

Case study

KOORIE HERITAGE TRUST



Supporting a living culture by designing a place of interaction and exchange

The Koorie Heritage Trust encourages people to see, touch and discuss items from its collection, and enjoy an interactive experience of learning and sharing knowledge.

Image: Peter Bennetts.

Quick facts

Project type:
Interior design, visitor centre

Location:
Birrarung Marr / Federation Square, Naarm / Melbourne, Victoria

Aboriginal language landscape group:
Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung and Bunurong Boon Wurrung (Kulin Nation)



Project time frame:
Completed 2015

Client:
Koorie Heritage Trust Inc.

Project scale:
950 m²

Project team:
Interior design
Greenaway Architects

Collaborating architects
Lyons Architecture

Aboriginal community engagement consultation
Indigenous Architecture and Design Victoria (IADV)

Builder
Kane Constructions

Joinery
Michael Earl, Schiavello

Awards:
2016 Victorian Architecture Awards: Finalist, Melbourne Prize, Interior Architecture, and Small Project Architecture

2016 Good Design Awards: Finalist, Architectural Design – Interior Design

2016 Dulux Colour Awards: Commendation, Commercial Interior (Office Fitout and Retail)

The Koorie Heritage Trust provides educational programs and resources to promote and celebrate the Aboriginal culture of south-east Australia. The Trust's Melbourne premises showcase a large collection of Koorie art and cultural artefacts, housing galleries and exhibition space as well as administration workspaces and meeting areas.

Key outcomes

Protecting Aboriginal cultural heritage

The space both protects and displays a large collection of Aboriginal art and cultural artefacts, encouraging visitors to interact with the Trust's collection and learn more about living cultural heritage.

Cultural competency

Aboriginal leadership for the project was established from the outset, facilitating opportunities for co-design and engagement with local Aboriginal groups and knowledge-holders. This Aboriginal leadership and broad engagement provided an educational opportunity for the broader project team and client to develop a deeper cultural awareness and respect for Aboriginal experiences, perspectives and culture.

Better places

The project has reconfigured an existing building's relationship with its context, connecting internal spaces with the broader landscape beyond the project boundaries – in this case the river. Sightlines, materials, colours and patterns relate specifically to the place and its stories.

Spatial implications / tips for designers

Empower Aboriginal design practitioners to embed stories of place from the start through to the end and ongoing life of a project.

Use visual connections and cultural sightlines to influence the placement of building elements, expressing a site's relationship with Country.

Identify spaces and design responses that will support Aboriginal businesses and communities in continuing their living cultural practices.

Design spaces to encourage social interactions, learning and cultural exchange.



Indigenous people have demonstrated unique abilities of adaption and resilience, from before first contact to the present day. Aboriginal organisations like the Trust have shifted to numerous locations over the years, but have always held firm in showcasing and celebrating culture regardless of where they were located. However, there is now a strong desire within community to demonstrate a visible presence within our major cities.

—Jefa Greenaway, 'Cultural adaption and resilience in Federation Square', *Architecture Australia*, 22 December 2017

Birrarung – River of Mist (the Yarra) is referenced throughout, with views out and sightlines directed towards the river; colours, patterns and shapes re-occur, consistently referencing the water narrative as a key feature of the design.

Image: Peter Bennetts.

The Koorie Heritage Trust is housed within the Yarra Building in Birrarung Marr / Federation Square on Wurundjeri Country. The premises had been shifted from the Museum of Victoria on the city fringe to the centre of Naarm / Melbourne, right next to the Yarra River. For both the organisation and the designers, this shift in itself was a deeply symbolic act in that it recognised a living and vibrant culture. The design, in turn, responds to this lively city context.

The design of the new space is centred around displaying and celebrating Aboriginal culture and heritage by enabling a wide audience of visitors to interact with the Trust's collection and enjoy the experience.

Working in collaboration

The interior fit-out was designed by Wailwan and Kamilaroi descendant Jefa Greenaway in collaboration with community engagement consultant and Gunditjmara descendant Rueben Berg, with whom he founded Indigenous Architecture and Design Victoria (IADV). The pair collaborated on the project with Melbourne firm Lyons Architecture.

This process of co-design and engagement recognises Aboriginal voices as important contributors in contemporary Australian design. As a collaboration between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal team members, it was possible to overlay multiple perspectives to be able to understand how the design might best respond to both Aboriginal non-Aboriginal visitors and users. This diverse and collaborative approach has enabled a project with a strong connection to its context and the creation of a place that fosters education, communication, and celebration of a living culture.

By engaging with Indigenous voices, one can limit the unavoidable cultural faux pas or the fear of 'walking on cultural egg shells', shifting to a productive and informed approach which embeds inclusivity while embracing diverse perspectives.

—Jefa Greenaway, 'Embracing cultural sensitivities that celebrate First Nations perspectives', from *Our Voices: Indigeneity and Architecture*, (Kiddle R, Stewart PR and O'Brien K eds), ORO Editions and Gordon de Vries Studio, 2018

A process of cultural exchange

The process of cultural exchange has many layers; it requires a process of listening – deep listening, it requires patience and generosity of spirit, which Indigenous people have in abundance, and it requires an acute attention to protocols and processes that places acknowledgement, authorisation and input from Elders at its centre.

Consequently, such important roles act as a cultural bridge or design diplomacy to ensure that we move to a space that moves beyond the simplistic or tokenistic, towards a considered approach that captures the rich affinities that reside in Indigenous culture.

The value of this manifesto of Indigenous awakening within the architectural and design disciplines is to embrace Indigenous design thinking as both aspirational and valuable to all. The advantages are threefold; it enables Indigenous-led approaches, it facilitates First Nations collaborations, and communicates the values of such thinking predicated on defined systems or protocols to enable best practice.

— Jefa Greenaway, 'Embracing cultural sensitivities that celebrate First Nations perspectives', from *Our Voices: Indigeneity and Architecture*, (Kiddle R, Stewart PR and O'Brien K eds), ORO Editions and Gordon de Vries Studio, 2018

There was a shared ambition to create a design that expresses a strong connection to place and also recognises and celebrates Koorie culture as a living and dynamic culture in dialogue with the city. This approach draws on stories and cultural practices local to the area to provide a rationale across all aspects of the design, from planning and functional relationships of spaces through to materials, textures, colours and details. As a result, a lively and joyful place has been created that celebrates the diversity of Koorie culture and feels welcoming and accessible to both the Aboriginal community and to the public.

The fit-out has been warmly embraced by the community. Visitor numbers have increased dramatically, and the spaces are consistently hired out and are well patronised. The project has successfully provided a place that is welcoming and highly valued by the community.



The project showcases culture in a manner that is accessible, visible, and celebratory. A place that is engaged with its central city context and expresses a vibrancy and audacity in pattern, colour, texture and light.
Image: Peter Bennetts.

Identifying 3 important design principles

Through the process of co-design, Greenaway and Berg identified 3 key ideas they felt were most important to this project:

- connection to Country – specifically to Birrarung (the Yarra River)
- access to the Trust’s collection (which includes over 60,000 items)
- maximising opportunities for community engagement and exchange.

These 3 principles governed all design decisions throughout the project development and ensured that the views, ambitions and key values of the Aboriginal community were recognised in the resulting project.

Through this project, IADV sought to establish a method for incorporating Aboriginal ideas, and to embed these ideas within the design process and approach as well as in the physical result.

Given that the building is adjacent to Birrarung (the Yarra River), that was a key reference point. That was pivotal for me finding a means – to connect to that cultural continuity of the river being the lifeblood of a community. And being [in] close proximity to cultural sites, like the MCG, just up the road, which was a gathering place for the five Kulin Nations. This began to create a narrative where we could connect to where we were, and therefore we could acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which the site is located.

—Jefa Greenaway interviewed by Elizabeth Dori Tunstall: ‘The Koorie Heritage Trust re-centres Indigenous communities by design’, *The Conversation*, 15 September 2015

Re-establishing a relationship with Birrarung

One of the main drivers of the design was to address the issue that the building had turned its back on Birrarung (the Wurundjeri name for the Yarra River). As a result, the water narrative became particularly important as a way to re-establish and recognise the significance of the river and open up a conversation about what the river means to the local Aboriginal community.

An example of this can be seen in the communal lounge area – where 2 windows were reinstated to take advantage of the views over the public domain and out onto the river. This established an important social place where staff and community Elders can meet and engage in conversation.

In addition to inserting windows that open up glimpses of the river from the interior, patterns of light on the ceiling and in the floor finish direct attention towards Birrarung. The blues throughout, and the grey-pebbled concrete floors, also continually reference the river as you move through and experience the spaces. Referencing the cultural and topographic features of Birrarung is a key feature and narrative of the design.

Indigenous culture is a living culture. This is a living organism of which you become part of that experience. You have the opportunity for engagement in a meaningful way with the Trust.

—Jefa Greenaway interviewed by Elizabeth Dori Tunstall: 'The Koorie Heritage Trust re-centres Indigenous communities by design', *The Conversation*, 15 September 2015

Celebrating a living culture

The ambition of both the client and the designers was to reinforce an understanding that Koorie culture is a living culture. The Trust has established a place that is engaged with its central city context and expresses a vibrancy and audacity that promotes and supports discussions between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

The recognition of Aboriginal living culture is a foundation of the Koorie Heritage Trust and this foundation is recognised not only through the work and activities of the organisation, but also through the design and engagement of Jefa Greenaway and Rueben Berg in a collaborative design process with Lyons Architecture.



With access shared equally by the staff and public, the joinery elements become 'positive dividers' that delineate private and public spaces, yet maintain transparency. The collection is interwoven into the general experience of the space.

Image: Peter Bennetts.

The collection as a living and active part of the design

Another foundation principle of the Koorie Heritage Trust is to facilitate access to cultural heritage material for the Aboriginal community. Despite the Trust's previous premises being almost 3 times larger, an ingenious method of turning internal 'walls' into display cases has enabled 20 times more of the Trust's collection to be displayed.

Rather than constructing solid partitions or wall systems, a series of joinery elements have been designed as stand-alone items, beautifully crafted and with a dual purpose. They define the spaces, but also provide a publicly accessible resource that encourages people to see, touch and experience items from the Trust's collection.

Endeavouring to break down walls, both metaphorically and physically, the display cases reveal the inner workings of a cultural facility – where staff, as custodians of the collection, are enveloped by the collection they are protecting. With access shared equally by the staff and the public, the joinery elements become 'positive dividers' that delineate private and public spaces, yet maintain transparency. In this way, the collection is interwoven into the general experience of the space, moving away from a conventional museum-like approach of static displays.

It is a hub for activity and engagement. It encourages you to open drawers, look [at] things through the top of the table, which has glass on it, and see artefacts within the table. The drawers all have artefacts from the collection. They are set at different levels so that from kids to adults, all can interact with the materials close at hand. It has a cantilever on one end, which allows people with wheelchairs to come in. We can have weaving workshops, where people sit around and use it. It could be used for art demonstrations.

—Jefa Greenaway interviewed by Elizabeth Dori Tunstall: 'The Koorie Heritage Trust re-centres Indigenous communities by design', *The Conversation*, 15 September 2015



The Koorie Heritage Trust project provides a desirable workplace for its staff and an accessible research facility for the community.

Image: Peter Bennetts.



Sparking engagement and exchange

A 7-m long ‘canoe’ table is a feature of the design and provides a focal point for visitors. It is a signifier of community engagement and exchange. While its form evokes a traditional bark canoe, its expression, detailing and construction use contemporary joinery techniques. The table references the scar tree that was an important community feature of the Trust’s previous premises. Scar trees represent Aboriginal custodianship of the land – based on a key understanding of only taking what was necessary (for the creation of bark canoes, shelters, shields or containers) and allowing the tree to continue living.

The design provides spaces for both formal and informal engagement. Flexible workshop rooms accommodate large groups of school children, or divide to create smaller meeting rooms. Seating areas at the entry and next to a shared staff and visitor kitchenette provide opportunities for conversation and social encounters as well as places for quiet reflection.

The project, built over three levels, required the ability to pull people up vertically through the building from a plaza level on the ground floor through an intermediate floor not part of the client’s tenancy to the uppermost level. A carefully calibrated engagement strategy, along with a considered level of cultural advocacy and design input, resulted in a design which referenced riverbanks, water and washed river pebbles. Contemporary references to carved trees, shield patterns, traditional canoes, and Indigenous astronomy in ceiling lights sought to evoke a sensory engagement with place and story.

—Jefa Greenaway, ‘Embracing cultural sensitivities that celebrate First Nations perspectives’, from *Our Voices: Indigeneity and Architecture*, (Kiddle R, Stewart PR and O’Brien K eds), ORO Editions and Gordon de Vries Studio, 2018

A ‘canoe’ table provides a place for meeting and discussion. Stand-alone, timber-framed glass display cases define spaces and showcase items from the Trust’s collection.

Image: Peter Bennetts.

Foregrounding Aboriginal perspectives

When they started the project, Lyons Architecture saw a beautiful space off Federation Square. Greenaway and Berg saw a place that had turned its back to the most significant element of the city – the river – and all of its cultural significance and heritage.

With the support and experience of Lyons, Greenaway and Berg were able to lead and drive the design process from an Aboriginal perspective, remaining involved throughout the project. Through this they have identified what is important to them as Aboriginal designers and practitioners, and what they believe is important for their community.

The project showcased culture in a manner which became accessible, visible, and celebratory. It reinforced the importance of connections to the landscape, the value of conversation within a cultural space, while encouraging the normalisation of Indigenous perspectives in the conception of a design solution. The use of Indigenous knowledge acted as a conduit between the Indigenous-led cultural organisation and the design team, while utilising the transferrable skills of Indigenous design thinking and education to provide a highly evolved layer of cultural meaning into the project.

—Jefa Greenaway, ‘Embracing cultural sensitivities that celebrate First Nations perspectives’, from *Our Voices: Indigeneity and Architecture*, (Kiddle R, Stewart PR and O’Brien K eds), ORO Editions and Gordon de Vries Studio, 2018

Supporting and empowering Aboriginal designers

Collaborating on this project, Greenaway and Berg have established a more prominent voice for Aboriginal designers and other professionals working on built environment projects. The project has been acknowledged in design and architecture awards, published in journals, and featured widely in both industry and mainstream media.

In addition, Greenaway and Berg have established the design advocacy organisation Indigenous Architecture and Design Victoria (IADV), a not-for-profit network of design practitioners, graduates and students.

The 2 main aims of IADV are:

- to encourage the First Nations community to be more engaged in architecture and design
- to encourage architects and designers to be more engaged with First Nations culture.

Since completing this project, Greenaway Architects has undertaken other community-related projects including Ngarara Place for RMIT University in Melbourne in collaboration with First Nations landscape designer Charles Solomon and artist Aroha Groves, and the recently completed University of Melbourne Student Precinct in collaboration with Lyons, Koning Eizenberg, NMBW, Architects EAT, Aspect Studios and Glas Urban.

Through enabling and supporting the work of emerging Aboriginal designers, a diversity of Aboriginal voices within contemporary Australian architecture is acknowledged. Recognising and supporting the contributions of Aboriginal people and culture to contemporary Australian society can help to form a more balanced perspective, contributing to a process of recalibration by educating the broader population about Aboriginal history, knowledge and living culture.

Where Indigenous agency is facilitated, empowerment and emancipation soon follow. Indigenous practitioners and academics are fast developing and consolidating their skills, knowledge and confidence here in Australia, as they begin to shape the conversation while being actively sought out to contribute to projects, policy and knowledge exchange ...

... international exchange among First Nations practitioners provides real potential for learning, benchmarking and collaboration.

The result of such engagement is revealing parallel work around Indigenous-determined protocols, processes and frameworks which seek to guide or codify a methodology that considers Indigenous culture among designers, [and] consumers of design, as well as a focus on the representation of culture in appropriate rather than 'appropriating' ways. Such work is endeavouring to safeguard the integrity of cultural considerations, while empowering practitioners (Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike) to implement strategies that are mindful and respectful of Indigenous knowledge and cultural expression.

- Jefa Greenaway, 'Embracing cultural sensitivities that celebrate First Nations perspectives', from *Our Voices: Indigeneity and Architecture*, (Kiddle R, Stewart PR and O'Brien K eds), ORO Editions and Gordon de Vries Studio, 2018

Further resources

Audio and video recordings

'Embedding Indigenous Placemaking Principles into Design Considerations: The Koorie Heritage Trust at Federation Square', Jefa Greenaway, Spotlight Productions for Koorie Heritage Trust Inc., 26 May 2020, <https://korieheritagetrust.com.au/about-us/history/2015-present-yarra-building-at-federation-square-melbourne/>

'Jefa Greenaway – Greenaway Architects – The Time is Now for Blak Design', REAL Lecture, Deakin University, recorded 25 August 2021, REAL Lectures channel, YouTube website, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ki_Tmpmhxe8

Books and writing

Greenaway J (2018) 'Embracing cultural sensitivities that celebrate First Nations perspectives', *Our Voices: Indigeneity and Architecture*, (Kiddle R, Stewart PR and O'Brien K eds), ORO Editions and Gordon de Vries Studio.

Kennedy R, Kelly M and Greenaway J (2017) *Australian Indigenous Design Charter*, <https://indigenousdesigncharter.com.au/>. (Initially focused on communication design, but has now evolved into a broader examination of the International Indigenous Design Charter – protocols for sharing Indigenous knowledge in commercial design practice.)

Pieris A, Johnson F, McGaw J, Tootell N and Berg R (2014) *Indigenous Place: Contemporary Buildings, Landmarks and Places of Significance in South East Australia and Beyond*, University of Melbourne and Indigenous Architecture and Design Victoria.

Tunstall ED (2015) 'The Koorie Heritage Trust re-centres Indigenous communities by design', *The Conversation*, 15 September.

Edgar R (2016) 'Architects learn from an Indigenous sense of place', *The Age*, 16 August.

Credits

Research and writing:
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