

Case study

BILYA KOORT BOODJA



Local Aboriginal stories are revealed through the building and exhibition experience



Exhibition experiences by Thylacine Design were developed concurrently with the building design.
Image: Peter Bennetts.

Quick facts

Project type:
Cultural centre

Location:
Northam, Ballardong Region,
Western Australia

**Aboriginal language
landscape group:**
Ballardong Noongar /
Nyoongar

Project time frame: 2016–18

Client: Shire of Northam

Project scale: 2,300 m²

Project team:
Architecture
Iredale Pedersen Hook

Interpretation
Thylacine Design
Landscape CAPA

**Environmentally
sustainable design**
Full Circle Design Services

Curator Janet Vost

Media designer
Mental Media

Lighting designer
Illuminated Design

**Shire of Northam
Aboriginal Advisory Group
2017–18 members:**

Kathleen Davis – respected Elder; Pat Davis – respected Elder and language specialist; Boyd Kickett – respected; Elder and botanical specialist; Janet Kickett – respected Elder; Yvonne Kickett – respected Elder and botanical specialist; Claire McGuire – respected Elder; Deborah Moody – respected Elder and language specialist;

Maria Nickels – respected Elder; Veronica McGuire – respected Elder; Delys Dick – community member; Rueben Kickett – community member, younger generations; Kirk Garlett – art and culture knowledge, younger generations; Jason Whittaker, CEO, Shire of Northam

Awards:

- 2019** Architecture of Necessity Finalist, Virserum Konsthall, Sweden
- 2019** Architectural Design / Cultural Architecture Honorable Mention, Architecture Masterprize
- 2019** Cultural Pavilion Finalist, Architizer A+ Awards

Bilya Koort Boodja Centre for Nyoongar Culture and Environmental Knowledge is located on the river foreshore in Ballardong Nyoongar Country in the town of Northam in south-west Western Australia.

Key outcomes

Healthy Country

Foregrounding Aboriginal care and custodianship of Country as key knowledge, this project brought many people together to share stories and promote a greater awareness and understanding of First Nations' perspectives, experiences and deep connections with Country.

Visual and physical connections to the Goguljar / Avon River are made through building siting and establishing sightlines, celebrating the importance of the river to the Nyoongar people.

Healthy community

In a place where the entire population of Aboriginal peoples was forcibly removed to a native settlement 200 km away in 1933, and only allowed to return in 1954, the creation and design of the centre itself is a tangible symbol of reunification for the Ballardong Nyoongar People and their rights to Country.

Cultural competency

Consultation with Aboriginal community enabled the project team to incorporate various perspectives into the design. The architects and exhibition designers worked closely with a project-specific Aboriginal advisory group that included community members and Elder representatives of key families in the region. The project provided an educational opportunity for the project team, client and public to develop a deeper cultural awareness and respect for First Nations' experiences and culture.

The building extends along the edge of the river and is elevated above the floodplain.

Image: Peter Bennetts.

Spatial implications / tips for designers

Stories of place should inform the design concept.

Sightlines and connections beyond the site boundaries are important considerations for building placement, orientation, paths of movement, framed views, apertures and design responses generally.

Building edges can be opportunities for connecting with Country.





A slatted screen of recycled jarrah (djarraly) timbers gives the impression of looking through a wooded river's edge, like that which existed here before colonisation.

Image: Peter Bennetts.

Bilya Koort Boodja, means 'river, heart, land' in the Nyoongar language. The centre is perched on the shore of Goguljar (the Avon River), at the confluence of Goguljar the Mortlock River. It is a place for holding, meeting, teaching, learning and ceremony. It is a 'keeping house' for collecting traditional and contemporary Ballardong Nyoongar culture, oral histories and environmental knowledge and passing it on to future generations.

The building includes educational and community functions, exhibition space, educational spaces, meeting spaces and a community gathering circle. The centre also helps local Aboriginal business development and enterprise and is a regional tourist attraction supporting the financial and economic development of the local community.

Following Aboriginal leadership

Bilya Koort Boodja is a community building design that responds to the perspectives of the local Aboriginal community. Through the design process, the project team determined the building should avoid referencing Western-colonial typologies and building forms existing elsewhere in the town. Instead, the team realised it was more appropriate to give the centre its own unique expression, responding to the landscape as perceived through Ballardong Nyoongar eyes. To implement this approach, the Shire of Northam extended an open invitation to members of the local Aboriginal community, inviting them to become part of an advisory group for the project.

Establishing a diverse and inclusive advisory group

The Shire of Northam Aboriginal Advisory Group was formed from project conception, including 12 community members and Elder representatives of key families in the region. Each respected Elder brought particular knowledge, including language and botanical knowledge. Care was also taken to ensure diverse perspectives were represented from different generations, genders, and various nations and language groups associated with the project.

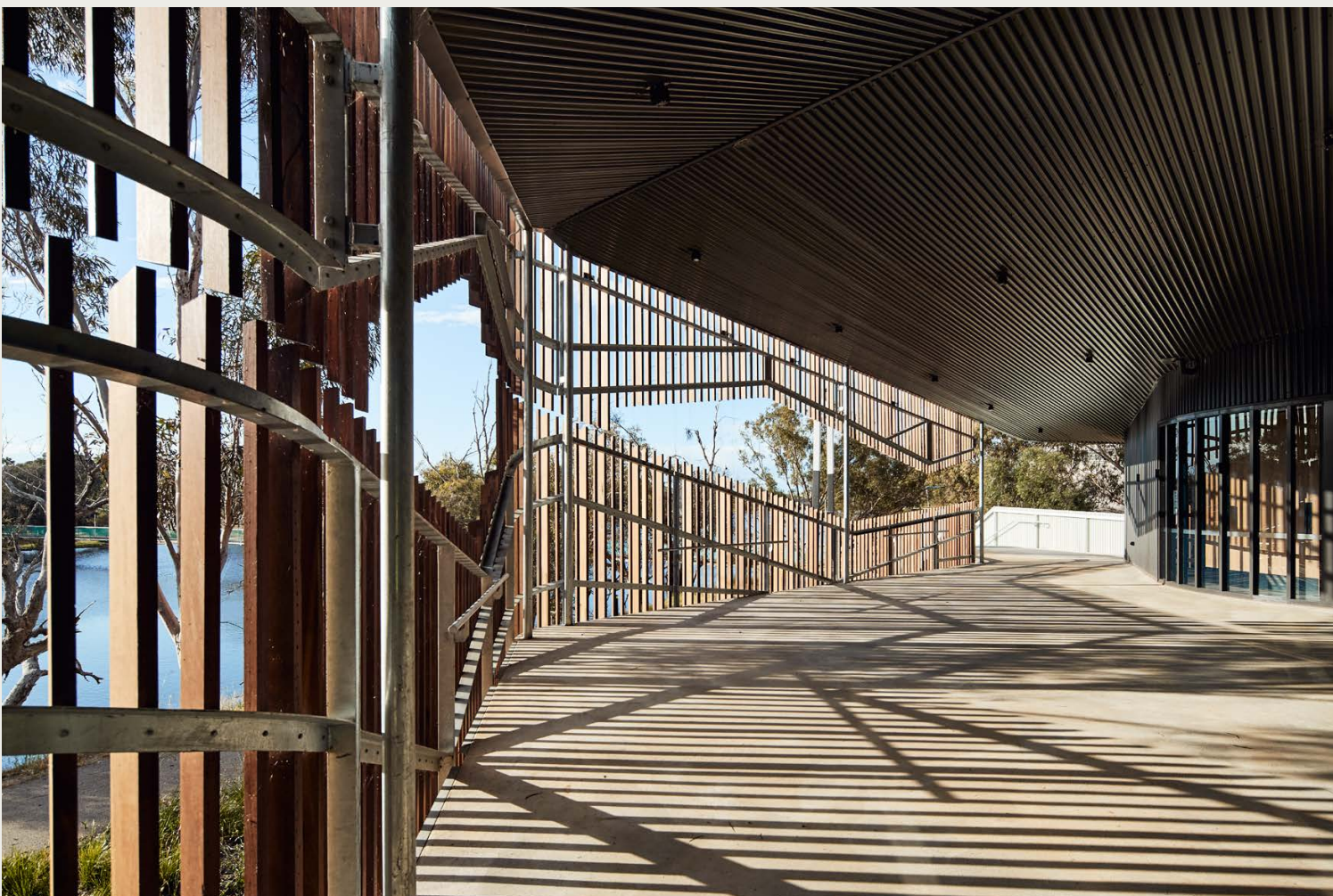
The advisory group was engaged by the project client, whose representatives had a long history living in the area and understood the project's complex socio-political and cultural context.

The advisory group contributed to the project brief, including deciding on preferred functions for the centre and how Nyoongar culture would be presented. The design team – including both the architects, Iredale Pedersen Hook, and interpretation designers, Thylacine – worked with close cultural guidance from this core group, along with wider community consultation at key moments.

The Aboriginal advisory group provided leadership throughout the life of the project, from initial formation, through design and construction, continuing into everyday operations.

The Advisory Group requested a distinct building that did not replicate any building type in town and one that reflected Nyoongar responses to landscape and Country. The project has an outward-facing educational function for visitors, tourists and school groups, and is a local community asset for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal families to gather and celebrate Nyoongar culture.

—‘Bilya Koort Boodja: Centre for Nyoongar Culture and Environmental Knowledge (2018)’, from *Campuses on Countries, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Design Framework* at The University of Queensland, The University of Queensland, <https://nacchocommunique.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Framework-UQ-Campuses-on-Countries-2022.pdf>

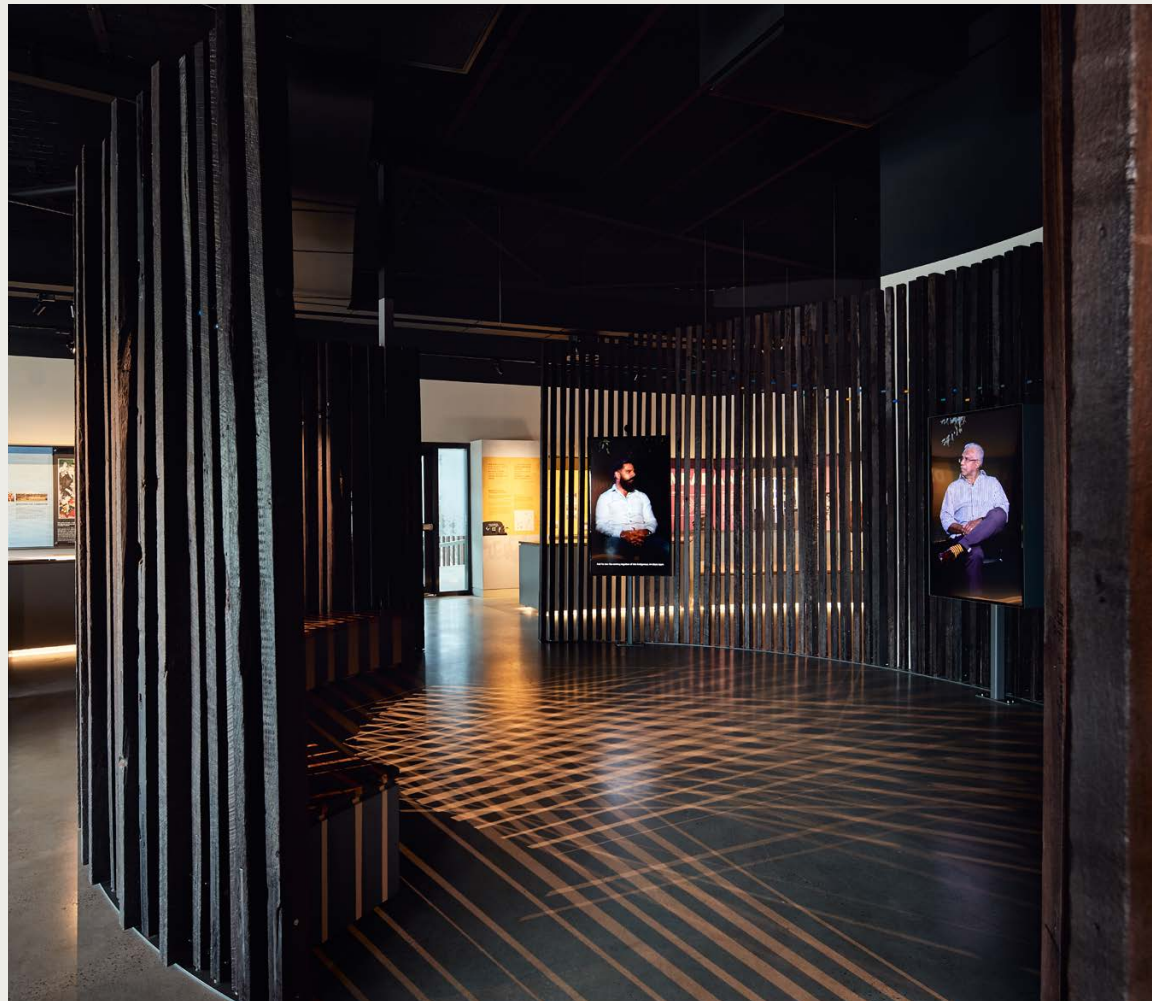


When inside the timber screen of the verandah, the experience is like looking through trees towards the river. Spaces are organised to respond to sightlines and views of Ballardong Nyoongar Country surrounding and beyond the site.

Image: Peter Bennetts.

The digital yarnning circle is a particularly powerful element that includes a broad range of voices from the community. A series of videos shows individuals from community telling yarns around a campfire.

Image: Peter Bennetts.



Integrating interpretation and exhibition design with building design

Architects Iredale Pedersen Hook worked collaboratively from the start with the exhibition designers Thylacine. Engaging both disciplines from the start of the project was important as it enabled the story and narrative of the building and content to be developed concurrently with the overall design. The result is a holistic and highly integrated experience.

Supporting Aboriginal employment, businesses and enterprise

The centre also has a practical agenda for its local community in helping Aboriginal business development and enterprise. It is a regional tourist attraction supporting the financial and economic development of the local community.

Caring for and designing with Country

Underscored by genuine and ongoing community consultation, the centre is imbued with a strong sense of place. Architectural moves such as siting, orientation and the design of openings all respond to Ballardong Nyoongar knowledge and caring for Country. Functional spaces are encapsulated by low, sinuous forms clad in dark, profiled metal sheeting, perching just above the

1-in-100-year floodplain. These undulating forms stretch out along the river shore, where a generously wide verandah overlooks Goguljar (the Avon River) to the west.

Afternoon sun and heat load is managed with a rhythmic, slatted screen of recycled jarrah timbers (djarraly in Nyoongar), giving the impression of looking through a wooded river's edge, such as that which existed before colonisation. This verandah flows seamlessly into the entry foyer of the building, the main connective tissue of the centre. Two main curved spaces face each other off this foyer: a large workshop room and the main exhibition space. Behind the foyer, an array of back-of-house spaces includes meeting rooms and offices. These spaces are not organised in reference to Western typologies, but rather are organised to respond to sightlines and views of Ballardong Nyoongar Country surrounding and beyond the site.

The concept of Caring for Country was carried through the delivery stage by integrating low-impact environmental design and building strategies. These included elevating the building above the floodplain for longevity, using recycled materials, collecting and using rainwater, and installing a photovoltaic array that powers the building and its low-energy LED lighting.

Providing access to Country and culturally safe space

The socio-spatial brief for the centre was formed by the Aboriginal advisory group in consultation with the wider Ballardong Nyoongar community. They determined the educational and community functions of the centre, eventually including exhibition space, educational spaces, meeting spaces and a community gathering circle.

An informal gathering circle is housed within the wide verandah overlooking Goguljar / Avon River, directly outside the main entry. It is accessible to the community any time of day. The outdoor circulation spaces, including polycarbonate-clad accessibility ramps and staircases, are well-lit at night to ensure visibility and safe movement.

Internal meeting rooms and the large workshop space also provide multiple places for various community groups to gather.

Giving space to tell the truth

In a place where the entire population of its Aboriginal peoples was forcibly removed to a native settlement 200 km away in 1933, and only allowed to return in 1954, the creation and design of the centre itself is a tangible symbol of reunification for the Ballardong Nyoongar People and their rights to Country.

The exhibition design and interpretive content was developed through ongoing discussions with the Aboriginal advisory group and other Traditional Custodians from this area. At the centre of the exhibition space is a yarning circle featuring digital oral storytelling. This circle is subtly separated from the main circulation area with timber screening, referencing a clearing in a forest. The local jarrah (djarraly) timbers are engraved with the names of more than 100 Nyoongar People who were displaced during colonisation.

The digital yarning circle includes a broad range of voices from many generations of the community. A series of portrait-oriented video screens display recorded stories, interlinked and played in sequence to form a conversation of yarns around a campfire. As the visitor passes through the 'rings of knowledge', hard histories about the stolen generations are told as first-person narratives, leading into the middle of the circle where community members have a yarn about language, culture and Country. The variety of rings presents a variety of content, suitable for different age groups.



Location plan

Image: Iredale Pedersen Hook.

Polycarbonate sheeting to circulation spaces creates silhouettes as people move through.

Image: Peter Bennetts.



The timber-slatted screen of recycled jarrah (djarraly) timbers on the western side reflects the contours of the river it faces.

Image: Peter Bennetts.

Preserving and celebrating Ballardong Nyoongar culture

Surrounding the yarning circle, the main circulation space is populated with a flowing series of displays showcasing Ballardong Nyoongar culture and heritage, including specific environmental knowledges such as the 6 Nyoongar seasons and the flora and fauna of Country. Graphic and textual displays line the walls, interspersed with wall-mounted cases containing objects of cultural and educational significance. Free-standing cases arrayed throughout alternately contain more object display space or digital screens showing moving graphics.

Bilya Koort Boodja is dedicated to the preservation and sharing of Ballardong Nyoongar culture and history, and highlights in particular the land management practices and knowledges of its traditional custodians. The exhibition design by Thylacine allows visitors to discover, at their own pace, the knowledge and stories embedded within the centre. Spaces are carefully planned to allow for individual discovery as visitors journey through the spaces.

The verandah flows seamlessly into the entry foyer of the building, the main connective tissue of the centre.

Image: Peter Bennetts.



Iredale Pedersen Hook has used common materials in different ways to express the region's environment. The sinuous timber-slatted screen, created from recycled jarrah, on the western side reflects the contours of the river it faces and gives the impression, when inside, of looking through trees towards the river. From outside, the timber battens create a similar impression of looking into a wooded area which, prior to European settlement, would have lined the river. Creating an effect of light and shadow, the timber screening complements the polycarbonate sheeting which, when backlit at night, creates performance in itself by creating silhouettes as people move beyond. The screens also express the relationship between inside and out, creating transitional zones.

—Cassandra Simpson, 'Bilya Koort Boodja: Iredale Pedersen Hook',
The Architect, WA Community Edition 2022

Further resources

Audio and video recordings

Bilya Koort Boodja Centre for Nyoongar Culture and Environmental Knowledge website, <https://www.bilyakoortboodja.com/>.

Books and writing

Architizer (no date) *Bilya Koort Boodja Centre for Nyoongar Culture and Environmental Knowledge* webpage, Architizer website, <https://architizer.com/projects/bilya-koort-boodja-centre-for-nyoongar-culture-and-environmental-knowledge/>.

Hromek D (2023) 'What is cultural safety and how do we design for it?', *Architecture Australia*, January 2023, <https://architectureau.com/articles/what-is-cultural-safety-and-how-do-we-design-for-it/>.

SWALSC (no date) *Kaartdijin Noongar – Noongar Knowledge* website, South West Aboriginal Land & Sea Council <https://www.noongarculture.org.au/>.

The University of Queensland (2018) 'Bilya Koort Boodja: Centre for Nyoongar Culture and Environmental Knowledge (2018)', from *Campuses on Countries, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Design Framework at The University of Queensland*, The University of Queensland, <https://nacchocommunique.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/FRAMEWORK-UQ-Campuses-on-Countries-2022.pdf>.

No Sugar, a play by Jack Davis. Commissioned for the 1985 Perth Festival, *No Sugar* is set in Northam, Western Australia. The play is part of Davis's *The First Born* trilogy which comprises 3 plays that trace the history of Aboriginal people in Western Australia from 1829 to the present. *No Sugar* explores the harsh treatment of the Western Australian Aboriginal (Nyoongar) people and the destructive government 'protection' policies in 1930s Australia. It also celebrates resilience in the face of brutality and determination to maintain culture.

Credits

Research and writing:

Isabelle Toland and Janelle Woo (Aileen Sage Architects)

In collaboration with:

Dillon Kombumerri (Government Architect NSW)