

BARA



A potent, symbolic work that honours and celebrates the connections of Gadi women to this Country

The monumental 6.4 m tall **bara** artwork sits prominently on Sydney harbour, between the sails of the Opera House and the arch of the Harbour Bridge

Image: Chris Southwood, courtesy City of Sydney.

Quick facts

Project type:
Public artwork – sculpture

Location:
Warrane / Sydney Cove, NSW

Aboriginal language landscape group:
Gadi (Gadigal/Gadigalleon)

Project time frame:
2018–2022

Client:
Council of the City of Sydney

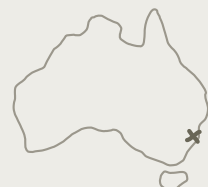
Project scale:
6.4 m high

Project team:
Artist
Judy Watson
Eora Journey
Curatorial Advisor
Hetti Perkins
Yananurala Curator
Emily McDaniel

Artwork production:
UAP
Stone Plus
Engineers
Richard Green Consulting
Lighting
Xenian
Heritage
City Plan

City of Sydney
City of Sydney Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Panel
Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council
Royal Botanic Gardens and Domain Trust

Awards:
2023 Aboriginal Heritage Award, National Trust (NSW) Heritage Awards



Commissioned by the City of Sydney, *bara* is a large-scale permanent public artwork located prominently above Dubbagullee / Bennelong Point, standing proudly next to a huge old fig tree and visible from Sydney Harbour.

The work is a monumental *bara* (fishhook crafted and used by Gadi women for thousands of generations). It also reflects the form of a crescent moon, the coves of the harbour, the sails of the nearby Sydney Opera House and the arch of the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

Key outcomes

Healthy community

A major public artwork in a highly visible public domain has recognised the long history of Aboriginal care and custodianship of this place. As a celebration and strong acknowledgement of Aboriginal cultural heritage, this work both symbolises and contributes to community health and wellbeing.

Protecting Aboriginal cultural heritage

Aboriginal leadership in the planning and development of the project was established from the outset, supported by multiple levels and methods of cultural advice from Aboriginal Elders, advisory groups and communities.

Better places

The artwork is fundamentally related to its location as a historically, socially and culturally significant place, and connects to broader landscapes and cultural narratives beyond the project boundaries. As a monument within a larger planned cultural walk, it creates ongoing opportunities as a focal point for social gathering, cultural awareness and a celebration of living cultural practices.

bara was unveiled in May 2022 in a headland ceremony overlooking the harbour.

Image: Chris Southwood, courtesy City of Sydney.



Spatial implications / tips for designers

Stories of key public places including cultural sightlines (and 'sitelines') are important considerations for the design, placement, siting and scale of artworks.

Identify stories and cultural practices specific to place. This may require discussions with multiple local knowledge-holders to ensure these stories are appropriate to share in ways that are inclusive and respectful.

Projects that tell the stories of Aboriginal culture should be led by Aboriginal curators, consultants, researchers and practitioners so Indigenous cultural and intellectual property (ICIP) can be appropriately respected.

Sited in the Royal Botanic Garden, on the eastern shore of Warrane / Sydney Cove, *bara* sits proudly overlooking the harbour, taking its place among other landmarks of national significance – the Sydney Opera House and Sydney Harbour Bridge.

As part of the Eora Journey: Recognition in the Public Domain program, the project was guided by the City of Sydney's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Panel, curatorial advisor Hetti Perkins and Aboriginal community members and organisations.

bara emerges out of an ancient and enduring Eora cultural context to eloquently express the nexus between the political, social and natural landscapes of historical and contemporary Sydney.

—Hetti Perkins, Eora Journey
Curatorial Advisor

The form of the work draws on many references, from the *bara* (fishhook made by Gadi women) to the coves of the harbour and a crescent moon.

Image: Chris Southwood, courtesy City of Sydney.



Celebrating Aboriginal women and their ingenuity

bara is a major public artwork by Aboriginal artist Judy Watson, a matrilineal descendant of the Waanyi People from north-west Queensland, just under the Gulf of Carpentaria. Watson's critically acclaimed art practice is continually inspired by the indelible traces left by Aboriginal cultures obscured and erased by colonisation, particularly those relating to Aboriginal women.

Continuing this practice, Watson's *bara* is a monument celebrating the living culture of local Gadi women. Soaring 6.4 m high, the sculpture takes the crescent form of the *bara* (shell fishhooks) crafted by Aboriginal women for generations. Gadi women were proficient fisherwomen, often the main food providers for their families, and food sourced from the waterways was a staple for the coastal people around Sydney.

Bara were made from turban shells found in the waters of the harbour, which were ground down and carved with stone tools into a curved hook. The pearly sheen of the inside of the shell acted as a lure. These were then tied to *carrejun* (string) made from twisted plant fibres. The women fished with their *bara* from *nawi* (canoes) made from the peeled bark of stringybark trees. The ends of the fibrous bark was thinned down and charred over fire so they could be folded and tied together to create a hull shape. Fires were carried onboard on clay pads both for warmth and for cooking.

Gadi women often wore their *bara* around their necks. While the *bara* were beautifully made articles of ingenuity, they were not decorative. These tools were signifiers of the women's identities and status as providers within their societies.

Watson referenced *bara* housed in the collections at the Australian Museum to develop the final work, a monument made in marble with a unique, gleaming finish. The sculpture makes prominent and highly visible the resilience and resourcefulness of Aboriginal peoples. As a major public artwork, this project allows for the local culture it honours to be permanently remembered as a key to connecting with its Country.

These fishhooks were a thing of beauty, carved and shiny in the water to attract the fish. Time and care were taken to make the tools of their trade. This embedded the important role of our women in society as providers and sources of sustenance, and providers of industry to our peoples.

—Aunty Bronwyn Penrith,
Chair of the Mudgin-gal
Aboriginal Corporation



Located prominently above Dubbagullee / Bennelong Point, **bara** is visible from the harbour.

Image: Chris Southwood, courtesy City of Sydney.

Connecting to place through many meanings

The multilayered relationship of this artwork to its broader place ensures its wide and enduring impact. The artwork is sited on the Tarpeian Precinct Lawn in the Royal Botanic Garden overlooking Dubbagullee, a place of both historical and contemporary cultural significance.

Its location was determined during the development of a larger public art program to recognise the culture and histories of the Gadi People and connected groups of the broader area, commissioned by the City of Sydney and curated by Arrernte and Kalkadoon woman Hetti Perkins. The criteria for its location were a proximity to the harbour and wider connection to the icons of Sydney's landscape, as well as a spaciousness that would allow for larger gatherings of people for events.

The monument's siting, overlooking the bays and coves of Sydney Harbour, recognises Warrane as one of the first points of contact with Europeans, an event setting in motion hundreds of years of dispossession and colonial violence. Its presence is a stark reminder of both the past and present; however, it also represents a gesture towards a reconciliatory and hopeful future.

The pearlescent crescent form of the sculpture connects to the gleaming white shells of the Sydney Opera House sails and to the arcing figure of the Sydney Harbour Bridge. It also recalls the crescent shape of the new moon appearing in the sky. **bara** is subtly lit at night to appear glowing, as if reflecting the light of the moon, the entity governing the tides the Gadi women fished on. In this form, it appears as a ghostly sentinel above Dubbagullee, an echo of the open fires on the headland that the Gadi people would gather around during meals, or the signal fires made for trade ships during early colonisation. The embracing gesture of the crescent shape also makes reference to the many coves and bays of the harbour.

For Watson, this many-layered symbolism in relation to the artwork's broader surrounds reflects the interconnectedness of Country and First Nations culture, being at once connected to sea, to sky, to land and to non-human forms. Both a refusal to be ignored and an act of hope for the future, **bara** draws on erased histories and narratives, and claims a place among contemporary cultural icons.

This site means a lot to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Sydney and the wider community. We will finally have a presence of this magnitude and an opportunity to share our culture, our history, and our knowledge with others who come to view it.

—Tracey Duncan, Former Co-Chair of the City of Sydney's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Panel

Yananurala ('walking on Country') and connecting the Eora Journey

bara is a core artwork in the City of Sydney's larger Eora Journey program, first conceived in 2008 by Yugambeh architect Dillon Kombumerri as a walk from the site of first contact on Sydney Harbour to Redfern, the home of Aboriginal activism in Australia. It is the fourth artwork to be realised of the 7 planned for Eora Journey. The sculpture is also a key point along a 9-km storytelling walk called Yananurala ('walking on Country'), envisioned by Wiradjuri curator Emily McDaniel, that aims to highlight local Aboriginal histories and culture along the foreshore, from Pirrama / Pyrmont to Wallamool / Woolloomooloo.

Eora Journey is a 4-part program involving recognition in the public domain, a significant annual event, an economic development plan, and an Aboriginal knowledge and cultural centre. In development for many years, with input and advice from local Aboriginal Elders and communities, bara exemplifies how standalone artworks or small projects can have a large impact when viewed as part of an interconnected network.

With its significant siting, bara is a prominent and important marker in the Yananurala and Eora Journey walks, with many more points of significance, including public art, historically significant places, and culturally important sitelines. bara, Yananurala and Eora Journey work together to create interconnected opportunities for Indigenous cultural heritage to be learned, remembered and accessed.

The shapes and sheen of the Opera House sails are echoed in bara's elegant, polished curve.

Image: Brett Boardman, courtesy City of Sydney.

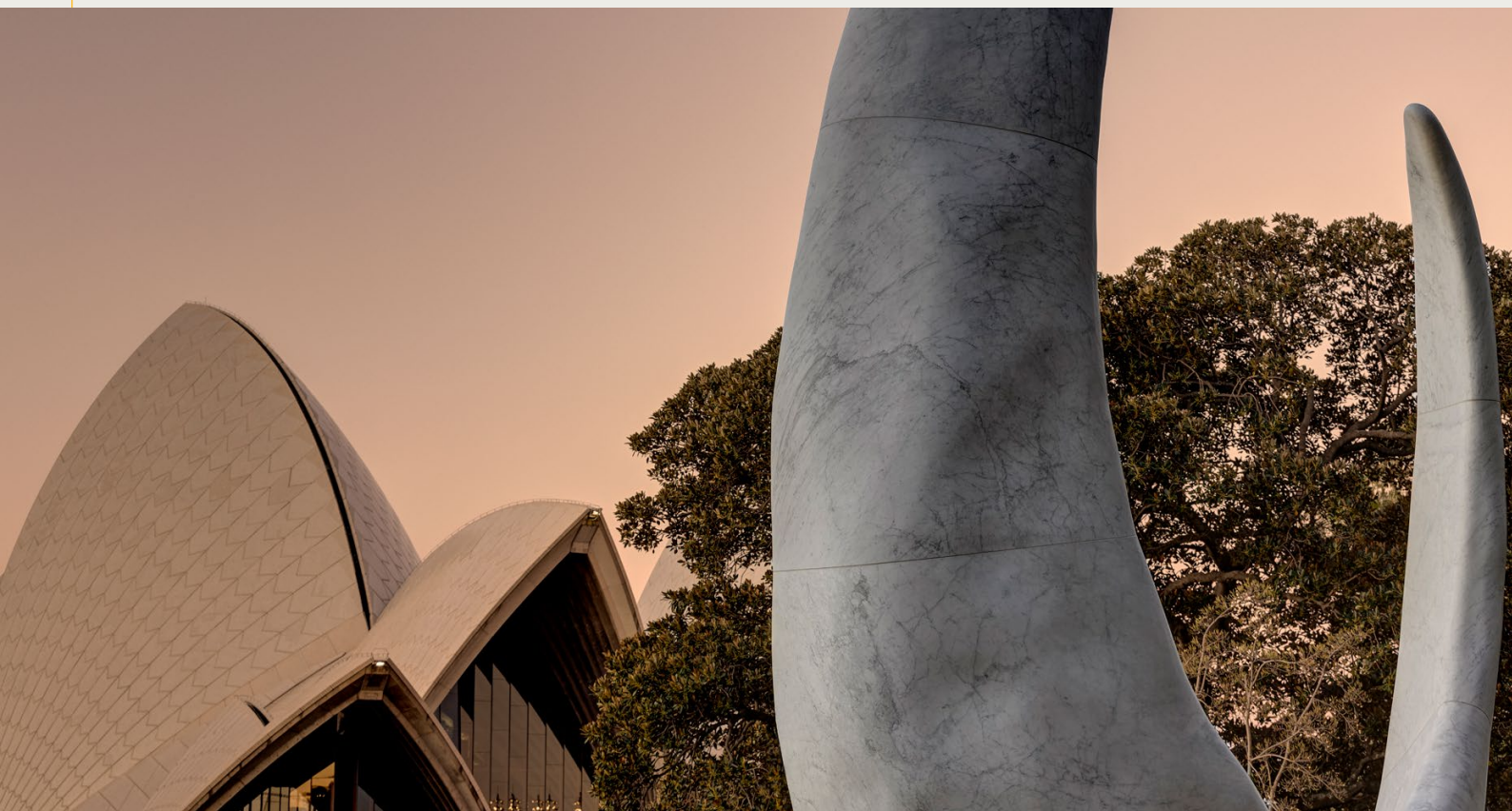
Connecting sitelines and conversation sites

As part of Yananurala, the Sydney Harbour storytelling walk, a new siteline connects bara from its pride of place atop the headland of Dubbagullee to Ta-Ra / Dawes Point, where the southern pylon of the Sydney Harbour Bridge makes land. Ta-Ra was the site of Lieutenant William Dawes's hut and observatory. It was there that Patyegarang, a young Gadi woman, granted Dawes permission to document her language by recording words in his notebooks between 1790 and 1791. It was here that the word bara was first recorded. These books, now held in the library at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London, contain the conversations and information that is now crucial for contemporary language revival work.

The larger project around bara connects it into a wider vision for embedding Indigenous knowledge and culture, as well as the colonial history by which it was irrevocably changed, into the urban fabric of the contemporary city. In particular, the relationship of this artwork to its siteline draws attention to the importance of language for Indigenous people. This aspect of storytelling, while non-physical, is no less tangible to the preservation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures of community and Country.

Yananurala is marked by sitelines, places that contain and interconnect the stories, memories and histories of this Country. These are the veins of Sydney, a living and breathing place.

—Emily McDaniel, Yananurala Curator





Following Aboriginal leadership

bara was developed as part of the long gestation of Eora Journey, an exemplar for planning and procurement processes in community engagement, policy development and implementation. (For more information see the Government Architect NSW case study *Eora Journey: Recognition in the public domain.*)

Watson's concept for bara was selected through an expression-of-interest process, eventually being selected from a competitive pool of submissions by a panel including Aboriginal art specialists and a representative from the Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council (LALC). This decision was then endorsed by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Panel for the City of Sydney. Throughout the development of bara, Watson engaged in continual cultural consultation with the Metropolitan LALC and the council's advisory

panel, as well as Gadigal Elders Uncle Allen Madden and Charles 'Chicka' Madden, and a member of the nation from where the bara held in the Australian Museum was collected. This project demonstrates the excellence that is possible when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people lead projects, working across curatorial, design and advisory capacities, and when enduring engagement and consultation is prioritised.

The unveiling celebrations brought together many family groups and leading women from the local community including (right to left) Aunty Bronwyn Penrith, Chair of the Mudgin-Gal Aboriginal Corporation; Clover Moore, City of Sydney Lord Mayor; Judy Watson, artist; Yvonne Weldon, Deputy Chair of the Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council; Margaret Beazley, Governor of NSW.

Image: Chris Southwood, courtesy City of Sydney.

Further resources

Audio and video recordings

'bara', a monument to the traditional custodians of Gadigal Country video, City of Sydney News website, June 2022, <https://news.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/videos/video-bara-a-monument-to-the-traditional-custodians-of-gadigal-country>.

Books and writing

City of Sydney (no date) Yananurala | Walking on Country webpage, City Art website, City of Sydney, <https://www.cityartsydney.com.au/city-art-public-art-strategy/yananurala/>.

City of Sydney (no date) bara webpage, City Art website, City of Sydney, <https://www.cityartsydney.com.au/artwork/bara/>.

City of Sydney (2019) *Eora Journey: Harbour Walk Storytelling Report*, prepared by Emily McDaniel for the City of Sydney, <https://s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/cdn.cityartsydney.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/19080633/Harbour-Walk-Storytelling-Report-November-2019.pdf>.

Karskens G (2014) *Barangaroo and the Eora fisherwomen*, The Dictionary of Sydney website, State Library of NSW, https://dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/barangaroo_and_the_eora_fisherwomen.

Credits

Research and writing:

Isabelle Toland and Janelle Woo (Aileen Sage Architects)

In collaboration with:

Dillon Kombumerri (Government Architect NSW)