

## Case study

# CASINO ABORIGINAL MEDICAL SERVICE



Designed to provide a comfortable and welcoming place for Aboriginal community members, recognising its role as an important social hub

Brick paving made from local earth designates entry and waiting areas as community meeting spaces – for many people a visit to the medical centre is a very social experience.

Image: Toby Scott.

### Quick facts

**Project type:**  
Medical centre

**Location:**  
Djanangmum / Casino,  
NSW

**Aboriginal language  
landscape group:**  
Galibal, Bundjalung Nation

**Project time frame:**  
Completed 2016

**Client:**  
Bulgarr Ngaru Medical  
Aboriginal Corporation, in  
partnership with Office of  
Aboriginal and Torres Strait  
Islander Health (OATSIH)

**Project scale:**  
600 m<sup>2</sup>, single storey

**Project team:**  
**Architecture**  
Kevin O'Brien Architects in  
association with AECOM  
Architecture and Design

**Project management,  
engineering, construction**  
AECOM

Bulgarr Ngaru Medical  
Aboriginal Corporation

**Awards:**  
2016 Commendation, Gold  
Coast and Northern  
Rivers Regional  
Awards, Australian  
Institute of Architects



**Bulgarr Ngaru Medical Aboriginal Corporation provides health services to the Bundjalung, Gumbaynggirr and Yaegl people of northern New South Wales. For many Aboriginal communities, a medical centre is a social and often convivial meeting place for families.**

### **Key outcomes**

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#### **Healthy community**

The medical centre supports healthy community by providing a place where patients, families, visitors and staff feel safe, respected and supported because their needs and concerns have been listened to and understood.

#### **Cultural competency**

Consultation with Aboriginal community and staff informed the development of the design. Engagement of an experienced Aboriginal architect helped the client agency and project team to develop a deeper cultural awareness and respect for Aboriginal people and culture.

#### **Better places**

The place-specific design of the centre connects the building with its broader location and landscape. Local materials with a relationship to Country have been used, and views to outside from the interior have been framed to reference specific sites and stories.

### **Spatial implications / tips for designers**

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**Acknowledge and celebrate place-specific Aboriginal culture and heritage.**

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**Views and connections beyond site boundaries can be important considerations for siting, orientation and paths of movement.**

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**Investigate construction and landscape materials that are made locally from local materials, and sourced and manufactured responsibly.**

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**Consider how construction details might interplay with the natural environment and add cultural meaning and value.**

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**Take the time to build trust and get to know members of the community and staff. This will enable a better understanding of cultural protocols and concerns, informing a design response that is sensitive and welcoming to the local community.**

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**Cutting a window through to the street to frame a view of St Marys Catholic Church down the road acknowledges the charged silence of the past 2 centuries.**

Image: Kevin O'Brien Architects.



**Central to the workspace, the courtyard brings natural light into the surrounding spaces. This visual connection with the natural world helps to provide relief from high stress levels.**  
Image: Toby Scott.

**Casino, in the NSW Richmond Valley near the border of Queensland, on Bundjalung Country, is home to around 10,000 people. The town has strong connections with Aboriginal community. The Casino Aboriginal Medical Service (CAMS) building provides a dedicated place to service the medical needs of local Aboriginal communities. It is located on one of the main streets of the town and is a single-storey, predominantly brick building planned around a central courtyard.**

## **Sensing Country**

The design of the building recognises the importance for Aboriginal people of 'sensing Country'. Through the design of the roof form, the floor plan and the choice of natural materials, a sense of connection to the natural world outside (the sky or the ground) is always present – for both visitors and staff.

Along the length of a central corridor the roof tilts upward so that high-level glazing on either side lets natural light into the consultation rooms and provides a view of the sky. Walls, and in some areas floors, are predominantly brick, made from local earth. A central courtyard provides an internal focal point and brings natural light and nature into the interior of the building.

Ways of engaging with all of the senses are employed throughout the design, expressing an understanding of 'listening to Country' and 'sensing Country'. Translating these ideas into the design of the building has resulted in a project that is grounded in its place and community.

## Asserting a strong presence

Casino Aboriginal Medical Service (CAMS) has a robust street presence, firmly asserting its place in the town centre. The brick street elevation is strikingly different to the surrounding buildings in its flatness and refined detailing. The front windows and entry are set back from this solid facade to provide protected openings.

Some of the facade bricks have their corners cut off to create subtle patterns in certain areas, and reveal the solidity of the wall. The cut corners of the bricks are also a way of responding to the weather. When it rains, drops gather and fall from the cut edges onto the pavement below, like tears, recognising past pains and local massacre sites. Poetic subtleties play an important symbolic role.

## Using materials of Country

Bricks made from the earth of Bundjalung Country feature heavily in the design. They are used selectively with subtle details and patterns that insert cultural meaning into specific parts of the building. Solid brick paving to the entry and courtyard provides robust, hard-wearing surface, as well as indicating meeting and social places.

The bricks for the project are made from the earth of Bundjalung Country. At the base of this robust facade, the earthy terracotta-coloured footpath appears as though the bricks from Country have washed over the town street, claiming the footpath as part of the building and part of the community.

Image: Toby Scott.

As is common throughout Australia, the tentacles of the frontier wars linger across the past two centuries as a charged silence. This was acknowledged by cutting a window with a gun metal reveal perpendicular to the street so as to frame a view of St Mary's Catholic Church down the road. Mediating this reconciled relationship was brick sourced from Bundjalung Country, set out as solid elevation with two patterned territories (one for mothers and one for fathers) of diagonally cut bricks either side of the window. Over time, each territory will form water stains from rain dripping down the cuts leaving crying stains bearing witness to the power of healing.

—Kevin O'Brien, 'Architecture and consent', from *Our Voices: Indigeneity and Architecture*, (Kiddle R, Stewart PR and O'Brien K eds), ORO Editions and Gordon de Vries Studio, 2018



## Understanding the experiences, challenges and concerns of community and staff

This project grew from a deep understanding of both staff and community needs and experiences. Taking the time to get to know members of the community and staff, and build their trust, has resulted in a highly nuanced and sophisticated design that responds not only to a specific community but also more broadly to the experiences of many Aboriginal communities in Australia.

From a functional perspective, a clear distinction was required to ensure the privacy of staff and patients, which is critical to the medical service. Consequently, the building has 3 distinct sections: the street-facing section accommodating public areas (waiting areas plus reception), the central consultation rooms, and the west wing accommodating staff workspaces (offices, technical rooms, meeting rooms, kitchen).

The designers sought to find a way to both open and close the building to the environment, accommodating the functional requirements of privacy while still opening up to natural light where possible.

## Responding to the needs of the building's users

Providing a place that strongly addresses the specific needs of both the community and staff was of highest importance. There was a strong ambition to provide relief to the medical staff from the high stress levels of their job. The maximisation of natural light throughout and the provision of the central courtyard were key to this ambition.

Central to the workspace, the courtyard brings natural light into the interior spaces. Its building materials and local native plant species connect people back to Country not only through colour and texture, but also through the scent of the plants, and the sound of the breeze through the leaves.

This project is robust and strong in its presence, yet subtle in its details and methods of expressing and representing Country and the community it serves. It illustrates a successful translation of a deep cultural understanding through its careful consideration of both the staff and community experiences and needs.

## Taking time to build trust

At the outset of the project, AECOM and the clients recognised the need for an architect who would be able to gain the trust of the community and fully understand their needs. Aboriginal architect Kevin O'Brien was appointed to work in collaboration with AECOM, staying with the project from beginning to end to ensure the integrity of the design was carried through.

O'Brien's office were the lead designers, responsible for concept design, design development and detailed design, with AECOM providing construction documentation services and support to the design team throughout the process. O'Brien's approach as an architect was to take time to speak with the staff and local community, to build a sense of trust, and ensure an understanding of their critical needs and desires for the building.

The courtyard provides an opportunity for a planted green space of local Indigenous species. Bricks and plants connect people back to Country, not only through colour and texture, but also through the scent of the plants, and the sound of the breeze through their leaves.

Image: Toby Scott.



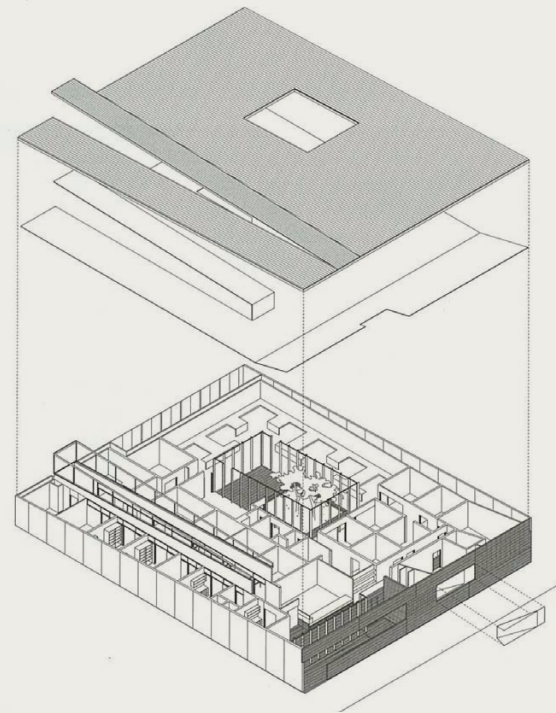
Of specific importance is that through an in-depth series of conversations with members of the community and the CAMS over a period of almost two years trust was established. Information, thoughts and feelings were shared on the back of this established trust that led to design decisions about how staff and community needed to use this building.

— Kevin O'Brien, 'Architecture and consent', from *Our Voices: Indigeneity and Architecture*, (Kiddle R, Stewart PR and O'Brien K eds), ORO Editions and Gordon de Vries Studio, 2018

## Recalibrating our relationship with the built environment

Through this project, and other projects, O'Brien and his team demonstrate an approach to the design of the built environment that is an important voice in Australian contemporary architecture. The recognition of practising Aboriginal architects and the contribution they make, alongside all other practising contemporary architects in Australia, is of enormous value in the recalibration of how we develop and understand our built environment. If we are to shift towards a more balanced society – where First Nations communities and people are no longer overlooked or considered a remote issue – then we must privilege their voices and provide them with opportunities and support.

In this design, O'Brien not only expresses his own voice and approach, but also draws attention to the stories, history and experiences of the local Aboriginal community. Expressed in abstract ways, through the publication, writing and speaking of these ideas and stories, a deep and powerful message is embedded within the design through its broad impact and recognition as an important work of Australian contemporary architecture.



**Tilting a portion of the roof up over the central circulation spine brings natural light into the corridor and adjacent rooms. The central courtyard brings light and local Indigenous plants into the building. Through these elements, a visual connection with the natural world is always present.**

'Exploded axonometric' drawing:

Kevin O'Brien Architects.

Images: Toby Scott.

Another dimension to the sustainability of Indigenous designs is the inherent preciousness of the object or design because of its increased meaning. Imbuing the object with spirit through its story increases its value to the owner, who will preserve it for longer. It goes against the consumerist 'throwaway' society. The object has life, and that life is valued.

—Alison Page, 'Design: Building on Country' from *Contemporary Indigenous Architecture and Design*, First Knowledges Series (Neale M ed), 2021

## Expressing culture through architecture

Similar to the use of bricks made from the earth of Bundjalung Country, the plantings in the courtyard are local indigenous species specific to the context. The planning of the building is also an expression of specific cultural and community needs, providing privacy where required as well as social and connected spaces where appropriate.

The subtle detail and patterning of the brick street frontage is abstract but deeply symbolic, avoiding literal representation. Views looking out from within the building relate to the internal functions of the spaces and to the broader context – framing or demarcating external spaces and views and making intangible aspects evident through the design.

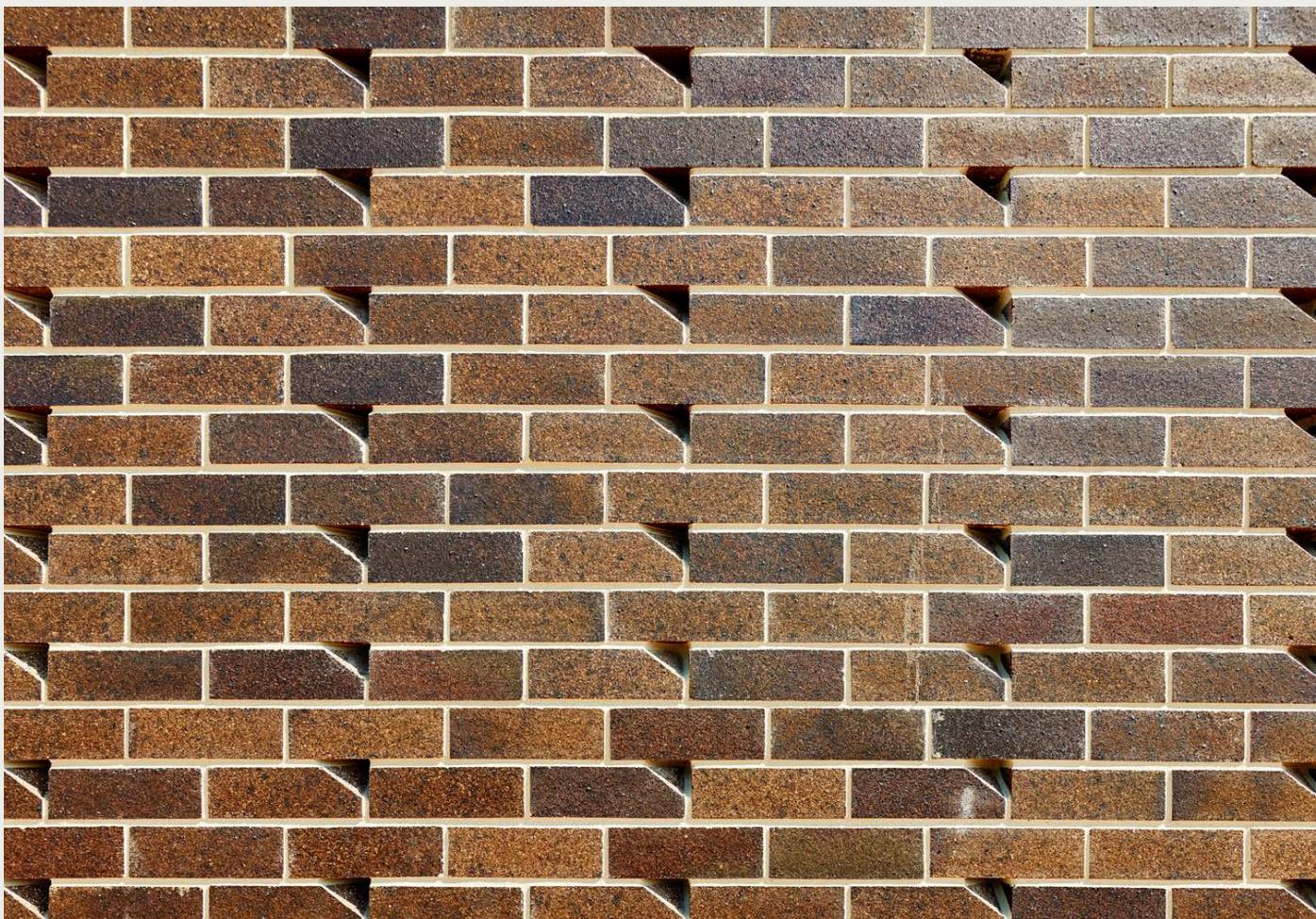
Adaptability of the design was made possible through the use of a simple structural system that is fixed and rigid, while the internal spaces are more malleable and can accommodate change. The material palette and construction methods chosen are common in domestic construction. This kept the construction cost down and ensures ease of future maintenance.

## Maintaining identity and ownership

Rather than being a translation and interpretation of Aboriginal cultural heritage and traditional knowledge, the cultural expression and intellectual property inherent in this project belong to the Aboriginal architect who created the design – driven by a strong desire and need to serve the needs of the community for whom it was created.

The funding client's recognition of the significance of commissioning an Aboriginal architect to lead this process, along with the support of the broader team, has resulted in a highly successful project that maintains identity and ownership of how Aboriginal culture is expressed in contemporary architecture.

Having Aboriginal built environment practitioners at the forefront of significant community projects is integral to ensuring that Aboriginal people are able to maintain, control and protect their intangible heritage, and develop their own identity and representation of culture.



Poetic subtleties play an important symbolic role. The cut corners of the facade bricks respond to the weather: when it rains, drops gather and fall from the cut edges onto the pavement below.

Image: Toby Scott.

## Recognising the contribution of Aboriginal people and culture

Kevin O'Brien is a descendent of the Kaurereg and Meriam peoples of the Torres Strait Islands in far north Queensland. While not specifically local to the area, being able to draw on the cultural heritage, knowledge and experience of his own background enabled O'Brien to apply an understanding of social behaviours and protocols that are not otherwise evident or explicit.

Through the body of his work, and the increased publication and acknowledgement of his voice as an important contemporary Australian architect, the contribution of First Nations people and culture in contemporary Australian society will be better recognised.

## Establishing robust design principles

While the level of detail and refinement of Kevin O'Brien's design documents for the project were lost to some extent in the process of translation to construction documentation, the high-level design ambitions were carried through as robust design principles that have provided a highly successful result for all.

... the making of architecture has become ever so much more complicated with the industrialised division of what once were the central roles of the architect. Many consultants contribute to the design and many contractors build the building. In this setting, it is perhaps an act of self-preservation to sit in behind the loudest voices at the table. However, architects of Indigenous heritage must lead the architectural strategy and direction. Sitting in behind other commercial practices leading projects is akin to waiting on a table for scraps; or even worse, waiting outside the tent. In short, to enter the contest, we must stand and speak. And write.

—Kevin O'Brien, 'Architecture and consent', 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

'Designing with Country: A way to think about projects that engage with First Nations communities and contexts', Kevin O'Brien, Reason & Reckoning Symposium led by Dr Fiona Foley for Griffith University Creative Arts Research Institute, Creative Arts Research Institute channel, YouTube website:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sc1FJsR3nIA&t=1s>.

'In Conversation with Kevin O'Brien', Indigenous Urbanism podcast, recorded 14 September 2018.  
<https://indigenousurbanism.simplecast.com/episodes/in-conversation-with-kevin-obrien>.

### Books and writing

O'Brien K (2018) 'Architecture and Consent', *Our Voices: Indigeneity and Architecture*, (Kiddle R, Stewart PR and O'Brien K eds), ORO Editions and Gordon de Vries Studio.

Memmott P and Page A (2021) 'Placemaking in Country' (Ch 7) and 'Contemporary Indigenous Architecture and Design' (Ch 8), from *First Knowledges Design: Building on Country*, First Knowledges Series (Neale M ed), Thames & Hudson Australia.

### Credits

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