

FOR OUR COUNTRY



Reflecting a greater appreciation of First Nations' perspectives and connections with Country



A circular basalt stone field in front of the pavilion establishes a collective gathering space. At the centre is a cast bronze plate for ceremonial fires alongside the cast bronze mouth of a sealed earth vessel. The mirrored face of the pavilion faces east to catch the morning light.

Image: Ben Hosking.

Quick facts

Project type:
Public memorial, pavilion

Location: Ngambri / Kamberrri / Canberra, ACT

Aboriginal language landscape group:
Ngunnawal and Ngambri

Project time frame: 2016–2019

Client:
Australian War Memorial, Australian Government

Procurement process:
Competition

Project scale: 23 m²

Project team:
Artist Daniel Boyd
Architecture Edition Office
Builder Ram Construction
Structural Engineer Farrar D
Facade consultants Arup

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Sculpture Commission Group

Aunty Roslyn Brown, Co-Chair, United Ngunnawal Elders Council; Ms Vanessa Seekee, Curator/Historian, Torres Strait Heritage Museum; Uncle David Williams, Royal Australian Navy (Retd); Uncle Harry Allie, Royal Australian Air Force (Retd); Corporal Tara Enchong, Royal Australian Air Force; Uncle Roy Mundine, Australian Army (Retd); Gary Oakley, National President, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Veterans and Services Association; Ms Tina Baum, Curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art, National Gallery of Australia; Ms Nici Cumpston, Curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art, Art Gallery of South Australia, and Artistic Director of Tarnanthi; Mr Tim Sullivan, former Assistant Director National Collection, Australian

War Memorial; Mr Michael Bell, Indigenous Liaison Officer, Australian War Memorial; Mr Ryan Johnston, former Head of Art, Australian War Memorial

Awards

- 2020** Canberra Medallion, Australian Institute of Architecture ACT Chapter Awards
- 2020** Nicholas Murcutt Award for Small Project Architecture, Australian Institute of Architecture National Awards
- 2020** Cynthia Breheny Award for Small Project Architecture
- 2020** Pamille Berg Award for Art in Architecture
- 2020** Robert Foster Award for Light in Architecture
- 2020** Collaboration Award, The Design Files

For Our Country is a memorial pavilion situated at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. It provides a place for contemplating and commemorating the sacrifices that First Nations men and women have made as members of the military service in defence of Country.

Key outcomes

Healthy Country

The pavilion embodies First Nations' deep connection with Country in its role both as a static and symbolic national memorial but also as a place of ongoing ceremony and active, physical connection with place.

Healthy community

As a place for ceremony, personal reflection, grief, healing and connection with others, the pavilion is actively supporting the ongoing health of community.

Cultural competency

A project advisory group, including First Nations military personnel, curators and local Elders, provided support to the design team, ensuring multiple First Nations perspectives were respectfully considered throughout the development of the project.

In 2021, to mark the Air Force Centenary, Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) Indigenous Liaison Officers deposited soil and sand collected by traditional custodians at RAAF bases around the country, and shells from the Torres Strait Islands, in the **For Our Country** memorial sculpture. Communities can continue to make deposits of soil by submitting a request to the Australian War Memorial.

Image: Marcus Fillingner, order reference AWM2021.4.17.26.



Spatial implications / tips for designers

Seek to understand the Country in which a project is located, through multiple walks on Country during various times of day, weather and seasons.

Acknowledge the multiplicity of stories and perspectives relating to a particular place by using design elements that encourage different interpretations (for example, layered or changing views and different focal points as you move through a place).

Abstract translations that respond to the intangible and temporal aspects of a place can enable multiple readings.

Provide spaces that support cultural practices such as ceremonial events that will facilitate ongoing connections between communities and the site.



A 2-way mirror glass 'veil' filters eastern morning light into the pavilion.
Image: Ben Hosking.

In addition to its role as a memorial, the project team understood it should equally facilitate cultural sharing between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. A collaboration between an Aboriginal artist, Daniel Boyd, and non-Aboriginal Australian architecture studio, Edition Office, the design creates a space that facilitates reflection and understanding across cultures.

For Our Country encourages visitors to engage with the memorial in different ways. It focuses on the physical experiences of the site – of light, atmosphere, movement and touch – creating a powerful experience that reflects a greater appreciation of First Nations' perspectives and connections with Country.

For Our Country was designed by artist Daniel Boyd, a Kudjala / Gangalu / Kuku Yalanji / Waka Waka / Gubbi Gubbi / Wangerriburra / Bandjalung man from North Queensland, in collaboration with Naarm / Melbourne-based architecture studio Edition Office.

The pavilion commemorates the service of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in conflicts where Australia has deployed its military. Importantly, it is also a place to remember all past and ongoing sacrifices made by First Nations peoples in defence of Country.

For Our Country is designed to facilitate grief, healing, reflection, sharing and cultural understanding as both a collective and individual experience. Through highlighting the physical experiences of the site – of light, atmosphere, movement and touch – the project enables a multiplicity of perspectives and experiences, creating a powerful and universal sense of shared understanding and empathy.

The memorial is an 11-m wide circular stone field, a ground plane of basalt, with one segment of the circle being a 3-m high, 3-dimensional 'slice' of enclosed space. The enclosing edge of this space, the arc of the segment, is a curved, black-pigmented, rammed-earth wall, visible from between trees. Closer to the centre of the circle, a straight wall of spotted 2-way mirror glass, conceived as a 'veil', reflects the viewer while at the same time allowing a view to the landscape beyond. Light is filtered through the dotted facade, allowing a shifting pattern of light into the curved interior space. Within the pavilion interior, a seat is set into the curve of the earth wall, creating an intimate space for contemplation and reflection.

A considered competition process

The approach established by the Australian War Memorial in commissioning **For Our Country** demonstrates a culturally considered competition process. Through national consultation, the Australian War Memorial identified that recognition and acknowledgement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander military service was required at the national war memorial, identifying the need and desire for the project. Following this, a First Nations project advisory group* was established to guide and advise the client group throughout the process.

Led by a diverse First Nations advisory group

The First Nations project advisory group included military personnel, curators and local Elders. It also included diverse representation (in age, experience and background) from key First Nations stakeholder groups, ensuring a diversity of voices was heard.

This group identified a selection of First Nations artists of national renown, who were approached to participate in a competition to propose a new memorial sculpture for the site.

For Our Country was created by one of our country's most gifted artists and is dedicated to my Country, my family, my mates, and me. It is a dignified art installation, full of meanings and symbolism. It pays respect to the deep connections and long, proud history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women and their defence of Country.

—Corporal Garth O'Connell,
Gomeri Nation, Australian Army History Unit,
Royal Australian Infantry

*When setting up a project advisory group, cultural safety of all members is required. Advice should be sought from an Indigenous community liaison or appropriate First Nations community engagement consultant to ensure representation of all key stakeholder and community groups. This may mean allowing for separate meetings or discussions for some members. A budget to cover the engagement of the project advisory group should also be allowed for in the project cost plan from the start – allowing for engagement from project initiation through to completion. Advice of the group throughout the ongoing life of the project should also be considered.

Establishing a relationship of respect and trust from the outset

Competitions can be a good way of testing out a collaborative relationship and challenging clients and ideas. However, they can also present many issues that can particularly affect First Nations peoples and businesses. Developing relationships and understanding how people work can take time, which can be difficult within the time constraints of a competition scenario, especially if the level of remuneration for the competition is limited.

In this scenario, an open and robust working relationship was established between Boyd and Edition Office from the start of the process, in which they allowed each other the time and space to be open about what they knew and didn't know. This established a sense of understanding and trust between both parties which was fundamental to a successful collaboration and outcome.

Vulnerability means exposing oneself to the qualities that we acknowledge we do not possess nor can we control. For Bridgland and Roberts [founders of Edition Office architecture studio], in the context of **For Our Country, vulnerability equated to limited knowledge about dispossession, discrimination, inequity and resistance through the First Nations lens.**

The collaboration with Boyd required them to learn about these qualities more meaningfully through the artist's worldview and to unpack the tension of vulnerability.

—Michael Mossman, 'Vulnerability in collaboration: "For Our Country"',
Daniel Boyd: Treasure Island,
Art Gallery of NSW, 2022

Welcoming all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

This memorial seeks to acknowledge and speak to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from all over Australia, recognising the contribution and sacrifices of many, over many generations. During a period of intense dispossession, of land, of culture and of personhood, over 1,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are estimated to have served in the Australian military during World War I, with the real number likely exceeding that. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have served in every military conflict involving Australia ever since. The importance of this memorial, in recognising this history, is significant.

In seeking to speak to these broader experiences, and to recognise First Nations values and perspectives within the design, the architectural geometry is deliberately simple, powerful and symbolic. Distinctly different to Western and colonial memorial designs, it also avoids reference to any singular historical event or figure, allowing for an inclusive experience that is not specific to any one cultural or language group, or generation.

The reserved and ambiguous nature of the space refuses any singular or predetermined readings, enabling individuals to overlay the experience with their own meanings and associations.

At the centre of the memorial is a cast bronze plate for ceremonial fires alongside the cast bronze mouth of a sealed earth vessel, which penetrates 4 m into the ground. This vessel collects together offerings of earth brought to the memorial by Elders of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities from across Australia. In this offering of earth, each nation can be commemorated in this place while the soil of each Country joins the many lands their Ancestors have defended.

Image: Ben Hosking.



A curved black-pigmented, rammed-earth wall is visible from between trees.

Image: Ben Hosking.

Only four or five generations after the arrival of the British First Fleet, having endured discrimination, brutal social exclusion, and violence, many Indigenous Australians denied their Aboriginality and kinship to enlist, serve, fight, suffer, and die for the young nation that had taken so much from them. Having enlisted from a desperately unequal Australia, many found military service to be their first experience of equality. In Australia's Defence forces they were equals – equal in life and equal in death.

—Dr Brendan Nelson, Director, Australian War Memorial, 2012–19



Designing for ongoing ceremonial practices

A ceremonial aspect is incorporated into the design. At the centre of the basalt circle is a cast bronze plate and 'mouth' to an earth vessel buried 4 m into the ground. The plate enables ceremonial fires on days of remembrance, and the vessel collects offerings of soil brought to the memorial by Elders of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities from across Australia – bringing together the soil of the many Countries and lands that their ancestors have defended.

While the collected soils are hidden, they are present, real and a significant symbolic gesture that places meaning and value on actions, shared experiences and ceremony.

The relationship of the new memorial to its surroundings was carefully considered. Particular landmarks of memorial and historical significance were noted, such as Mount Ainslie beyond and the dome over the Hall of Memory. The pavilion is also oriented east to the rising sun and sited purposely amidst a row of trees that had been grown from cuttings taken from various sites of conflict around the world.

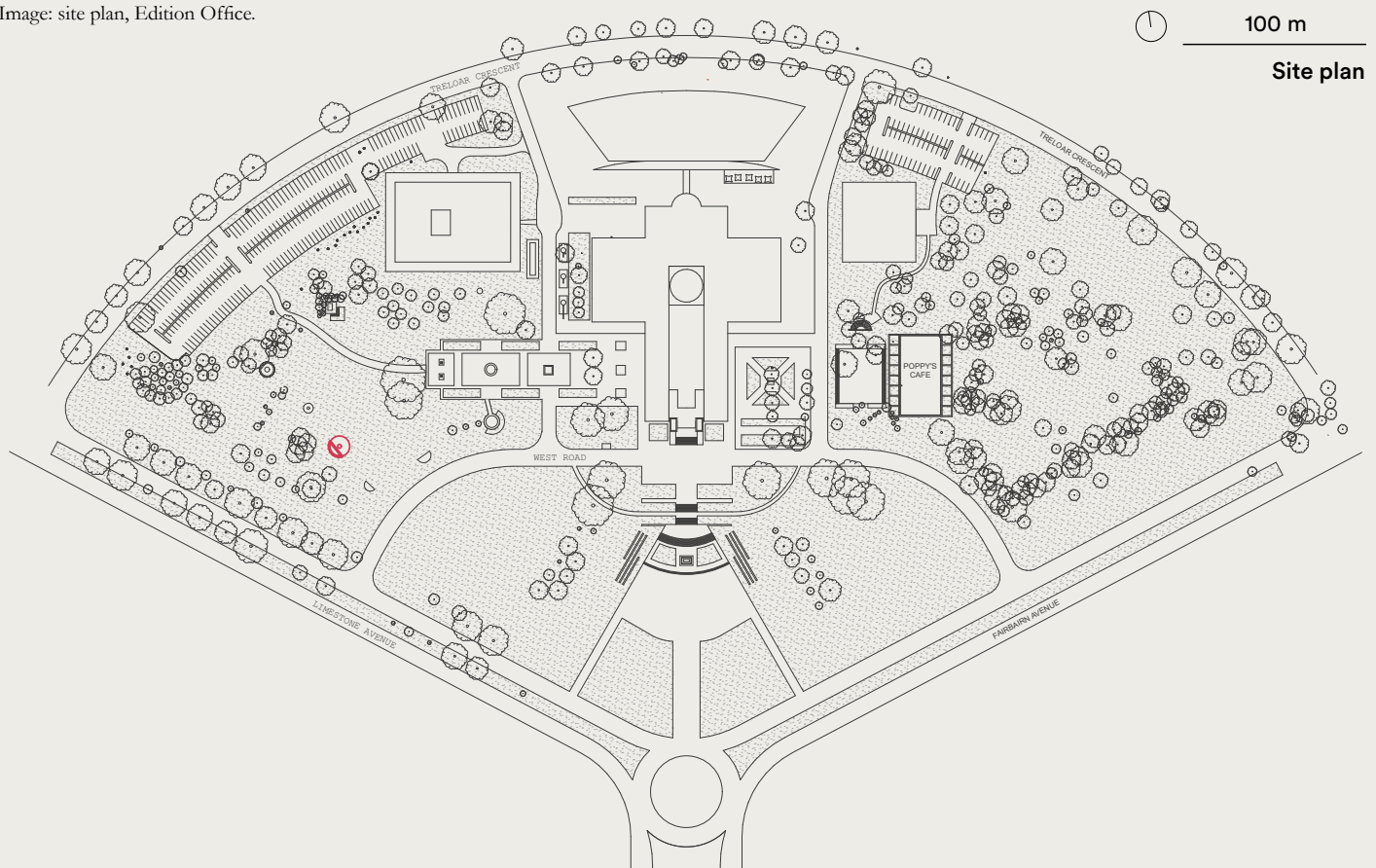
Image: site plan, Edition Office.

Remembering trauma and tragedy as both a personal and collective experience

An abstract form that is derived from an experiential understanding of the site is a key aspect of the project. The design allows the visitor to focus on the physical experience when on site, encouraging a visceral response, regardless of their background or any specific relationship to the memorial.

A field of basalt shards ('nascent spear tips') forms the forecourt to the pavilion. It crunches underfoot as you walk along it to the ceremonial fire and soil repository. This basalt is often used for making weapons, a subtle but impactful reference to the violence endured by First Nations people throughout colonisation.

Once inside the pavilion, a space for reflection and contemplation is created through the interplay of light, views and reflections of the landscape through the 2-way mirror glass 'veil'. Behind this veil, the black-pigmented, rammed-earth wall defines an intimate and sheltered resting space which provides a view out to the stone field and landscape beyond. This intimate area for contemplation is described by Boyd as 'Blackness – an opaque space where the world we see is not in our own reflection, but the reflection of many' – Daniel Boyd, Australian War Memorial website.



A meaningful gesture towards reconciliation

The abstract design of the memorial allows for dual meaning: it commemorates not only the service of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander veterans, but the sacrifices of all those made in defence of Country. This recognition of Country from a First Nations perspective is important. Acknowledging Country as all-encompassing and transcendent elevates the meaning of the project to a powerful nationally symbolic gesture.

In acknowledging the grave responsibility to the serving men and women that this memorial serves, we also acknowledge the deep responsibility to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who have fought for their country within our own borders during the previous 230 years of colonisation, dispossession and the conflict of the Australian resistance wars...[The work] rise[s] above the limitations of its brief... to become a space that enables the contemplation of and commemoration of the full range of Indigenous sacrifice for Country.

—Kim Bridgland and Aaron Roberts, Edition Office

Facilitating cultural sharing

Beyond the memorial experience, the project is also an opportunity to facilitate cultural sharing between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. Designed to encourage reflection (both self-reflection and reflection on the experiences of others), the memorial embodies a desire to seek a deeper understanding of, and connection with, Country.

This opportunity for cultural sharing is expressed through the experience of the completed pavilion, and was equally present through the collaborative process of developing the design. Through a shared understanding and reading of Country, from multiple perspectives, the sharing of culture and knowledge has been embedded into both the design process, the design itself, and the ongoing life of the memorial.

... For Our Country presented distinct opportunities to expand the limits of art and architecture within the network of Country and expose collaborating professionals to dynamic understandings of First Nations loss, healing and renewal through vulnerability. The interrogation of these vulnerabilities in practice, presented in the narratives of For Our Country, enables us to reflect on our past, advocate and activate our present, and envision better futures for us all.

—Michael Mossman, 'Vulnerability in collaboration: "For Our Country"', Daniel Boyd: Treasure Island, Art Gallery of NSW, 2022

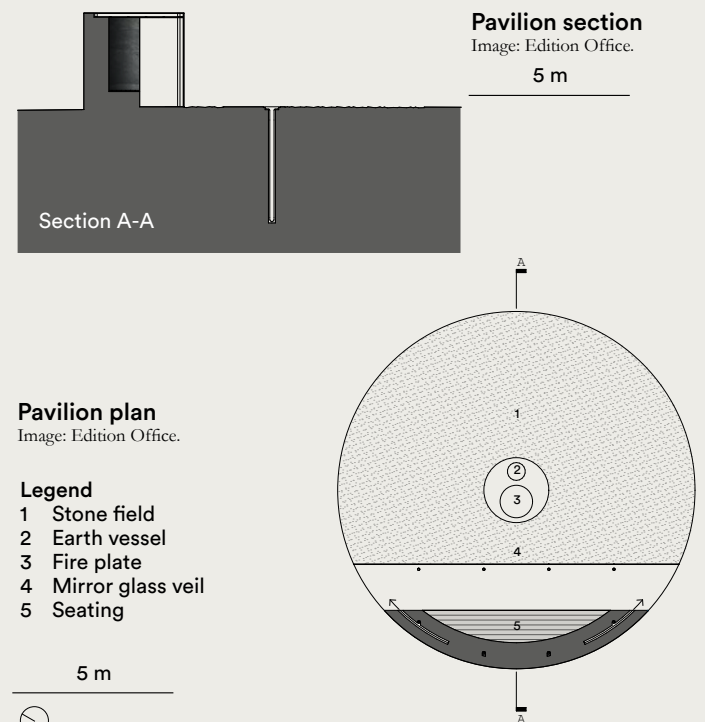
Sensing Country

The memorial is designed to sense Country. Boyd and Edition Office began the process by visiting the site and walking Country, multiple times, to understand the new memorial's potential relationship to its surroundings. Particular landmarks of memorial and historic significance were noted, such as the dome over the Hall of Memory and Mount Ainslie beyond.

Aligning the work with the path of the sun ... was crucial. The work is sited to emerge from a sheltered recess amidst a row of trees, all planted from cuttings taken from various sites of conflict around the world, and is overhung by the branches of the Lone Pine. The broad mirrored face of For Our Country faces back towards two great oak trees, to the rising sun.

—Kim Bridgland, Edition Office

Before this memorial existed, Māori, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander diggers from across Australia and New Zealand, would commemorate Anzac Day by walking up the foot of Mount Ainslie to a clearing, a gathering space defined by a rocky outcrop, where a small memorial plaque to their service is laid. Responding to this tradition, For Our Country is oriented to the north-east, towards this site.



Understanding our place within Country

Representing multiple perceptions and highlighting our incomplete understanding of time, history and memory are recurring themes in Boyd's work. The obscured reflection of the self, while within the memorial, allows the visitor to form a deeper connection with the histories at hand through what is described by the designers as 'empathetic exchange'. Here, the viewer can see themselves reflected in the glass, but equally within the surrounding landscape.

This experience of seeing oneself within the landscape highlights the importance of Country and understanding our relationship with it.



A seat is set into the black-pigmented, rammed-earth wall creates an intimate resting space for reflection.

Image: Ben Hosking

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander war memorial is a manifestation of a deep connection to the land and responsibility to future generations: how they will inherit this relationship; generational exchange of knowledge that has happened hundreds of thousands of times, from parent to child, grandparent to child, great-grandparent to child, and so on. It is about our respect for the land, how we would like our children to experience that connection, while understanding the sacrifices made to seek a system in equilibrium.

—Daniel Boyd, artist, *For Our Country*, Australian War Memorial website, <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C2640543>

Outside, when facing *For Our Country* and its wall of glass, the visitor sees themselves dappled and reflected in the landscape. Boyd said he 'wanted to introduce this way of seeing yourself with the space that you are visiting or make you a part of that narrative and that space'. This self-reflection mixed with the multitude of apertures that frame the outside world creates an awareness of one's own position relative to the memorial.

—Michael Mossman, 'Vulnerability in collaboration: "For Our Country"', Daniel Boyd: *Treasure Island*, Art Gallery of NSW, 2022

Further resources

Audio and video recordings

'For Our Country – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander memorial' video, Australian War Memorial website: Daniel Boyd and Edition Office (Kim Bridgland and Aaron Roberts) speak about the ideas behind the memorial, <https://www.awm.gov.au/visit/exhibitions/forourcountry>.

'Centenary Welcome Ceremony' video, Royal Australian Air Force ceremony 2021 at the *For Our Country* memorial, Royal Australian Air Force channel, YouTube website: soil from many nations across Australia was brought to the memorial, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vmxq6Jq6rIQ>.

Books and writing

Mossman M (2022) 'Vulnerability in collaboration: "For Our Country"', *Daniel Boyd: Treasure Island*, Isobel Parker, Philip and Erin Vink (eds), Art Gallery of NSW, pp. 173–181.

Annetta P (no date) *For Our Country*, Design Anthology website, <https://design-anthology.com/story/for-our-country/>.

Burns A (2020) 'An empathetic act: For Our Country', *Architecture Australia*, July 2020, Australian Institute of Architects, <https://architectureau.com/articles/for-our-country/#>.

Credits

Research and writing:

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In collaboration with:

Dillon Kombumerri and GANSW