Nations people in the built environment is incredibly low. In fact, there are fewer than 30 First Nations professionals practicing in the whole of Australia. There are initiatives working to rectify this balance, such as Arcadia's Indigenous Scholarship for Landscape Architecture and the Droga Indigenous Architecture Scholarship at UTS, but more needs to be done across the entire industry to shift the scales.

"I cannot speak for all Indigenous people," said Arcadia's Indigenous Strategist Kaylie Salvatori – one of the few First Nations women practicing Landscape Architecture in NSW. "There is a lot of pressure on me to have all the answers or know all the intricacies of my culture. But even I am still learning. We need more First Nations people on design teams not only so that they can represent the interests of more Indigenous groups, but also so they can forge trusted relationships with local communities."

"Time is everyone's main issue," says Dr Hromek. "When an industry decides that 3% of the population now needs to be engaged and included in their work after 300 years of being ignored, you can expect to encounter high demand for very few Knowledge Holders." We need to balance demand for expertise with respect for First People's energy, availability and quality of life, as well as payment for any and all contributions of intellectual property and time.

Knowledge-sharing practices in First Nations communities aren't limited to the formalised Powerpoint presentation of Western norms. And when it comes to IP as valuable as that of First Peoples, it's even more imperative to ensure that it's being protected and used in the way its Knowledge Holders would like. In her work on engaging with Country, Dr Hromek makes use of what she calls a 'visual verbal essay' to communicate Indigenous IP verbally with a project's stakeholders – not only to ensure that stories are protected, but to communicate the importance of unlearning Western knowledge-sharing practices as the 'only' way.

How to engage

“Similar legislative changes to those in the EP&A Act are likely to impact all states and territories in some way in the future,” says Dr Danièle Hromek, “meaning that everyone working in the built environment needs to develop the right vocabulary and relationships to connect with First Peoples and Country.”

It is up to each individual within their corner of the built environment to start forging their own connections. The following steps are a starting point in terms of how to begin engaging:

1. Create relationships

Reach out to First Nations Knowledge Holders, spatial designers, Elders and community members in the local project area, and listen closely to their interpretation of the project, the site and their preferences. Relationships can be built via community organisations/bodies, personal relationships, local First Nations businesses and land councils. Cultural engagement doesn't necessarily call for an entire community gathering in one room, but rather developing connections with a few Knowledge Holders who can provide their specific insight and help carry other information back and forth with their community. Acknowledge the unseen cultural voices too – there is almost always someone willing to be involved, even if they are not a pre-eminent voice in their community.

2. Conduct 'walkshops'

When it comes to the collaboration process itself, we believe that walking on Country with First Nations people should become an embedded research practice when a new site is chosen. At Arcadia, we call these early co-design meetings 'walkshops' and they're important not just in terms of hearing the stories and history of an area from First Nations people themselves, but to experience that land's significance through all senses and get to know Country up close. Build whatever your version of this is into all processes, and come back to it throughout the project.

3. Invite the wider team in

What we've found is that people in the industry generally want to do the right thing but they don't get to hear these discussions up close or participate in this process of unlearning and listening. Share what you learn with the entire project team. Include clients in that initial workshop or meetings. Get civil engineers and the finance team listening in. By ensuring everyone overhears the conversation in some way, we will see change ripple through the industry.

4. Create ongoing opportunities

Indigenous contribution can be sewn into the fabric of a project from all angles. Find organisations, artists and community groups to work with on design elements, public art, writing and marketing, and hire First Nations people as ongoing custodians of the site. The design process should seek to provide space for First Peoples to actually practice culture, and provide community benefit – not just inspire the architectural design.

5. Recognise economic responsibility

Engagement needs to be a reciprocal conversation, not just the 'use' of Knowledge Holders for industry gain. “If we can first acknowledge that land has been stolen, we're able to see how the people it was stolen from cannot make a living off that theft,” says Dr Hromek. “What if the built environment could acknowledge that theft by not only working with Country, but addressing reconciliation through capitalist means – by paying First Nations people to help shape and care for their land, making arrangements for co-care or co-ownership, or even handbacks.”

02. Engaging with Country

We need to listen to the land itself, **letting Country tell its story** through landscape, flora, changes in vegetation and wildlife.

Kaylie Salvatori

Nature holds increasing value in the built environment.

Frank Lloyd Wright himself once mused that “the land is the simplest form of architecture.” But Indigenous design goes further to see Country as a living spirit to be in relationship with, not an inanimate object to be moulded or designed around.

“By creating and supporting beautiful environments that people can cherish and make memories in” says Kaylie Salvatori, “we help to engender not just connection to nature but that deeper care about what happens to the earth – not just this building.”

With guidance from First Nations people, professionals can explore this much broader opportunity posed by cultural engagement: to connect end users – both Indigenous and non-Indigenous – with Country and its plants, Songlines and role in community. “The built environment should be excited by the potential of creating spaces that better close the loop between end users and how they’re experiencing the land,” says Arcadia’s director Alex Longley. “Is that not the essence of design? What is the point if you’re not connecting people to the place anyway?”

Healing the land

We cannot talk about engaging with Country without examining sustainability. In the Department of Education and Training’s Guide for Tertiary Educators on Indigenous Knowledge in the Built Environment, Elder April Bright of the MakMak people and Marranunggu language group in Northern Territory is quoted as saying “it is part of our responsibility [to be] looking after our country. If you don’t look after country, country won’t look after you.” We’ve seen a marked improvement in environmental awareness and care in Australia’s built environment. But Western sustainability targets and notions of what’s ‘eco-friendly’ don’t go as far as Indigenous knowledge in terms of knowing what an environment actually needs. The industry would benefit deeply from an Indigenous approach to climate-resilient design. “This isn’t just about leaving a smaller footprint,” says Dr Hromek. “We need to be asking: How can we live here forever? And then we need to be willing to listen to the answer.”

“We were once tasked with designing a new landscape area for a school. There was a stand of Casuarina trees on-site that we weren’t sure how to integrate them into the new design and removal was considered. But during a workshop on Country with a local Knowledge Holder, he shared that areas around Casuarina trees have been purposefully used as play areas for Indigenous communities for centuries. Their fallen needles deter snakes, providing additional protection for the children. Their significance was undeniable and the Casuarinas became a focal point of the design from there on out.

If we are not in close collaboration with Knowledge Holders during every design, we do not get to uncover this deeper or hidden meaning, and may end up removing or remoulding parts of the landscape that have significance to the local community.”

Michael Barnett, Director at Arcadia

“Instead of maintaining a lawn with machinery and chemicals, why not consider inviting cockatoos in to weed the onion grass,” says Dr Hromek.

Botanist Gregory Moore from the University of Melbourne noted in a recent paper that “a flock of about 50 birds can consume 20,000 plants in a couple of hours. This significantly reduces the weed level and may make expensive herbicide use unnecessary. So if you have a large amount of onion grass on your property and are regularly visited by sulphur-crested cockatoos, it would be wise to let them do their weeding first.”

News to Western science, perhaps, but part of a longstanding relationship with Country for First Nations people. The built environment often prides itself on ‘firsts’ – standout projects with innovative use of materials, plants and spaces. But often what the industry deems as innovative is something that First Nations communities have been utilising for millennia.

“Developed intergenerationally and communally over many generations of Indigenous peoples, the Country-centred design methodology is ‘owned’ by Indigenous peoples, and embodied through Indigenous designers. It positions Country as the guide for design processes...and understands the connections and kinships between all that share space. The methodology is interpreted differently dependent on the spatial practitioner and their individual relationships to Country, culture and community.”

Dr Danièle Hromek.

Steps for Engaging with Country

1. Spend time on Country:

“Knowing that Country communicates what it needs to keep the land, water and air healthy means that we, as humans, need to ensure we are listening to those communications,” says Dr Hromek. “A connection to Country comes through the development of a relationship with Country and, like all relationships, it can be strengthened through quality time spent together.”

2. Go beyond ‘science’:

The world’s oldest living culture comes with a lot of tried and tested practices, particularly when it comes to caring for the land – from fire mitigation strategies through to examining how humans can co-exist with local wildlife, and how nature itself can take on an active role in the project team. Widening our set of tools and solutions to take heed of ancient successes is powerful.

3. Give First Peoples custodianship:

Processes of colonisation – including forced displacement, environmental degradation and economic upheaval – have meant that many First Nations people are no longer living on or able to care for their sacred lands. Creating ongoing roles for First Nations people in caretaking, public art, tourism and more is significant in terms of economically supporting communities, as well as giving First Nations people authority over how a space is cared for or evolved.

4. Design spaces for Aboriginal people to ‘be Aboriginal’:

There is an opportunity to set aside space in each project for First Nations people to practice and pass on their understanding of Country and how to care for the land “Everyone else has their churches and places to practice religion or culture,” says Dr Hromek, “but where do Aboriginal people go to teach our young people, share culture, do cultural practice, to rest outside of view of colonisers? A space needs to be designed into every landscape with local mobs, and then handed over to the local mob to decide how it is run, accessed and cared for.”

5. Shift from human-centred to Country-centred design:

The concept of ‘human-centred design’ has recently risen to the top of the agenda, bringing with it many improvements to the usability of spaces. But HCD has its limitations. “If people and their needs are at the ‘centre’ of design considerations, then the landscape and nature are reduced to second order priorities,” warns the Government Architect NSW. “If design and planning processes considered natural systems that include people, animals, resources and plants equally – similar to an Aboriginal world view – this could make a significant contribution to a more sustainable future world.”

Feature project: St Leonards Health Organisation Relocation (SHOR)

Client:

Property NSW

Builder:

Multiplex

Indigenous Nation:

Gaimariagal/Guringai

Location:

Cammeraygal Country
(St Leonards, NSW)

Key collaborators:

BVN, DDA, Nicole Monks

1 Reserve Road is home to the St Leonards Health Organisation Relocation (SHOR), where NSW Ministry of Health staff come to work and connect. The building sits on Cammeraygal Country where the Guringai clan once lived – known for their strong connection to the land, and their use of elements such as water, fire and vegetation as part of the healing process.

Arcadia was selected to shape the new SHOR public domain, increasing amenity and useable open space for diverse users to commute, collaborate or meet socially, celebrating a legacy of human connection and healing onsite. Connection to Cammeraygal Country forms the cornerstone of the design, with Indigenous history and contemporary First Nations culture integrated to communicate the longer narrative and give people the opportunity to reflect while spending time there.

Cultural engagement

Arcadia conducted half a dozen meetings with First Nations people on the design committee throughout development. Planting formed a significant part of our consultation, with nature itself overlaying a sense of the site's Indigenous relevance. Kaurareg/Meriam man and BVN architect Kevin O'Brien was deeply involved in this process, as well as BVN architect Abbey Galvin – now head of NSW Architects and core contributor to the GANSW's Connection to Country policy. We also worked with Indigenous artist Nicole Monks to centre the First Nations narrative in artwork around the site.

Outcomes

To reflect the importance of yarning and congregating in Indigenous culture, Arcadia integrated a series of meeting rooms, nooks and places of respite for people to connect throughout the public domain. These include a timber deck area, Corian-clad seating, and raw sandstone nooks around a larger turf space – abundant space for movement and interaction.





Feature project: St Leonards Health Organisation Relocation (SHOR)

An Indigenous planting strategy recognises the Blue Gum High Forest as the original plant community on the land and provides a window into the landscape the Gurinai people would have originally experienced here. The landscape supports native fauna habitat and acknowledges the neighbouring endemic plant communities – distinctive of the region, and not found anywhere else in Australia.

Public artwork by Indigenous artist Nicole Monks seeks to maintain heritage while implementing contemporary ideas, with a focus on bringing people together and creating wellbeing. The artwork includes a shade canopy, message stick sculpture, Corian laser cutting design, sandstone meeting circle design and text on the underside of the building canopy.



**“NGARAWINGARAWAWIYA GULYANGARINGARA BANGAWAWIYA
MAGURANGARA WURRALDARA”**

Translation: Teaching the children how to make fish slow.

Materials throughout the site continue a First Nations narrative, with seating made from locally-sourced sandstone and Turpentine Ironbark timber. Corian detail was innovatively shaped to reflect the shoreline of the nearby Sydney Harbour, and text depicting the Indigenous translation of what would usually occur at this place on the foreshore.



03. Engaging with Industry

Consultation can produce an adversarial environment, whereas collaboration is about **healthy partnerships and cross-cultural learning.**

Kaylie Salvatori

The Government Architect NSW recently posed their strategy for Better Placed design. In this vision for more connected, successful place-making in Australia, they define 'good design' as one that "generates ongoing value for people and communities and minimises costs over time. Creating shared value of place in the built environment raises standards and quality of life for users, as well as adding return on investment for industry."

The Government Architect NSW recently posed their strategy for Better Placed design. In this vision for more connected, successful place-making in Australia, they define 'good design' as one that "generates ongoing value for people and communities and minimises costs over time. Creating shared value of place in the built environment raises standards and quality of life for users, as well as adding return on investment for industry."

Over the past few decades we've proven that by involving Knowledge Holders from the outset, we're able to create better performing, more meaningful spaces and reduce any conflicts or delays. But cultural engagement also allows us to meet the GANSW's more specific aspirations, such as 'Better look and feel: What is Australia's 'aesthetic' and do we have the opportunity to work alongside First Peoples to create truly engaging, inviting and attractive spaces unlike anywhere else on the planet? In collaboration with Knowledge Holders, artists and designers, can we integrate the ancient and contemporary stories and creativity of First Peoples – not just as an 'ornamental' afterthought?

Culture impacts commercial outcomes

As an industry it our responsibility to demystify the opportunity, process and inevitability of cultural engagement for stakeholders, clients and partners. We need to communicate and advocate for how First Nations involvement has proven to increase commercial viability and productivity of space, and bring everyone onto the same page:

Engagement is not a hurdle. In fact, it's a catalyst for better projects. Engagement, particularly at early stages, can actually prevent conflict and delays. The intricate expertise of local Knowledge Holders and Cultural Leaders, combined with the industry's understanding of placemaking, is what can elevate projects to truly award-winning levels.

We do have time. There's often a fear from clients and partners that cultural engagement will delay a project, but from experience, a collaborative approach lowers risk and makes projects quicker, time and time again.

It's also not just ticking a box. There are many First Nations people who want to share their knowledge and see projects that respect Country.

We don't have to solve everything at once. It's about opening the conversation. We've got years to refine the solution, particularly if we start the process of engagement early. In some projects, we have 10 years before the site truly comes to life, which is ample time to navigate conversations and keep coming back to new ideas.

Intentions matter. There's a fear of not going about cultural engagement the 'right' way, which is not unfounded. But starting to understand the process and trusting that your intentions are heading in the right direction is important, and will bode well in engagement. Not doing anything in fear of 'getting it wrong' is undoubtedly going to cause more conflict than engaging with the capacity to learn.

What to do when you can't engage

At this point, most non-Indigenous people don't have the right or ability to interpret and speak for Country themselves. "A lot of people don't know which part of the world their ancestors originated from, where their original 'Country' was, where their essences come from," says Dr Hromek. "Their ability to listen to Country has been lost when they left their ancestral lands and it could take 20 years of constantly working at the practice of listening to Country and First Nations peoples before they can engage in their own sensing of Country, or even know what it means."

As such, engaging directly with First Nations people on a project remains a core imperative. In most places, there will be people who want to be involved. But if all options have been exhausted and there is no route to engagement, what else can the industry do to write Indigenous knowledge back into design?

Listening to First Nations voices – in literature, community and archives – and spending time on Country are important first steps. "Learning to listen to First Nations people will guide you into listening to Country," says Dr Hromek. "Eventually we would like to see more non-Indigenous people being able to ask the question themselves – what does this place need?"

"The standardisation of the built environment results from finances and ease being the priorities in the design, rather than place or characteristics of Country."

Dr Danièle Hromek

Where to next

The way we've been doing things isn't working – not on a design level, nor on a cultural one. The entire built environment needs to take the baton by starting discussions, developing protocols and integrating processes that unlock the wider benefit of Indigenous-led and Country-centred design. Some steps we believe each individual and company can do to begin learning, unlearning, reconciling and ultimately creating better design outcomes are as follows:

1. Reach out.

Build relationships with First Nations people, organisations and communities both within project areas and across Australia – even outside of project timelines. This is paramount in building lasting relationships and keeping conversations going. Arcadia's mutually beneficial partnerships include a number of Indigenous organisations and communities, some of which we've listed here to help show the types of groups you could engage:

- / Djinjama Indigenous Corporation
- / Balarinji
- / Indigenous Communication and Design
- / Jiwah
- / Indigenous Horticulture and Education
- / Yerrabingin
- / Indigenous Design Thinking for Collaborative Solutions
- / Wiradjuri Women's Group

2. Put it in the budget.

Just as public art collaborations have now been formalised as a line-item in most built environment projects, so can collaboration with First Nations people. We don't need to engage every person and find every answer today. But we can begin creating space for this conversation in every new design.

3. Redefine the project lifecycle.

"Time and space are the same in a lot of Indigenous languages," says Dr Hromek. "We can take a more cyclical approach to a project timeline, coming back again and again in cycles to refine solutions. First Nations people don't want to just have their story heard, used and then everyone moves on again. We need to be bringing people together for the long term and creating real community ties so that reconciliation can continue happening."

4. Conduct cultural training.

When we surveyed our own staff at Arcadia in 2020, we found useful information in terms of where understanding was lacking, where people were scared to misstep and where we could offer training. 86% of our employees said their understanding of Indigenous history and culture needs work, with many calling for greater guidance in terms of language and in particular Indigenous land management techniques. Our Indigenous Landscape Strategist was able to facilitate cultural training and provide strategic advice across all studios to address this.

5. Officialise your progress

with a formalised Indigenous strategy for your firm or business. Many businesses will have a RAP, but it may be helpful to elevate cultural engagement to a strategy level for execution on a project basis as well. The GANSW's Statements of commitment and action are a good place to start in terms of setting goals and aligning on your responsibilities.

6. Invest in representation.

If you are unable to access First Nations voices, that is likely a symptom of under-representation in your sector. Turn your attention to solving that, so that future projects can centre Indigenous insight more easily. Ultimately, we want more First Nations Knowledge Holders leading on design projects, helping to improve the cultural competencies of staff, and liaising with Indigenous communities. This may involve partnerships with Indigenous organisations, creating scholarships, paid internships and jobs for First Nations professionals, or getting involved in education.

Redressing the balance requires affirmative action and funding. Every year, Arcadia Indigenous Landscape Architecture Scholarships are offered at eight universities nationally, working to balance the scales. Look into scholarship opportunities in your field and consider funding new ones if few are available.

7. Read and research.

Literary awareness through archives, recordings and art or literature in a place can reveal a lot about a space and its significance. Interpretation is the hard part, and knowing what the First Nations communities would want to see happen, so it's important to still prioritise direct engagement, but deep research is significant and can buy time while you await engagement. This can also save the community time in the process because you've come prepared. Be sure to privilege Indigenous voices in your research to ensure you find authentic cultural understandings rather than a non-Indigenous interpretation.

8. Take personal responsibility.

What happens when someone leaves a company? Because of the nature of cultural engagement, there is a larger emphasis placed on individual relationships and ongoing responsibility. We become involved as people, not just as CMOs or Project Managers, and may need to play larger and less linear roles, prioritising our own learning and action both inside and outside work hours.

"Are you doing the real work?" said Shelley Penn at the 2019 National Architecture Conference. "I don't mean putting in the hours. I don't mean being competent and professional. The real work is the stuff that hurts your brain or your heart. Creative work or thoughtful work or personally challenging work. The stuff we know we have to face if we want to be true to our values."

The built environment needs to lead this discussion, rather than wait for policy enforcements or First Nations people alone to instigate change. It is up to us to congregate, converse, co-design and build solutions together – a couple of hundred years in the making.

About Dr Danièle Hromek: Dr Danièle Hromek is a Budawang woman of the Yuin nation. She works as a spatial designer, cultural designer and researcher considering how to Indigenise the built environment. Her work contributes an understanding of the Indigenous experience and comprehension of space, investigating how Aboriginal people occupy, use, narrate, sense, dream and contest their spaces. Danièle's research rethinks the values that inform Aboriginal understandings of space through Indigenous spatial knowledge and cultural practice, in doing so considers the sustainability of Indigenous cultures from a spatial design perspective. Danièle is director of Djinjama, whose clients include state and local government, museums and galleries, as well as industry including architects, planners, designers, heritage and engineering firms.

About Arcadia: Arcadia is a leading landscape architecture and urban design practice working at the intersection of the built form and nature on Australia's Eastern seaboard. Our focus is to enrich community and Country, shaping meaningful places for all Australians in regional and urban settings. We take a considered approach to place through collaboration with end users, stakeholders and First Nations communities. By placing high import on the way people interact with the environment, we continuously pursue rigorous, enduring outcomes that use landscape as a powerful tool for connection.

Our approach to Indigenous Country, heritage and culture goes beyond project based work. It is about learning, establishing and maintaining community partnerships, supporting Indigenous advancement in design, and building our team's capacity. From establishing Australia's first Indigenous Landscape Architecture Scholarship, to our partnerships with Indigenous initiatives and in-house staff cultural training and our ongoing employment and mentoring of Indigenous professionals, Arcadia prides ourselves on being at the forefront of our industry in engagement, advancement and collaboration with our First People.

Further reading:

- / The (Re)Indigenisation of Space: Weaving narratives of resistance to embed Nura [Country] in design
- / Connecting with Country: A draft framework for understanding the value of Aboriginal knowledge in the design and planning of place
- / Indigenous Knowledge in the Built Environment: A guide for tertiary educators
- / A discourse on the nature of Indigenous Architecture
- / Don't disturb the cockatoos on your lawn, they're probably doing all your weeding for free
- / Better Placed: A strategic design policy for the built environment of NSW
- / Future Indigeneity: Shared values in the built environment
- / Reconfiguring Architecture's relationship to Indigenous Knowledge
- / Reading Country: Seeing deep into the bush
- / Djinjama Indigenous Corporation
- / Aboriginal Cultural Values: An approach for engaging with Country
- / Further works by Dr Danièle Hromek



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