

Better Placed



Good practice guidance on how to respond
to Country in the planning, design and delivery of
built environment projects in NSW

GOVERNMENT
ARCHITECT
NEW SOUTH WALES



Design objectives for NSW

Seven objectives define the key considerations in the design of the built environment.



Better fit
contextual, local
and of its place



Better performance
sustainable, adaptable
and durable



Better for community
inclusive, connected
and diverse



Better for people
safe, comfortable
and liveable



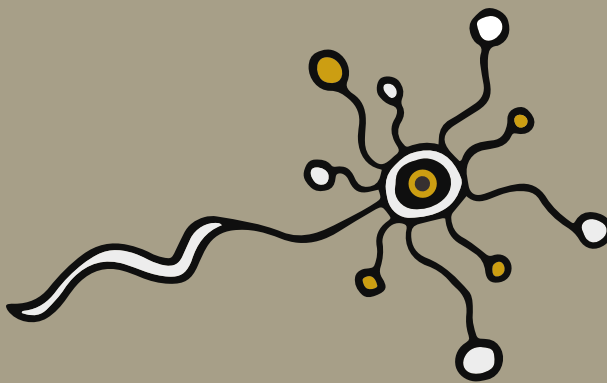
Better working
functional, efficient
and fit for purpose



Better value
creating and
adding value



Better look and feel
engaging, inviting
and attractive



GN ASW

Feedback

The framework is an evolving document reflecting an increasing body of knowledge and practice. We encourage government, industry and Aboriginal community to continue providing Government Architect NSW (GANSW) with feedback on what is working well and how the framework can be improved.

Please send comments and your contact details to: government.architect@planning.nsw.gov.au

This feedback will be recorded and incorporated into a review of the framework by the end of 2027.

Contributors and acknowledgements

This framework has been informed by engagement through interviews and workshop discussions with selected stakeholders including an advisory panel of Traditional Custodians, representatives from community organisations, and government. This document has been written by and with Aboriginal experts in spatial design in collaboration with GANSW staff. We express our deep gratitude to the following individuals and communities who have contributed to the development of this framework:

Aboriginal consultants

Balarinji
Carroll Go-Sam
Cox Inall Ridgeway
Djinjama
Flying Fish Blue
Future Black Design
Old Ways, New
Thirriwirri
Yerrabingin
Zakpage
Zion Engagement and Planning

Aboriginal advisory panel

Ruby Langton-Batty, Frances Bodkin, Terri Janke, Linda Kennedy, Shannon Foster, Alison Page, Yatu Widders-Hunt.

Aboriginal land councils

NSW Aboriginal Land Council; Deerubbin, Gandangara, La Perouse, Metropolitan and Tharawal local Aboriginal land councils

Aboriginal organisations

Aboriginal Housing Company, Darug Custodian Aboriginal Corporation, Darug Tribal Aboriginal Corporation, Guringai Tribal Link Aboriginal Corporation, Kurranulla Aboriginal Organisation.

NSW Government

Aboriginal Affairs; Department of Planning and Environment including the Aboriginal Strategy and Outcomes team, Aboriginal Network, and the Science, Economics and Insights Division; Infrastructure NSW; NSW Treasury; Department of Regional NSW; Health Infrastructure; Sydney Metro; NSW Department of Education including School Infrastructure NSW; Greater Cities Commission.

Local government

Aboriginal liaison officers from Sydney City, Parramatta, Cumberland, Campsie, Canterbury-Bankstown, and Northern Beaches councils.

Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians, the First Peoples of Australia. We acknowledge their many Countries, knowledges and cultures. We acknowledge their evolving, living cultures and dynamic relationships with Country. We pay our respects to their Elders – past, present, and future. We also pay our respects to the cultural knowledge-holders who have guided us in the development of this project.

The NSW Government does not speak for Country in the sense that word is understood by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. However, this project is led by Aboriginal professionals within NSW Government collaborating with Aboriginal Traditional Custodians and knowledge-holders. New South Wales is Aboriginal land, so throughout this document Aboriginal people are referred to specifically, rather than First Nations, or Torres Strait Islander peoples. The Connecting with Country Framework is informed largely by the experiences and knowledges of people who work on, and are from, Countries in and around the Sydney basin. We acknowledge that further work is required to determine the appropriateness of this framework for the other Countries of New South Wales.

Aboriginal Elders from the Sydney region engaging with their ancestral cultural heritage of middens, now captured in colonial architecture as shell lime mortar
Macquarie Street, Sydney.



Aboriginal staff joint foreword



Amanda McCarthy
Mithaka
Director
Aboriginal People
& Cultural Affairs



Liz Dargin
Wiradjuri
Chair Department
of Planning and
Environment
Aboriginal Network



Dillon Kombumerri
Yugambbeh/Quandmooka
Principal Architect
GANSW

The concept of creating a built environment that promotes environmental sustainability, climate change action, and healthy communities is not a new one. First Nations peoples around the world have long understood the importance of living in balance with the natural world, and have developed traditional practices and knowledge to support this way of life.

As we face the urgent challenges of climate change and environmental degradation, we are now recognising the importance of creating better places that support our health and wellbeing, while minimising our impact on the planet.

In this document, we share the stories and experiences of Aboriginal communities, cultural advisers and built environment professionals who have been at the forefront of integrating traditional knowledge with modern technologies and approaches to create innovative solutions to the complex challenges we face.

From green building practices and energy-efficient technologies to regenerative landscapes, Aboriginal communities can lead the way in transforming the built environment to promote sustainability, resilience and community health. Their cultural practices reflect a deep understanding of the interconnectedness of all living things, and a commitment to building a more equitable world for generations to come.

As we reflect on the progress that has been made, we are reminded of the importance of collaboration, new thinking, and a commitment to building a sustainable future. We hope this document will inspire others to join us on the path to recognise the value of Aboriginal knowledge and the importance of creating a built environment that supports our health and wellbeing, while respecting the natural world.

Minister's statement



The Hon. Paul Scully
Minister for Planning
and Public Spaces

I am delighted to present to you the Connecting with Country Framework, a comprehensive guide that underscores the importance of responding to and preserving Aboriginal cultural heritage in our urban planning and design endeavours. This framework not only acknowledges the existing policies, strategies, and processes in place but also serves as a valuable resource to support and enhance these initiatives.

The challenges posed by climate change have created a pressing need to create sustainable, resilient urban spaces. The Connecting with Country Framework provides practical ways to navigate changes and new directions in planning policy, particularly those related to Aboriginal culture and heritage. It offers insights into place-led design approaches that embrace and celebrate Aboriginal culture, fostering a stronger and more vibrant connection between our built environment and the people who inhabit it.

This guide recognises the invaluable contributions made by our Aboriginal colleagues and community leaders who have tirelessly worked to develop protocols and policies for engaging with Aboriginal communities, creating employment opportunities, designing with

Country, and protecting cultural heritage. Their expertise and guidance have been instrumental in shaping this framework, and I extend my heartfelt appreciation to each and every one of them.

The Connecting with Country Framework seeks to foster collaboration and knowledge-sharing between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal individuals, acknowledging that both perspectives bring unique insights and strengths to the table. By working together collectively, respectfully, and with open minds, we can unite our complementary knowledge and create urban spaces that are truly inclusive and reflective of our diverse cultural heritage.

I am particularly excited to see the completion of this framework after many years of development. Its comprehensive approach, practical guidance, and commitment to supporting a strong and vibrant Aboriginal culture in our built environment are commendable. It is a testament to our shared vision of a future where sustainability, cultural heritage, and community wellbeing go hand in hand.

I encourage all of you to familiarise yourselves with the Connecting with Country Framework and incorporate its principles into your planning and design processes. Let us take this rare opportunity to make a lasting impact, to create urban spaces that respond to climate change, honour Aboriginal cultural heritage, and foster a sense of pride and belonging for all.

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Section 1

ABOUT

THIS

FRAMEWORK





Minga Cultural Experience
Image: Conrad Gargett.

The *Connecting with Country Framework* is a guide for good practice to help you respond to Country when you plan, design and deliver built environment projects.

Section 1 gives an overview of this document, including how it is structured, who it is for, and its policy context.



Central Park
Chippendale, Sydney.
Design by Ateliers
Jean Nouvel and PTW.

1.1 The framework at a glance

The *Connecting with Country Framework* brings together:

- **context** for the document
- the **commitment** to working with a Country-centred approach
- **practices** for reframing our way of working
- **actions** for implementing the framework
- **outcomes** for Country
- **designing with Country** considerations for a Country-centred approach
- **case studies**.

Figure 1: The framework at a glance



Connecting with Country Framework



1.2 The framework style

The framework offers guidance and suggestions rather than a comprehensive checklist for how to connect with Country.

We encourage you to do your own research, undertake cultural awareness training, and work with Aboriginal communities to develop projects. The key characteristics of this style of guidance are:

- featuring the authentic voice of Aboriginal people who have contributed to writing this document, and quotes from Aboriginal community representatives throughout
- proposing that Aboriginal and Western knowledge systems have important similarities – both rely on observation, experimentation, pattern recognition, testing information shared by others, creativity, and intuition; many of the concepts presented here combine aspects of these 2 knowledge systems
- leading with Aboriginal knowledge to encourage a change from business-as-usual working practices so we can better connect with Country in planning and designing our built environment.



Indigenous native species planted in Sydney University's Eastern Avenue on Gadigal Lands. Landscape design by Turf Design Studio. Sydney University, Camperdown.

Figure 2: The document layout uses several graphic tools and strategies to help you understand the content

The colour banner – summarises the section content

Provides extended learning opportunities related to adjacent text

Where special focus is recommended on how to apply the knowledge shared within the content

Key learning from knowledge shared within the document

The Connecting with Country Framework is a guide for good practices to help you respond to Country when you plan, design and deliver built environment projects. Section 1 gives an overview of this document including how it is structured, who it is for, and its policy context.

2.1 What is Country?
Country encompasses everything. It includes both living and non-living elements. It holds everything within the landscape, including Earth, Water and Sky Country, as well as people, animals, plants, and the stories that connect them.
Country (Capital C) has specific and significant meaning for Aboriginal peoples. Country relates to the nation, cultural group and region that Aboriginal people belong to. It is the land and waters that are Country to the Ancestors of the land place of origin for Aboriginal peoples.
Aboriginal peoples' deep and personal relationships with Country are expressed in multiple ways. The form of Country is expressed through language, stories, art and ceremonial practices, including the names of Aboriginal groups and place names, are another means of maintaining relationships with Country.
There is no universal way of defining Country. Descriptions of Country can vary from traditional associations, well-differ from individual to individual, depending on the associations passed down through the family and community.

Further explanation did you know?

2.2 The framework style
The framework offers guidance and suggestions rather than a comprehensive checklist for how to connect with Country.
We encourage you to do your own research, undertake cultural awareness training, and work with Aboriginal communities to develop projects. The key characteristics of this style of guidance are:
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—proposing that Aboriginal and Western knowledge systems have important similarities – both rely on observation, experimentation, pattern recognition, testing information shared by others, creativity, and intuition; many of the concepts presented here combine aspects of these 2 knowledge systems
—leading with Aboriginal knowledge to encourage a change from business-as-usual working practices so we can better connect with Country in planning and designing our built environment.

'Quotes from Aboriginal community and cultural experts'
— Aboriginal expert

How project teams can apply this:
Adjusting cultural perspectives
The challenge for project teams – including Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal team members – is to step outside your own cultural comfort zone and be open to other ways of recognizing and respecting knowledge. Common barriers to professionalizing include the desire to defend our personal beliefs, over those of someone else, or to reap the same problems in a familiar 'test and test' way.
When it comes to knowledge sharing, it is essential that Aboriginal people reach, understand and control their cultural knowledge and intellectual property, and how it is shared with others. Aboriginal people need to be invited to co-design and co-manage projects rather than just being asked to provide their cultural knowledge, stories and insights to help develop projects.
Country-centred projects can be guided by some key relationships listed within the Aboriginal community:
—listening to Elders and family
—deep listening, observing and being modest
—being collaborative, sharing and inclusive.

Key learning for section 2:
From an Aboriginal perspective, Country encompasses all aspects of Earth, Water and Sky, as well as the cultural, spiritual and ancestral connections.
Caring for Country is a cultural practice and responsibility that can be undertaken only by Aboriginal people.
Ensure cultural safety is established and maintained throughout a project life cycle.
Respect Indigenous cultural and intellectual property (ICIP), noting that caring for Country, connecting with Country and designing with Country are terms that belong to Aboriginal people and are their ICIP.
Listening to everyone else's knowledge, we've all got a common thread. It all weaves in together as a landscape. It's starting to heal.
— Aunty Pamela Henry, community workshop 6 February 2022

1.3 Who the framework is for

The Connecting with Country Framework is for project clients, project teams and the communities they serve.

It describes practical ways for responding to changes and new directions in planning policy relating to Aboriginal culture and heritage, including place-led design approaches. It also aims to help better support a strong and vibrant Aboriginal culture in our built environment.

The framework is for:

- **Aboriginal communities** – to help you promote the built environment projects you are working on
- **local government** – to help you respond to and advocate for Aboriginal communities’ needs in local planning policies and projects
- **government agencies** – to help you, as better clients, make decisions affecting Country in partnership with Aboriginal communities

- **the design and planning industry** – to strengthen your cultural awareness and ability to appropriately interpret cultural knowledge shared by the Aboriginal communities you are working with
- **developers**, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, to help you develop proposals that respond to and support the health and wellbeing of Country.

The Connecting with Country Framework is intended to augment and support the work of Aboriginal colleagues and community leaders who have developed protocols and policies for engaging with Aboriginal communities, providing Aboriginal employment opportunities, designing with Country, and protecting Aboriginal cultural heritage.

Connecting with Country is intended to help all of us – Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people – to work together collectively, respectfully, and with open minds to unite our complementary knowledge.

Sorry Day 2019, The Australian Botanic Garden Mount Annan
Image: Victoria Ngu.



1.4 Evolution of the framework

Piloting the draft framework 2020

The first draft of this framework was produced by Government Architect NSW (GANSW) in 2020, and was widely supported by the Aboriginal communities who were consulted and contributed to the guidance. It was embraced by clients and teams who referred to the document to guide their projects.

Soon after the framework was released, we established a pilot program to test implementing it on several NSW built environment projects, from precinct-scale masterplanning and infrastructure projects to smaller individual projects. At various stages throughout this period, GANSW consulted with the government agencies delivering the pilot projects, the project teams and the Aboriginal communities working with them. Their feedback has informed the final framework. The [Appendix](#) summarises the pilot program consultation and feedback.

Updates on the draft framework

Engagement with Aboriginal community and project teams across government and industry informed changes we have made since the 2020 draft framework. These include simplified guidance and new actions to better support project delivery.

Since time immemorial, our ancestors, the First Peoples, have been caring for Country in a sustainable way, passing on this continuing responsibility and custodianship to countless generations. As a consequence, profound relationships have been forged with Mother Earth and other ancestral beings which underpin this culture of caring for Country.

—David Kennedy – Gumbaynggirr/
Yuin and former Chair of Aboriginal
Network, Department of Planning
and Environment



Community consultation
on the draft Connecting
with Country Framework

1.5 Context for the framework

International and national context Connecting with Country is informed by the wider context of First Nations rights recognition, social policy, legislation, design standards and research.

This context embraces the lived experience of the First Nations peoples who have contributed to developing this framework, including participation in a living culture with tens of thousands of years of history. It includes responses to historic and ongoing consequences of colonisation, cultural revitalisation, and to the global impacts of climate change.

Internationally, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples have helped to create a momentum for projects such as this one, which give voice to Aboriginal and other First Nations peoples in the development of policy.

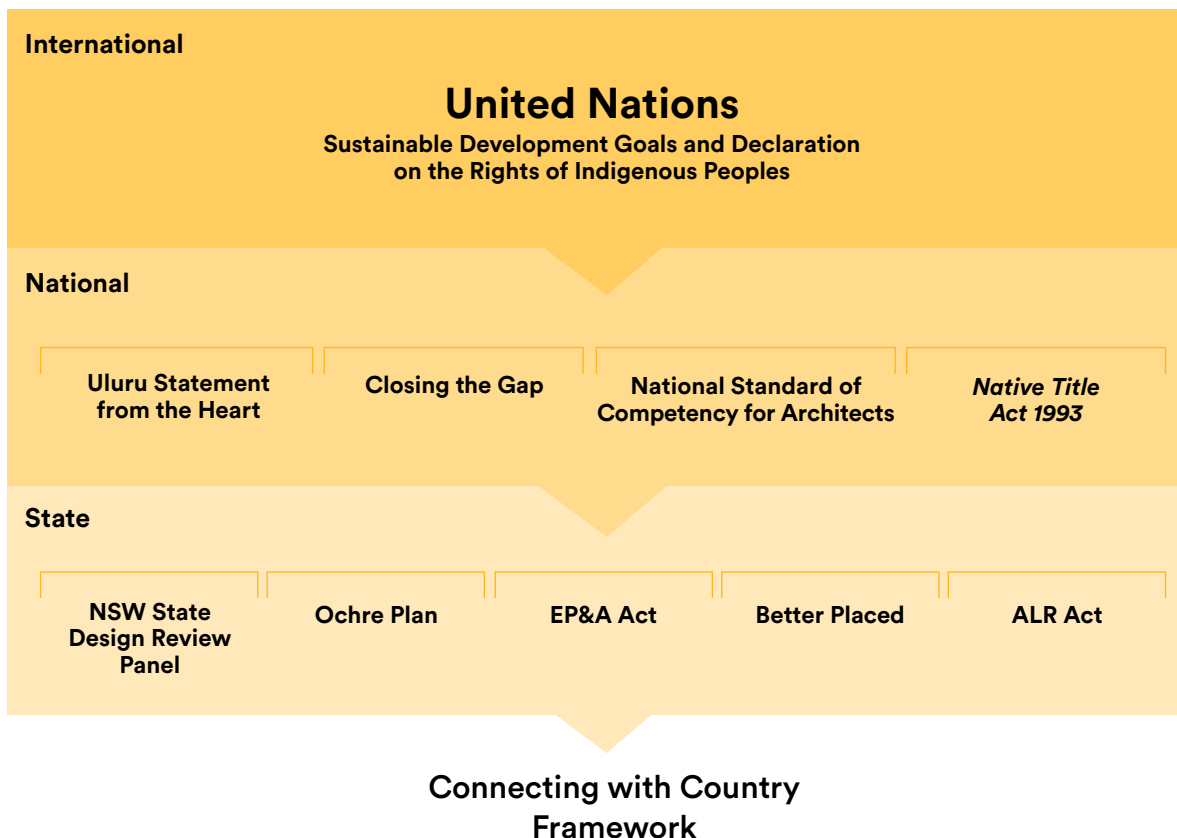
At a national level, the *Native Title Act 1993* has established a framework for the recognition and protection of native title rights, including the rights of First Nations peoples to access and use land based on their traditional ownership and occupation.

The federal government has also committed to implementing the Uluru Statement from the Heart. The statement’s call for self-determination, truth-telling and recognition of First Nations peoples is echoed in this framework.

Adopted by all levels of government, the National Agreement on Closing the Gap sets out clear targets for improving the overall health and wellbeing of First Nations communities. The Connecting with Country Framework aligns with defined targets, including providing economic opportunities, strengthening cultural heritage, maintaining connection with Country, and shared decision-making with First Nations communities on how this is done.

The framework also aligns with the 2021 National Standard of Competency for Architects (NSCA)¹, which promotes a greater focus on more meaningful engagement with First Nations peoples and caring for Country within architecture programs, education, registration and practice as architects.

Figure 3: The framework’s policy, strategic and procedural context



First Fleet Park in Warrane (Circular Quay) holds a marker of time as the first place British colonists established the colony on Gadigal Lands. The Rocks, Sydney.



NSW context

Connecting with Country links NSW Government policy intent with the processes of designing and planning the built environment.

The Connecting with Country Framework provides a guide for government, planners, designers and industry to address the legislative requirements of the NSW *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979* (EP&A Act) – specifically item 1.3 (f): ‘to promote the sustainable management of built and cultural heritage (including Aboriginal cultural heritage)’. This framework also aligns with item 1.3 (g): ‘to promote good design and amenity of the built environment’.

The *NSW Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983* (ALR Act) recognises the land rights of Aboriginal people in the state. While the ALR Act gives Aboriginal people legal rights to claim and control land, this is not always land that has been traditionally owned or used. The Act was passed primarily to help return land to Aboriginal peoples as compensation for historic dispossession.

The NSW Government is making a significant effort and investment to support inclusion, engagement, employment, and opportunities for Aboriginal people, including plans and policies such as *OCHRE: Opportunity, Choice, Healing, Responsibility Empowerment*² and *Urban Design for Regional NSW*³.

The framework also supports the broad range of policies and advice provided by GANSW including *Better Placed: An integrated design policy for the built environment of NSW*⁴. Since the release of the draft framework, Connecting with Country now informs all GANSW guidance, including advice given by the NSW State Design Review Panel.

Further planning and legislative reform, particularly in response to protecting and maintaining Aboriginal cultural heritage at a broader level, is necessary to achieve the commitment and outcomes of the framework.

The difference between native title and land rights

Native title and land rights are governed by 2 land statutes that provide national recognition and protection of ownership and use of land by First Nations peoples. While they are related, they have some key differences. In some cases, native title and land rights can co-exist on the same land.

Native title is protected by a national law that recognises First Nations peoples’ traditional rights and connections to land, while land rights are protected by a NSW law, which refers to a broader set of legal rights and interests that may include ownership and control of the land.

Section 2

**ABORIGINAL
CULTURAL
CONTEXT**



Aboriginal heritage of handprints on Hawkesbury Sandstone undercroft on the north side of Sydney Harbour

Section 2 explores the complex and dynamic relationships of culture, community and identity that characterise the Aboriginal concept of Country.



Aboriginal Elders from the Sydney region reflecting on the last pre-colonial scar tree known to exist in the Sydney Central Business District Sydney.

2.1 What is Country?

Country encompasses everything. It includes both living and non-living elements. It holds everything within the landscape, including Earth, Water and Sky Country, as well as people, animals, plants, and the stories that connect them.

Country (capital 'C') has specific and significant meaning for Aboriginal peoples. Country relates to the nation, cultural group and region that Aboriginal people belong to, yearn for, find healing from and will return to. Country is the literal place of origin for Aboriginal peoples.

Aboriginal peoples' deep and personal relationships with Country are expressed in multiple ways. The lore of Country is expressed through songlines, stories, art and ceremony. Language, including the names of Aboriginal groups and placenames, are another means of expressing relationships with Country.

There is no universal way of defining Country. Descriptions of Country, particularly traditional associations, will differ from individual to individual, depending on the associations passed down through the family and community⁵.

We are all, always on Country.

—Dillon Kombumerri,
Yugambah/Quandmooka,
Principal Architect
GANSW, 2020



Country, community and culture

The many interpretations of Country are often expressed by Aboriginal communities through cultural practices.

Culture includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, and customs acquired by membership in a social group. Knowledge, appropriate behaviour and capabilities all make up culture⁶. For more detail see Section 3.3 of this framework, '[Being on Country](#)'.

While many Aboriginal communities refer to Country as 'she' or 'her' – to support the idea that Country is a living entity – there are Aboriginal places, sites and locations where Country is not gendered.

When people talk about Country it is spoken of like a person: we speak to Country, we sing to Country, we worry about Country, and we long for Country.

—*Connection to Country*,
Common Ground First Nations

Caring for Country

Caring for Country is a cultural obligation that Aboriginal people undertake with a deep sense of responsibility, ownership and stewardship. Caring for Country includes caring for the wellbeing of Country's interconnected systems now and for the future.

The term 'Caring for Country' is associated with a complex web of Aboriginal shared authority and management, and therefore we need to ensure we do not misappropriate it.

Reciprocity is critical to achieve mutually beneficial relationships between project and Country. If built environment projects can help Aboriginal people to fulfil their obligation and responsibility to care for Country, then Country will care for us all.

First Fleet Park
The Rocks, Sydney.



Identity

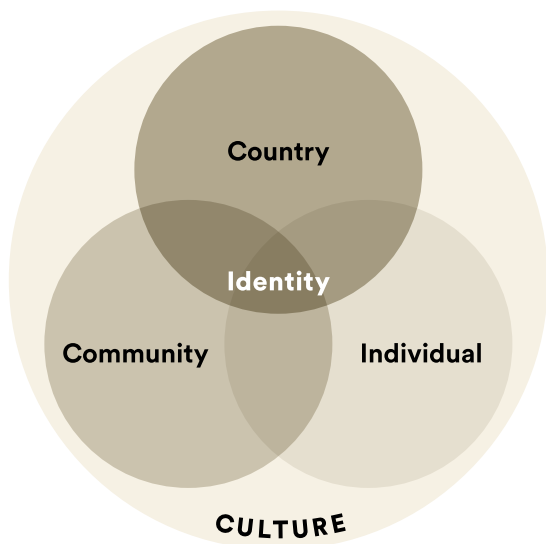
For Aboriginal people, Country is at the core of identity. Aboriginal peoples' connection with Country has continued over thousands of years, from deep time. It is a source of valuable wisdom and knowledge that can guide all of us to improve the way we plan and design the places where we live and work.

People don't speak about Country as the place they stand on, but what's inside them.

— Christian Hampson, Woiwurrung/Maneroo, designer, 2023

For both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, culture defines us and makes us who we are. Our cultural identity and sense of belonging to places and communities is strongly linked to our overall health and emotional wellbeing⁷.

Figure 4: Interrelationships between Country, community and individuals. Reciprocal relationships with Country and community form cultural practices, which in turn shape individual identities. All are also influenced by external factors including environment, politics and wider society.



Billabongs, petroglyphs and *Angophora costata* overlooking the north side of Sydney Harbour. Berry Island Reserve women's waterhole. Wollstonecraft, Sydney.

'First peoples' identities are deeply linked to culture, community and the land, and this is a key factor to health and wellbeing.

—Dr Danièle Hromek, Budawang/Yuin, researcher and spatial designer, 2020

2.2 Cultural safety

Cultural safety is about creating a socially, emotionally, physically and spiritually safe space where there is no challenge or denial of a person's identity. For Aboriginal people this means feeling safe, valued and able to participate in their cultural, spiritual and belief systems, free from racism, discrimination and lateral violence.

Cultural awareness, respect and sensitivity provides the foundation for understanding how to create culturally safe work environments – this includes being open and responsive to Aboriginal community needs.

—Aboriginal Cultural Safety Framework, The State of Victoria Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) 2019

Lateral violence is a complex mix of historical, cultural and social dynamics that results in a spectrum of behaviours that include bullying, shaming, social exclusion, family feuding, organisational conflict and physical violence. Lateral violence is not just an individual's behaviour. It often occurs when a number of people work together to attack or undermine another individual or group.

— Australian Human Rights Commission

Project teams are likely to engage with ICIP when undertaking the following activities:

- engaging with and recording Aboriginal communities sharing their cultural knowledge
- incorporating aspects of Aboriginal culture into built environment projects
- using Aboriginal language, such as naming places, buildings, rooms or other locations
- commissioning artworks by Aboriginal artists that incorporate cultural knowledge.

2.3 Indigenous cultural and intellectual property

Australian Indigenous cultural and intellectual property (ICIP) refers to the rights that Aboriginal people have to protect their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and cultural expression.

ICIP is recognised in international law, including the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, to which Australia is a signatory. ICIP is underpinned by the self-determination of Aboriginal peoples, and is an important part of the cultural heritage and identity of Aboriginal communities. It is the product of generations of accumulated knowledge and creative expression, and reflects the unique history, values, and traditions of Aboriginal people.

Care and respect is always needed, to ensure cultural knowledge is not appropriated or interpreted without permission from the Aboriginal community to which this knowledge belongs. Cultural knowledge can be used only for the purpose for which it was provided. Aboriginal people need to be recognised as the ongoing guardians of this knowledge and how it is used.

Misappropriation of ICIP can perpetuate cultural stereotypes and have negative impacts on the wider society's perception of Aboriginal people. This can lead to exploitation, unfair competition, and economic marginalisation of Aboriginal communities, consultants, and built environment professionals, who may not receive the benefits or recognition for their cultural and intellectual contributions.

The terms **caring for Country**, **connecting with Country** and **designing with Country** referred to in this document are Aboriginal cultural terms. These terms should be used by project teams only with permission from the Aboriginal people they are working with. However, project teams can support the health and wellbeing of Country by following good environmentally sustainable design practices – see Section 3.1 of this framework, 'Determining involvement of community'.





Key learning for Section 2:

From an Aboriginal perspective, Country encompasses all aspects of Earth, Water and Sky, as well as the cultural, spiritual and ancestral connections.

Caring for Country is a cultural practice and responsibility that can be undertaken only by Aboriginal people.

Ensure cultural safety is established and maintained throughout a project life cycle.

Respect Indigenous cultural and intellectual property (ICIP), noting that caring for Country, connecting with Country and designing with Country are terms that belong to Aboriginal people and are their ICIP.

Listening to everyone else's knowledge, we've all got a common thread. It all weaves in together as a landscape. It's starting to heal.

— Aunty Pamela Young, community workshop 6 February 2023

Redfern Mural, a historically significant public artwork for the community, with Sydney cityscape behind on Gadigal Lands. Redfern, Sydney.

Section 3

TAKING A COUNTRY- CENTRED APPROACH

STATUES OF ANCIENT W



Ballast Point in Balmain addresses historical layers of place with an environmental approach.
Birchgrove, Sydney. Design by
McGregor+Coxall on Wangal Country.

Section 3 identifies the need for project teams – and their clients and leaders – to make a clear commitment to act in ways that can deliver positive outcomes for Country and community. Supporting this central commitment, this section proposes new practices and ways of working, actions and outcomes for built environment projects.



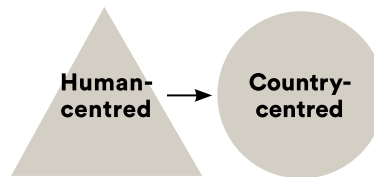
The Cultural Landscape Garden on Cornwallis Street on Gadigal Lands contains food forests and perennial meadows of endemic native species. South Eveleigh, Sydney. Co-designed by members of the local Aboriginal community and Jiwah.

Figure 5: Connecting with Country Framework

Guided by Aboriginal community

The commitment

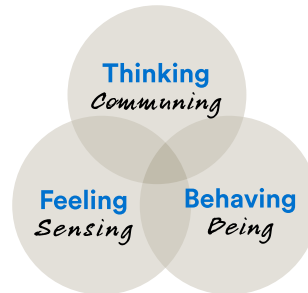
All NSW built environment projects will be developed with a Country-centred approach guided by Aboriginal people, who know that if we care for Country, Country will care for us.



Practices

Reframing our way of working

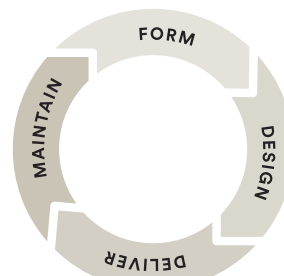
Changing our approach and processes to support a Country-centred approach



Actions

Implementing the framework

Project life cycle from an Aboriginal perspective



Outcomes for Country

- Healthy Country
- Healthy community
- Protecting Aboriginal cultural heritage
- Cultural competency
- Better places



Adam Goodes mural
Surry Hills, NSW.

3.1 Guidance from Aboriginal community

Reframing our approach to project delivery from human-centred to Country-centred needs to be guided by Aboriginal community. This section provides guidance to support project teams who engage with Aboriginal communities and form a Country-centred approach to built environment projects.

Building relationships

Meaningful relationships with local Aboriginal communities are essential to designing with Country and creating places of cultural safety. Sensitivity to the complexities of identity is paramount. Building relationships with Aboriginal people requires appropriate allocation of time and resources to develop personal connections in ways Aboriginal people recommend and feel comfortable with.

Because cultural connections with Country differ between Aboriginal peoples and communities, projects need to be guided by those who are acknowledged by their communities as knowledge-holders for Country, and often in combination with nominated Aboriginal organisations such as local Aboriginal land councils (LALCs).

The **New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council** was established in the 1970s. It is now a statutory corporation under the ALR Act and oversees a network of 121 LALCs (land rights network), each constituted over a specific area in NSW. LALCs can help project teams connect with local Aboriginal communities. Note: their boundaries may not align with cultural or traditional associations with Country.



Community workshop

Image: Conrad Gargett.

Engagement should be undertaken in an inclusive way, and project teams should be open to diverse groups of people and points of view. In addition to LALCs, the groups that should be invited to join the engagement process include:

1. Traditional Custodians who have ancestral connections to a place
2. people from surrounding groups/tribes/mobs/communities/nations
3. those who have moved to the area since colonisation and are integrated into the community
4. everyone else who wants a say.

Building relationships takes time and commitment, and needs to occur from project initiation through to all phases of a project. The relationships should be nurtured so they are enduring.

It may be appropriate to engage the services of a cultural adviser who can add value to projects by helping to develop and facilitate relationships with Aboriginal communities, and to guide research and interpretation of cultural knowledge. Supply Nation, New South Wales Indigenous Chamber of Commerce and Buy NSW are reliable sources for finding consultants who have proven experience as cultural advisers and spatial design experts. However, it is also important that advisers have experience relevant to the local community.

Determining involvement of community

While many projects would benefit from engaging with community and cultural advisers, this is not always practical or necessary. Engagement and effort need to be prioritised to make best use of precious and limited community time and resources.

Considering the scale and significance of a project may help to determine the appropriate scope of community involvement:

High	Extensive collaboration with Aboriginal community throughout the project life cycle, with cultural advisers guiding project teams and clients
Medium	Targeted advice provided by cultural advisers, supported by community consultation at major project milestones
Low	With community agreement, their involvement is not required, but they will receive summary information about the project if they request it

Taking a coordinated and strategic approach can reduce the load and pressure on community resources, while prioritising where community input can have greatest impact. One option is to collaborate with multiple teams across projects, or work with community to review a group of projects within their broader precinct or region. Multiple design teams working on these projects can then be invited, as a collective, to briefings about Country, and how to protect the overarching cultural landscapes in which these projects will belong.

For large-scale projects, such as precinct planning, major building programs (such as health and school facilities), or significant projects, it is important to work with community. A coordinated approach at this large scale can help to identify the individual projects that will have most impact on significant cultural sites, and require more focused attention from the community. Small or simple projects may be considered by community as low priority, and not require any further input from them.

Whether or not there is direct engagement with community and cultural advisers, all project teams should start with a Country-centred approach to design. In instances where Aboriginal community decide projects may not benefit from their direct engagement, this framework can be a useful guide to support healthy Country.

[The framework has] given a voice to the landscape. It's given a voice to the community.

—Aunty Pamela Young,
community workshop
6 February 2023

Ways of working together

The engagement approach for each project needs to be developed with the local Aboriginal community, to understand how they would like to conduct this process. Community workshops or working groups may be good ways to collaborate, but other ways may also be developed.

How project teams can apply this

Clearly define the scope of influence for community input.

Agree on protocols, through discussion with project team members and community, to guide ways of working together.

Clearly define the role of cultural advisers, including the extent to which they will help establish contacts and build relationships with community.

Commit to developing personal cultural competency.

Be humble and respectful when approaching conversations with Aboriginal people.

Establish project governance measures to regularly report back to community about project progress, including how their input has shaped the design.

Look for opportunities at all stages of the project life cycle for Aboriginal people to provide project leadership and guidance.

Learn from all experiences even if there is a mixed degree of success. This learning can be applied to future projects.

Respect and protect Indigenous cultural and intellectual property.

Refer to the Department of Planning and Environment for guidance and more information on good engagement practices⁸.

3.2

The commitment

All NSW built environment projects will be developed with a Country-centred approach guided by Aboriginal people, who know that if we care for Country, Country will care for us.

This overarching commitment is central to the framework.

The intention of the commitment is to stimulate discussion within project teams about how to depart from business-as-usual practices – as well as think and behave differently when conceiving, planning, designing and delivering built environment projects.

The need for a Country-centred approach

A combination of factors is driving the need for a fundamental change in our approach:

- The devastation caused by large-scale events such as drought, bushfire and flooding requires adaptation of our built environments so we can live safely when these events occur.
- Significant Aboriginal cultural sites are being damaged or destroyed by rapid development and urgently need protection.
- Closing the Gap is a national priority that needs to be addressed at all levels of government and enterprise.
- There is broad community and industry support for reconciliation with Aboriginal peoples.

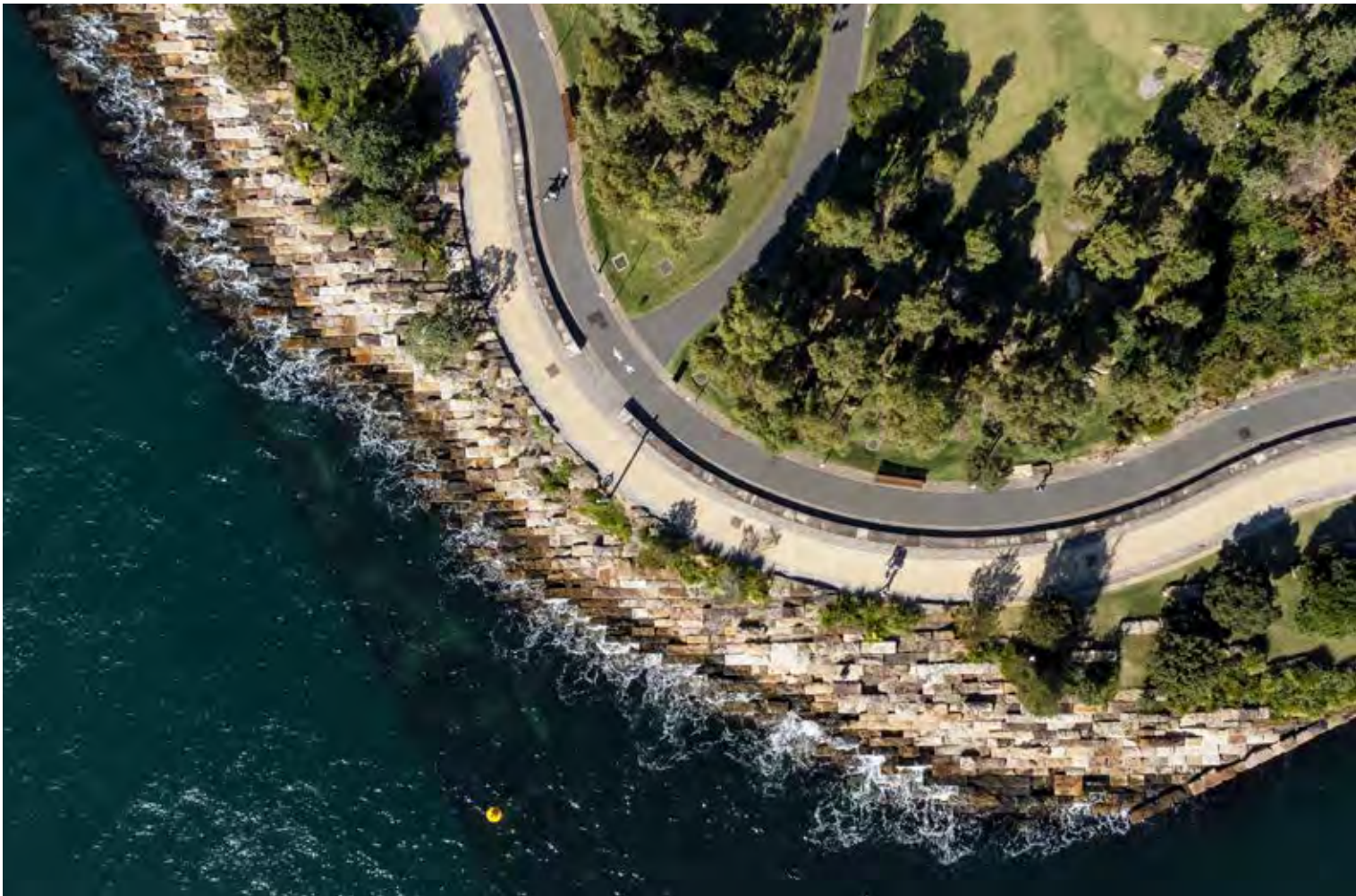
To date, reactive responses to the above factors have not delivered successful or sustainable long-term change in our approach to the built environment. To achieve the change required, we need to reframe our way of working – starting by learning from Aboriginal people to inform a Country-centred approach to project planning, design and delivery.

Moving from a human-centred to a Country-centred approach

Prioritising people and their needs has been widely regarded as fundamental in contemporary design and planning processes. However, an Aboriginal world view suggests there are limitations imposed by an entirely human-centred approach to design.

If people and their needs are at the ‘centre’ of design considerations, the landscape and nature are reduced to second-order priorities. If design and planning processes consider natural systems that include people, animals, resources and plants equally – similar to an Aboriginal world view – this could make a significant contribution to a more sustainable future.

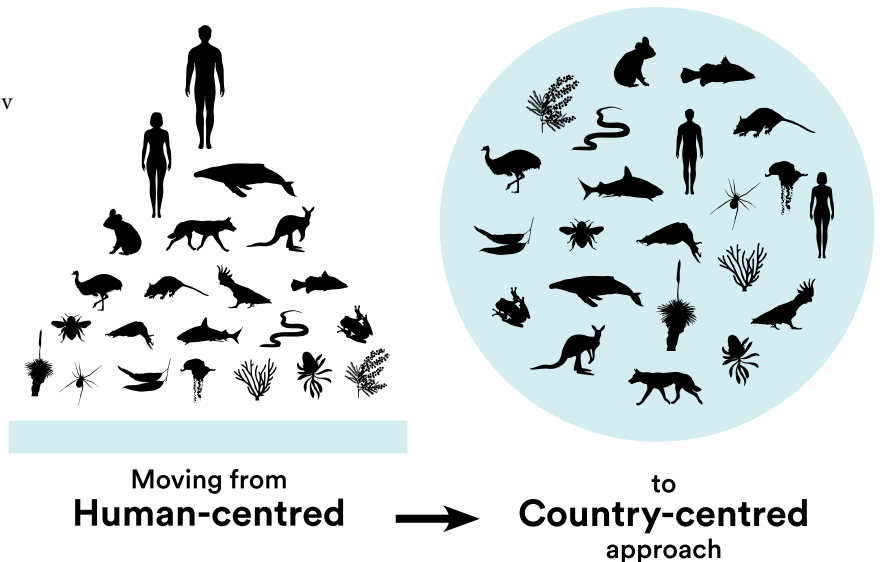
Country, as expressed in Aboriginal language, wisdom and ideas, shows a different way of thinking about how we, as humans, are part of our built and natural environment, and how we shape and are shaped by that environment.



Wulugul Walk in Barangaroo on Gadigal Lands is part of a 12-km walk along the Sydney Harbour foreshore, and is part of Yananurala, a walk highlighting Aboriginal history and culture. Barangaroo, Sydney.

This diagram is a simple representation of a complex idea, illustrating the fundamental change in thinking that connecting with Country requires. A human-centred approach is illustrated by a hierarchy that prioritises humans over non-humans and Country, whereas a Country-centred approach is represented as a circular network of integrated relationships.

Figure 6: Human-centred or Country-centred
Diagram adapted from German architect Steffen Lehmann's 'Eco v Ego' diagram, 2010



3.3 Practices for enabling a new approach

To shift from a business-as-usual practice and adopt a Country-centred approach, we need to change our way of working, guided by Aboriginal community.

In this section, we propose a method that combines knowledge systems, ways of understanding and practice, and guidance from community to inform a new approach.

This section explores 2 knowledge systems that can help to open our minds and aid behavioural change towards a new way of working.

**Indigenous native species planted
in Sydney University's Eastern
Avenue on Gadigal lands.**

Landscape design by Turf Design Studio.
Sydney University, Camperdown.

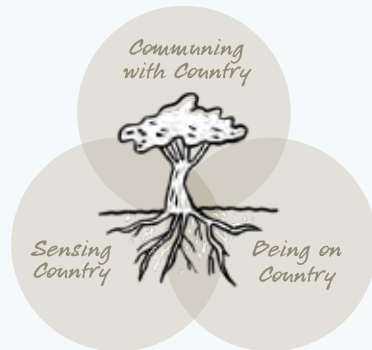


Cultural knowledge systems

Aboriginal knowledge is developed, experienced and shared through cultural practices of *communing with Country, sensing Country, and being on Country*.

Each of these practices is interlinked, and each informs and deepens cultural knowledge. Over the following pages, each of these practices is explored in more detail, with suggestions for how you can use this knowledge to inform future practice.

Figure 7: Traditional cultural knowledge and practices

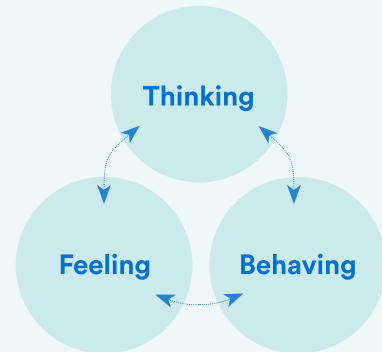


Behavioural change

Changing established ways of working is challenging.

Behavioural psychologists refer to a cognitive triangle to demonstrate how we interact with the world and to describe what prompts behavioural change. It illustrates how our processes of **thinking**, **feeling** and **behaving** are interlinked.

Figure 8: Cognitive triangle underpinning behavioural science

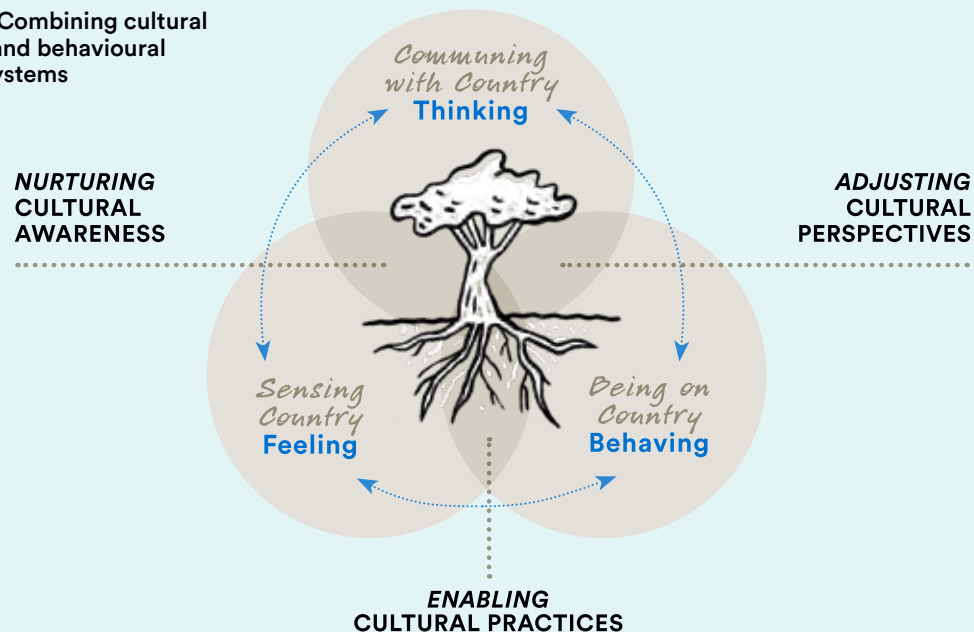


Combining knowledge systems

There are similarities between these systems of cultural practice and behavioural change.

This section proposes a method of learning from cultural practices to inform a new approach. We can consciously cultivate behavioural change, using processes of thinking, feeling and behaving that are informed by the cultural practices of communing, sensing and being on Country. Through this we can gain a deeper insight into traditional knowledge systems that informs a new approach and way of working.

Figure 9: Combining cultural practice and behavioural change systems

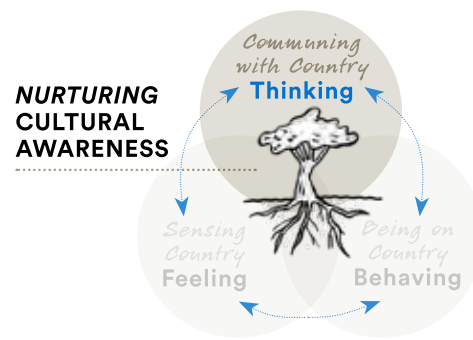


Communing with Country Thinking

Developing cultural awareness through **thinking** is the first step towards adopting a Country-centred approach.

This section proposes ‘communing with Country’ to describe a cultural practice used by Aboriginal people to connect with Country through their mind and spirit. The word ‘communing’ has been selected to convey a specific meaning: being in deep and intimate conversation with Country but not in a religious sense as some may understand it. Communing with Country is presented as an invitation to explore the deep connection Aboriginal people have with Country, demonstrated through various forms of cultural expression. Project teams can learn about cultural practice as a way to deepen cultural understanding, guided and mediated by Aboriginal people.

Aboriginal Elders from the Sydney region visiting Pymont, part of the important Hawkesbury Sandstone cultural landscape, yarning about finding bush tucker in the city.
Pymont, Sydney.



Learning from cultural practice / communing with Country

‘Communing with Country’ is an opportunity to connect, but also to have a dialogue with Country – to speak with and listen to Country.

Furthermore, communing with Country is a holistic approach to understanding the environment, recognising that all things are interconnected and that humans are a part of nature, rather than separate from it.

Communing involves actively engaging with Country through traditional practices such as storytelling, dance, song and ceremony. It is about understanding the responsibilities that come with being a custodian of Country.

Connecting with Country occurs through every sense, movement, and through stories, so happens best through physical activities, and being on Country.

—Dr Danièle Hromek, Budawang/Yuin, researcher and spatial designer, 2019

The deep connection between humans and nature is well documented. Many studies suggest that humans have a capacity for a special relationship with the environment, and that we thrive when connected to nature. This is well understood in the Japanese practice – *shinrin-yoku* – sometimes referred to as ‘forest bathing’⁹.

Communing with Country is not just about connecting with the natural environment, but also with the identity and cultural heritage of Aboriginal peoples. It provides a sense of purpose, belonging, and connection to the past, present and future. This can be experienced by non-Aboriginal people if invited to do so by Aboriginal people who perform this living practice.

By **engaging with various forms of Aboriginal cultural expression**, we can learn about the intrinsic qualities and features of Country, but also about the impact of recent history on Aboriginal peoples' relationship with Country. Themes of early resistance and warfare, forced removal from Country and family, activism, and reconciliation can be explored through artwork, design, song and writing.

How project teams can apply this

Nurturing cultural awareness

We need to have curious minds, be prepared for cultural immersion, and allow all knowledge to be heard. By doing this while nurturing cultural awareness we can promote effective communication between Aboriginal community, project teams and others.

Project team members have a responsibility to undertake their own research and engage in cultural awareness training, and Aboriginal community should not be burdened with providing this basic task. However, the development of deeper cultural understanding through immersion and exploring the practice of communing with Country needs to be guided by the Aboriginal community.

Cultural awareness is an ongoing process that needs to be constantly developed and updated to ensure we continue to improve the way we deliver Country-centred built environment projects.

bara, Tarpeian Precinct Lawn

Dubbagullee / Bennelong Point, Sydney.

Artist: Judy Watson.

Curator: Hetti Perkins.



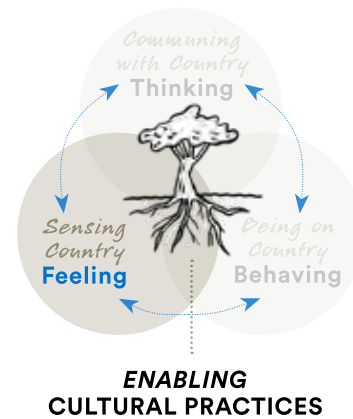
Sensing Country Feeling

Knowledge gained from thinking and learning about communing with Country can be deepened by immersion and exposure to cultural practice described in this section – sensing Country.

Understanding how emotions and feelings shape our responses to experiences and knowledge is an important step towards changing our approach. This section explores immersive cultural practice that enhances connection to Country. Where guided by Aboriginal people, being immersed in Country can awaken our senses and feelings and inform a deeper understanding of Country.



Aboriginal Elder appreciating the last pre-colonial scar tree known to exist in the Sydney Central Business District Sydney.



Learning from cultural practice / sensing Country

Immersive cultural practices performed by Aboriginal peoples include walking Country, cool burning, gathering resources, making things, and ceremony.

Walking Country

Walking Country is an Aboriginal cultural practice of moving through, sensing, and listening to what Country is telling us. Walking Country is a visceral practice that activates feeling and engages all senses – seeing, hearing, touching, smelling and tasting. Often performed in a group, walking Country facilitates knowledge sharing and strengthens interpersonal relationships. When guided by Aboriginal people, this practice can also help project teams in similar ways.

Neuroscience tells us that movement and cognition are powerfully connected, which explains why we can learn so much from walking Country. The part of our brain that processes movement is the same part that processes learning. Exercise also improves learning and memory retention¹⁰.

Cool burning

An important cultural management practice is cool burning Country. Fire has always been (and continues to be) a tool used by Aboriginal people to provide environmental care for Country by being in a reciprocal relationship with nature. It is deployed in an intelligent and systematic way to gently burn grasses and clear understorey debris, decreasing fuel load and making fire easier to control.

Although much of Australia's native vegetation requires heat to regenerate, the aim is not to destroy the tree or its canopy, which provide animal and bird habitat as well as essential shade for reducing ground moisture loss and water evaporation¹¹.

An Aboriginal perspective finds balance within an environmental system that both needs fire, but can also be destroyed by fire. Rather than interfering with or fighting against this ancient rhythm of burning and regeneration, we could instead adapt and synchronise with it.

Other living cultural practices

Insights into how Aboriginal people problem-solve and make decisions can be gained by observing traditional practices of hunting and gathering of food and medicine within diverse landscape settings.

Ingenuity and innovation are also revealed in the making of cultural artefacts such as clothing, baskets, carrying vessels and tools.

Ceremonies and rituals help to bring a deeper understanding of important cultural narratives, expressed through storytelling, dance and performance.

I can't tell you what the landscape is saying, it's your interpretation of what it is. I can only give you techniques to interpret the landscape. The landscape is talking to you now.

—Aunty Pamela Young, community workshop 6 February 2023

How project teams can apply this

Enabling cultural practices in design

Enabling cultural practices can improve how knowledge is gathered, used and then applied to the way we deliver built environment projects. An example of the way cultural practice can be incorporated into design practice is through **walking Country** with Aboriginal knowledge-holders.

The site analysis commonly undertaken by planners and architects tends to be based on observations and interpretations of written reports, technical investigations and geographical information such as contour surveys. This can be augmented by the Aboriginal cultural practice of walking Country to inform a visceral and spatial understanding of Country.

Enabling cultural practices in projects

Providing spaces within projects for living cultural practices to continue on Country will make more meaningful any planning and design decisions that interpret cultural narratives.

The Coal Loader on Balls Head remains an important part of Cammeraygal/ Gaimarigal Country in both historical terms, with the whale petroglyph, and contemporary terms, with the bush tucker garden. Waverton, Sydney. Design by Hassell.



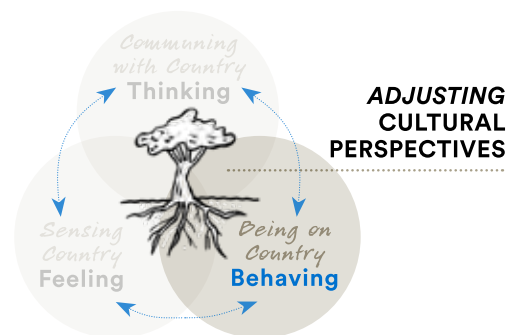
Being on Country Behaving

The outcome of this process of shifting our thinking, feeling and behaving in relation to Country is behavioural change, enabling a new way of working.

By communing with and sensing Country over deep time, Aboriginal people have developed traditional lore to describe their own laws, customs, beliefs and ways of behaving. This section explores how to work together, share knowledge, and adjust our perspectives, developing a new way of behaving to support a Country-centred approach.



Aboriginal Elder from the Sydney region sharing her cultural practice of weaving, which she is able to continue when native weaving plant species are growing.



Learning from cultural practice / being on Country

Being on Country refers to the experience of being connected to and living in harmony with Country. Being on Country requires an understanding and balancing of complex systems of knowledge sharing, interrelationships, protocols and behaviours.

For many Aboriginal people, being on Country is also an important part of their identity and sense of belonging. It provides a connection to their ancestors and other living entities, to their cultural heritage, and to the broader community of humans and living beings that inhabit Country. A vital part of being on Country is through knowledge-sharing practices to support the health and wellbeing of Country. Knowledge is contained and shared within the cultural expression of many Aboriginal peoples.

Design has benefited from the time and space for deep listening and respect.

—Graham Toomey, community workshop 6 February 2023

Culture is learned from the people you interact with as well as the natural and spiritual world that surrounds us. Elements of culture viewed in isolation may seem strange, but can make more sense when considered within an overall integrated system. Knowledge sharing can help us to overcome barriers. Designing solutions to complex problems requires many dissimilar minds and points of view, often referred to as brainstorming or collective problem-solving.

Aboriginal ways of knowing and thinking consider natural systems as part of a complex and interconnected ecosystem, which may be challenging in systems and processes where Western science and culture have predominated. However, it is important that two-way knowledge sharing occurs, supporting greater appreciation and development of Aboriginal knowledge systems with input from Western scientific ones.

Two knowledges, experiences and world views brought together for a better design outcome.

—Christian Hampson, Woiwurrung/
Maneroo, designer, 2023

How project teams can apply this

Adjusting cultural perspectives

The challenge for project teams – including Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal team members – is to step outside your own cultural comfort zone and be open to other ways of recognising and receiving knowledge. Common barriers to problem-solving include the desire to defend our personal beliefs over those of someone else, or to want to solve problems in a familiar ‘tried and tested’ way.

When it comes to knowledge sharing, it is essential that Aboriginal people retain authorship and control of their cultural knowledge and intellectual property, and how it is shared with others. Aboriginal people need to be invited to co-design and co-manage projects rather than just being asked to provide their cultural knowledge, stories and insights to help develop projects.

Country-centred projects can be guided by some key behaviours valued within the Aboriginal community:

- fulfilling obligations to care for Country and community
- respecting Elders and family
- deep listening, observing and being modest
- being collaborative, sharing and inclusive.

Kimberwalli Centre for Excellence

Whalan, NSW. Design by Bligh Voller Nield and Kevin O’Brien Architects.
Image: Barton Taylor.



3.4

Actions: implementing the framework

This section suggests a series of actions to support applying the framework throughout all stages of a project's life cycle. Typical project delivery phases are paired with an Aboriginal perspective to encourage a shift from business-as-usual practices.

Having made a commitment to prioritise Country, we can reconsider how to plan and structure the phases of project development and delivery so they will complement and embrace Aboriginal ways of understanding Country.

The actions presented here are suggestions only – you may need to modify or supplement them with specific actions more relevant to the project you are working on.

Eyes of the Land and the Sea

Artists: Alison Page and Nik Lachajczak.
Kamay, Kurnell.



Project life cycles embracing an Aboriginal perspective

Using terms from another language to explain something can change our thinking about places and processes¹². The re-occurring and ongoing experiences and understanding that typically describe project life-cycle stages can be supported by also using terms familiar with Aboriginal people.

A typical 4-phase built environment project cycle can embrace and bring together familiar project management conventions and Aboriginal knowledge systems:

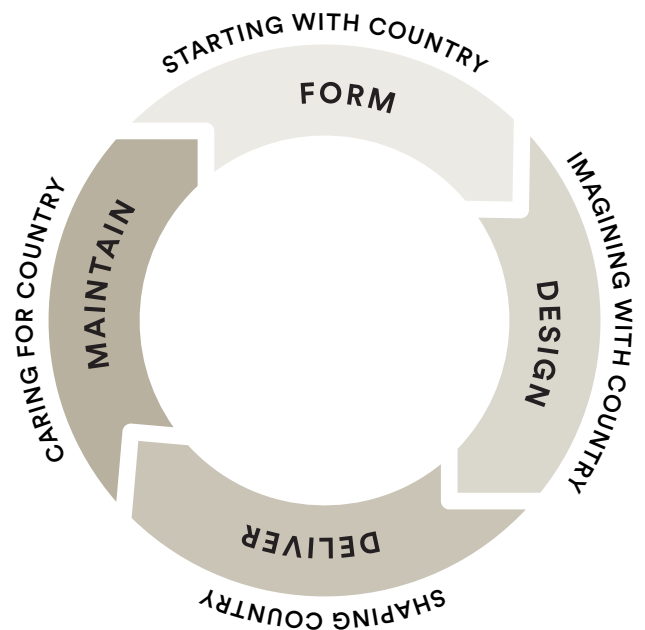
- **Project formation** can be understood as an immersive process of **starting with Country** – the phase at which we start to form an understanding of Country.
- **Project design** can be understood as a process of **imagining with Country**.
- **Project delivery** can be understood as a process of **shaping Country**.
- **Project maintenance** can be understood as part of an ongoing continuum of **caring for Country**.

The terms starting with Country, imagining, shaping and caring are preliminary suggestions – there may be other terms preferred by the Aboriginal communities and knowledge-holders who are contributing to the project.

The suggested actions on the following pages are a starting point rather than an exhaustive list. They should be modified or extended depending on your project and with guidance from the Aboriginal community involved. These actions are grouped within particular project phases, but may also apply across a whole project life cycle.

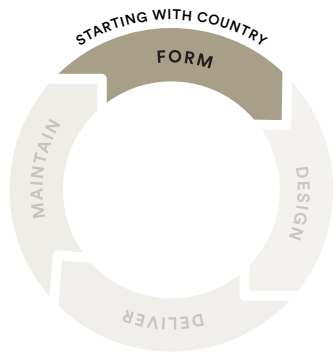
Figure 10: Project life cycle from an Aboriginal perspective

Diagram adapted from architect Ben Hewett's 'Project Lifecycle' drawing, 2018



Starting with Country

Project formation

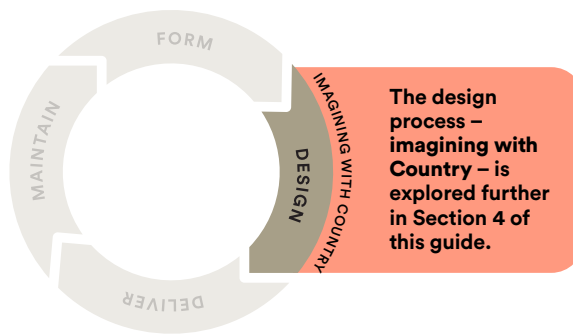


Start with Country in the formation stage of a project.

We strongly encourage all project team members and their collaborators to adopt a Country-centred approach from the project outset, as outlined in the previous section, including undertaking cultural awareness training before the start of a project.

Activity	Action	Why it is important
Research and prepare	Locate previous Aboriginal cultural heritage and technical studies relevant to the project.	To avoid consultation fatigue and prevent duplicating time and effort when information is already available.
	Consider undertaking cultural awareness training, including identifying the Aboriginal stakeholders you will be working with.	To aid communication with those involved, and to support project planning and design.
Allocate time and resources	Allocate sufficient time and resources for community to participate, ensuring there is flexibility with timing and location of meetings.	To ensure that consultants and community representatives participating in knowledge-sharing workshops are given sufficient notice and paid appropriately.
Empower	Enable Aboriginal community to lead and guide the project from the outset and throughout the project life cycle, including financial decision-making.	To build trust with the community and deliver better project outcomes, particularly those that will benefit the community.
Collaborate	Follow established community engagement protocols – refer to <i>Practice note – Engaging with Aboriginal communities</i> ⁸ .	To establish a common understanding for how to communicate and behave when working with community.
Share knowledge	Discuss with all involved how historic events and cultural narratives will be supported. There may be multiple versions.	To work out how multiple accounts of historic events and cultural narratives will be told.
	Listen to community concerns about building development and how it will affect Country.	While many Aboriginal people understand that some decisions will be made without their endorsement, many feel deep sorrow about how building development will affect Country.
Respect ICIP	Establish ICIP protocols that will ensure knowledge and other intellectual property (e.g. artwork) is protected and appropriately credited.	To acknowledge ICIP knowledge-holders, and ensure it is used respectfully and not by others or for other purposes.
	Keep confidential records of all engagement sessions. Report back to community on how ICIP is being used, and seek permission before sharing information.	To maintain good communication on how ICIP is being used, and reassure community that protocols are being followed.
Create employment opportunities	Consider engaging an Aboriginal cultural adviser who has spatial design skills, ideally with one or more of the following built environment qualifications: planning, urban design, architecture or landscape design.	To support the project team with community consultation and interpreting cultural knowledge.

Imagining with Country Design



Imagining with Country involves interpreting cultural narratives and understanding of Country. It is a key component of designing with Country and includes conversations with Aboriginal community about the history, needs and purpose of a place.

Activity	Action	Why it is important
Design basics	Start with the First Nations map ¹³	To understand how relationships between neighbouring nations will influence collaboration and design outcomes.
	Use first placenames	To better understand what they reveal about Country, and guide design responses.
	Connect to broader landscape settings	To understand the site within its context, including how it relates to the broader cultural landscape and wider ecosystem.
	Protect Aboriginal cultural heritage	To protect important connections between items and places, and to landscape settings, and maintain their relationship with the overarching cultural narrative.
	Acknowledge shared history	To find common ground, and support reflection and healing based on a deeper understanding of how Aboriginal and colonial history have influenced each other.
Design opportunities	Learning from traditional Aboriginal architecture	To learn from the ingenuity, creativity and connection with Country embodied in the design of traditional structures.
	Supporting living systems: Earth, Water and Sky	To acknowledge the role of culture in caring for Country, improve the environmental sustainability of built environments, and protect and restore natural systems.
	Reawakening memory	To incorporate storytelling and knowledge of the past so it can enrich the design of places.
	Explore in-between spaces	To respect and draw inspiration from different cultural perceptions of relationships between spaces.
	Indirect connections	To understand how connection can be established through subtle features such as sightlines or elements prompting reflection and memory.
Design considerations	Consider designing with Country at multiple scales.	To connect to the broader cultural landscape through a Country-centred approach.

Shaping Country

Project delivery



Many ecosystems exist across Country, including both living and non-living elements. Rocks, for example, have a relationship to the place they rest in, being formed from material of that location. Consequently, making from and on Country respects and allows this relationship to continue.

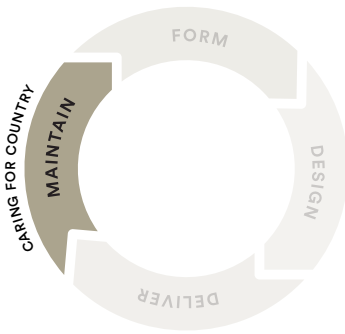
Activity	Action	Why it is important
Construct with Country	Consider how the building or place will become part of Country once completed.	Once you make something from Country it belongs to Country and has the right to remain on Country.
	When significant items are discovered during subsoil investigations, collaborate with local Aboriginal community to determine culturally appropriate handling, repatriation, and reburial of any ancestral remains or artefacts.	
	Undertake a skills audit of the community before construction	To provide training and employment opportunities during construction for the Aboriginal community.
Celebrate	Plan for ceremony. Look for opportunities to involve community throughout the development process, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> —invitations to perform a Welcome to Country ceremony at important milestone events, noting that a Welcome to Country needs to be done by Traditional Custodians —invitations to attend official openings. 	Ceremony is an important cultural process showing respect and giving thanks to Country. Celebrating achievement at key milestones is also an important part of building confidence in the process, for project teams and community. It can strengthen relationships that will contribute to positive outcomes for the next project.

There is a challenge in the implementation – how are you going to get that lens of the developer to think outside their area of influence? We want more visibility of the scope of the influence.

—Brendan Thomas, community workshop 6 February 2023

Caring for Country

Project maintenance



Once built on Country, all projects belong to and will have a continuing relationship with Country.

Connecting to Country is not an action that will be completed at the end of a project, but rather an ongoing commitment to nurturing a relationship with Country beyond the time frame of a single project's life cycle. Projects and Country become interlinked, and ongoing maintenance and care should acknowledge they are now part of a related system. If the early phases of a project have been guided by Aboriginal knowledge-holders and their local expertise, and if the project is developed with cultural awareness and a commitment to enabling connection with Country, then this relationship between the project and Country can be a mutually beneficial one.

Activity	Action	Why it is important
Provide access to Country	Support the return of community to Country by providing access to sites where projects are being developed and delivered.	To enable community to continue to meet their responsibility to care for Country. Having community on site brings authenticity to any cultural narrative that has been incorporated within the precinct or building design.
Monitor and evaluate	Undertake post-occupancy evaluations to establish project success and areas for improvement.	To verify if a project is working as intended, so successes can be identified and repeated in future projects.
	Maintain ongoing relationships with community.	To ensure Aboriginal people participate in the governance and ongoing operation of the project.
	Continue to develop and strengthen cultural awareness.	Cultural awareness is never ending and needs to be constantly maintained and updated.

This is our opportunity for us to get it right. Not only by the building itself but by the behaviours and the training and the people and the skills.

—Jackie Jackson, community workshop 3 March 2023

3.5 Outcomes for Country

To help project teams fulfill their **commitment to Country**, the outcomes of a Country-centred approach are presented in this section as practical indicators of success.

Healthy Country is the overarching outcome of the Connecting with Country Framework, and determines all other outcomes.

Healthy Country describes healthy, interconnected natural ecosystems, supported by regenerative and sustainable environmental practices. Western and Aboriginal concepts of sustainability are largely shared, including the critical need to reduce the impact of building development on the environment.

In many instances, healthy Country will require healing, which can be supported if Aboriginal communities are enabled to practice their obligations to care for Country. From Healthy Country flows employment and education opportunities, respect for Country and community, facilitating social cohesion, and the ability to shape better places with a brighter, more sustainable future.



Protecting Aboriginal cultural heritage



Cultural competency

1

Healthy Country

Healthy Country describes healthy, interconnected natural ecosystems, supported by regenerative practices based on Aboriginal knowledge.

What this looks like

Healthy ecology

Indicators for success

High biodiversity is home to a wide variety of plant and animal species, including those that are rare or endangered.

Clean air and water are free of pollutants.

Porous development allows rainwater to soak the ground as well as flow freely across land into original waterways.

Stormwater infrastructure that has replaced original water systems is naturalised and opened up to daylight.

Ecological systems are resilient to impacts from drought, floods and fires, as well as human-induced disturbances such as habitat destruction and pollution.

The physical form of Country remains recognisable and restored where possible

Alternative solutions are found to excavating, cutting into and reshaping the ground.

Interference with natural water systems is minimal.

Original landscapes are restored and protected, and isolated pockets are reconnected.

2



Healthy community

Built environment projects can provide opportunities for employment and capacity building within the Aboriginal community, and support Aboriginal communities' connection to their cultural identity, which supports positive health and wellbeing.

What this looks like	Indicators for success
Strong cultural identity, connected to place and community	Aboriginal community see their cultural heritage appropriately reflected in the design of places where they live and work.
Cultural safety	<p>Aboriginal people feel safe, respected, and supported in how they express their cultural identity.</p> <p>Aboriginal consultants with spatial design expertise aren't burdened by an expectation to represent the voice of many within Aboriginal communities.</p>
Relief for Aboriginal communities who are fatigued by the workload imposed on them by project teams seeking their advice on Country	<p>A strategic plan or register is established to identify technical and cultural skills of Aboriginal community.</p> <p>Community is involved early in the decision-making about which projects they are best placed to work on.</p> <p>Availability and choice of Aboriginal consultants with cultural and spatial design expertise is increased.</p>
Training	<p>Training is provided to develop communities' spatial design skills and understanding of planning and design processes.</p> <p>Financial supports including scholarships encourage community to pursue a career in built environment professions.</p>
Employment opportunities	<p>Jobs are created that allow people to stay connected to community and Country, for example, the Camooweal spinifex project¹⁴.</p> <p>Employment opportunities are provided throughout all stages of project life cycles.</p> <p>Aboriginal businesses are supported in the project procurement strategy.</p>

3



Protecting Aboriginal cultural heritage

It is critical that Aboriginal cultural heritage is protected in the built environment, both through the design and development of projects, and by acknowledging and respecting the rights of Aboriginal people and community over their cultural intellectual property.

What this looks like	Indicators for success
Aboriginal cultural advisers guiding project teams and clients to better connect with Aboriginal community	<p>Aboriginal cultural heritage is protected and celebrated within planning and design outcomes.</p> <p>Aboriginal community actively participate in shared decision-making processes related to precinct/regional planning or program workstreams, particularly those that significantly impact Country they are responsible to care for.</p>
Project teams and processes for project delivery respect ICIP	Aboriginal community endorses the project outcomes and behaviour of the project team.
Aboriginal language placenames are used	Aboriginal placenames are used for suburbs, parks and streets. Dual naming, or returning the original name, is used for natural features such as mountains, waterways, beaches, forests ¹⁵ .
Access to Country is provided	<p>Indigenous land-use agreements (ILUAs) or other shared land and water use agreements are established for projects that are significant to Aboriginal community. (ILUAs are recognised by the Australian Government under the <i>Native Title Act 1993</i>, and can be negotiated between Indigenous groups and other parties anywhere in Australia.)</p> <p>Access to Country enables community to practice ceremony and undertake obligations to care for Country.</p>

4



Cultural competency

Implementing the Connecting with Country Framework through built environment projects provides educational opportunities for project teams, clients, and the public, to develop a deeper cultural awareness and respect for Aboriginal people and culture.

What this looks like	Indicators for success
Ongoing cultural awareness training develops skills and competency in delivering Country-centred design projects	Workplace culture supports training, immersion and learning for built environment professionals, including individuals, project teams and across agencies.
	Cultural awareness training is embedded into continuing professional development requirements (e.g. NSCA).
	Proof of cultural awareness training is required in procurement contracts.

There needs to be a level of cultural understanding to have meaningful engagement and conversations.

—Brendan Thomas, community workshop 6 February 2023

5



Better Places

Adopting a Country-centred approach creates better places, informs sustainable designs, integrates with the broader landscape to form place-based design responses, and promotes strong community engagement to create welcoming and accessible places.

What this looks like	Indicators for success
Planning and design projects create places that are connected with Country	Project sites are connected to broader landscapes beyond property or project boundaries.
	First placenames guide design and planning outcomes: placenaming, dual naming and wayfinding.
	The memory of significant cultural, historic and natural events can be read and traced within Country's landscape.
	Where possible, locally sourced, sustainable building materials are used; they have a relationship with and belong to the Country they come from.
Planning and design outcomes support living cultural practices	Cultural burning is used to maintain the health of landscapes and protect against unplanned bushfires.
	Projects support ongoing opportunities for on-Country cultural tours, ceremony, and sourcing Indigenous food and materials.
Original landscapes are repaired or restored	Landscapes are regenerated from seed banks stored within the soil, activated by warming the ground through traditional cultural burning. When this is possible there may be no need to reconstruct or guess what the original Indigenous landscape was like before it was disturbed by colonisation.





Key learning for Section 3:

When guided by Aboriginal community, the practices for enabling a Country-centred design approach and actions to support project life-cycle delivery can help realise these healthy Country outcomes.

We all get the feeling that we're on the same journey, and we share the vision for what we want for Country, to share with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

—Thelmarie Rudd,
community workshop
14 February 2023

Redfern Community Facility on Gadigal Lands is an upgrade to an existing 1880s Victorian Italianate building made both physically and psychologically accessible for First Nations community members.

Redfern, Sydney.

Design developed collaboratively by Aileen Sage Architects, Dr Danièle Hromek of Djinjama, Jean Rice Architect, Dr Noni Boyd and the City of Sydney.

Section 4

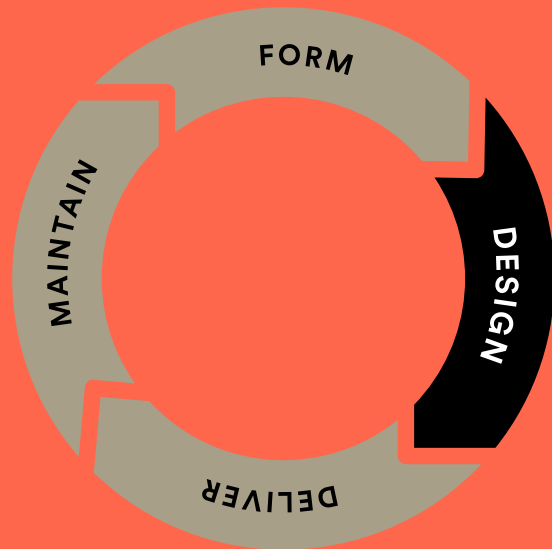
DESIGNING WITH COUNTRY





George Street Plaza
Sydney CBD. Artist: Daniel Boyd.

Section 4 explores opportunities for design to support connection to Country in built environment projects in greater detail. It elaborates on the actions listed in the design phase of the project life cycle (Section 3.4), and includes design concepts that may inspire a shift towards designing with Country.



4.1 Design basics

In addition to the typical design processes and practices we use as built environment professionals, bringing understanding of Country into these processes can help to improve project outcomes.



Kimberwalli Centre for Excellence

Whalan, NSW.

Design by Bligh Voller Nield
and Kevin O'Brien Architects

Image: Barton Taylor.

Glenleigh Estate is a rare opportunity for access and connection to Dyarrubbin (the Nepean River), on Mulgoa Country, Regentville, Sydney.



Start with the First Nations map of Australia

Identify and learn about the Country on which your project is located.

The map of Aboriginal Australia shows a tapestry of interconnected nations defined by soft edges. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have a sense of belonging to specific nations but also having relationships between neighbouring nations. In contrast, the colonial system has largely ignored the outlines of these original nations, and has imposed property boundaries with hard edges that claim land ownership.

Aboriginal nations are identified on the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) *Map of Indigenous Australia*. While the AIATSIS map doesn't reveal the many complex dimensions of Country, it does show the rich diversity of language, tribal or nation groups of the First Nations peoples of Australia. AIATSIS acknowledges 'the information on which the map is based is contested and may not be agreed to by some Traditional Custodians'. There are also further delineations between different language or nation groups at a finer-grain scale.

Given the important difference between the colonial cadastral system and the blurred boundaries of Aboriginal language groups, we need to understand that properties and development proposals sit within broader cultural landscapes.

Figure 11: Adapted from the *AIATSIS Map of Indigenous Australia*.

Image: David R Horton (creator),
© Aboriginal Studies Press, Australian
Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait
Islander Studies (AIATSIS) 1996.



Language use and first placenames

When we speak another language, we think differently¹⁶. By speaking and understanding the meaning of first languages and placenames we are better able to connect with Country.

First placenames provide important clues for how we can plan and design places. Universally, they describe the physical character and purpose of Country. Connected placenames can also reveal overarching cultural themes relating to multiple cultural and living practices, or explaining larger landscape settings such as rivers, forests and mountains.

From an Aboriginal perspective, Country is continuously speaking to Aboriginal people. Country tells people who she is in placenames like Parramatta (in Darug language: burra – eel; matta – water place).

Country tells Aboriginal people who they are, for example, Gadigal (in Darug language: gadi – grass tree; gal – male people) and Country gives people language from the sounds they hear and repeat back to Country such as the kingfisher bird called kookaburra (in Wiradjuri language: Guuguuburra). Cultural lore was also developed by lessons learnt from Country, such as observing weather patterns affecting seasonal changes.

Language can also shape how people from different cultures connect and relate to place. Instead of referring to location in human-centred terms like ‘left’, ‘right’, ‘back’ and ‘front’, most Aboriginal nations use cardinal direction terms connecting to Country – north, south, east and west. Also, the commonly used term ‘hello’ is a human-centred personal exchange and does not exist in Aboriginal language. Instead ‘Where are you going?’ and sometimes ‘Where are you coming from?’ is used, highlighting Aboriginal peoples’ deep connection to Country¹⁷.

Language is Country, Country is language and it all connects. It is reinforcing our connection to Country. But it is actually a tool that non-Aboriginal people are also learning, and it’s connecting them to Country too.

—Thelmarie Rudd, community workshop
14 February 2023

Connect to the broader landscape

One of the key principles of designing with Country is to look beyond the boundaries of a project site. Applying boundaries and separating ecosystems can work against supporting and regenerating connections to adjoining ecosystems.

Projects typically include a site analysis, which will consider key environmental impacts affecting the site. Rather than focusing on the location of the site, consider the site through a landscape lens, which can help to capture the context of the site within its broader cultural landscape.

We need to think beyond site boundaries and consider the concept of cultural landscapes.

—Elle Davidson, Balanggarra,
town planner and lecturer, 2023

Consider the following ways to connect to a broader landscape:

- When undertaking site analysis, zoom out to consider the surrounding landscape at a macro scale.
- Consider the site in relation to surrounding landforms and watercourses, and explore ways of connecting the site to the broader landscape systems and ecology.

The artwork in the rear lane of the Juanita Nielson Community Centre on Gadigal Lands includes words in the local language of place.
Woolloomoolloo, Sydney.



Country-focused design is both process and product that goes beyond stylised homage to plants and animals. Every step from the first marks on a page to governments' decisions, materials used in building fabric and the public domain, has respect for Country.

—Alison Page, from *Design: Building on Country*, Alison Page and Paul Memmott, 2021

Promote and protect Aboriginal cultural heritage

We are good at celebrating and protecting colonial heritage, often reflecting this in precinct planning by protecting colonial buildings with generous open-space curtilages. However, it is difficult to have these same protections applied to cultural landscapes, particularly Aboriginal cultural landscapes.

Many early post-contact settlers took advantage of places where Aboriginal people were already living – Aboriginal communities were often forcibly removed to allow the settlers to prosper unchallenged. Often, significant Aboriginal cultural sites were on high ground, and because of this strategic outlook, this was also where early colonial homesteads were built. Early post-contact roads were often laid on top of the original travel routes built by Aboriginal people, and over time buildings were erected along the roads to promote trade and commerce.

Cultural landscapes contain Aboriginal artefacts and cultural sites. Each element is individually important – but together they collectively inform an overarching cultural narrative tracing the lifestyle of the first community belonging to this location, incorporating sites such as food gathering areas (including beaches, waterways, bushland and open grasslands), ceremonial sites on hills, scar trees and living places.



Scar tree in now critically endangered Sydney turpentine–ironbark forest
Olympic Park, Sydney,
Image: Danièle Hromek.

A scar tree is considered an important cultural item but it is also a living thing and belongs to a family of trees. Science reveals that trees communicate and have purposeful relationships with other trees. They rely on this connection to support healthy growth within their tree network by passing information and resources to and from each other through a network of subsoil fungi¹⁸.

Acknowledge our shared history

It is human nature to value our own cultural framework above others – which in turn can lead to us having fixed mindsets about many things.

We can't put Country back so then how can this be interpreted through design? How can designers interpret our view pre-1788 and bring it back to life?

—Aunty Cheryl Goh, community workshop 14 February 2023

One example of this is when Aboriginal and colonial cultural heritage are considered as being wholly separate from each other. Each has unique aspects, but post-contact history is very much a shared history – one affecting the other – with stories entwined between first peoples, new settlers and migrants.

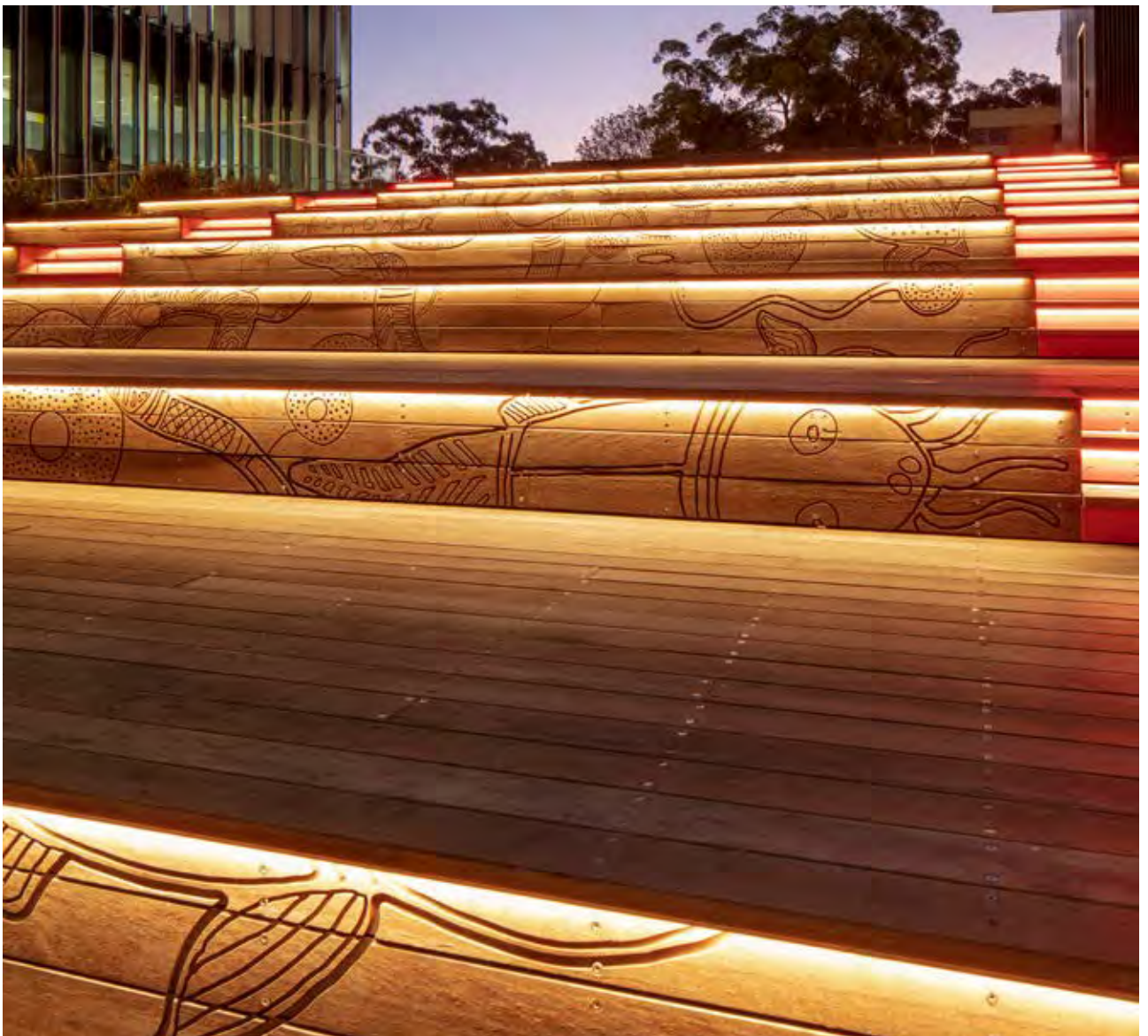
If we consider this blending of culture, our planning and design can better respond to Country. This approach more clearly defines who we are as Australians – reflecting how we have all influenced Country and each other.

As well as respecting deep time and recent history, we also need places to reflect and heal, to find common ground and better understand one another.

***Guruwaal*, Engraving in concrete paving, counter-relief on wooden bleachers**

University of New South Wales, Kensington.

Artist: Uncle Greg Simms (Gadigal/Dharug), with guidance by Aunty Marjorie Dixon (Bidjigal) and Uncle Assen Timbery (Bidjigal) and interpretations by Danièle Hromek (Budawang/Yuin) and Samantha Rich (Wiradjuri).



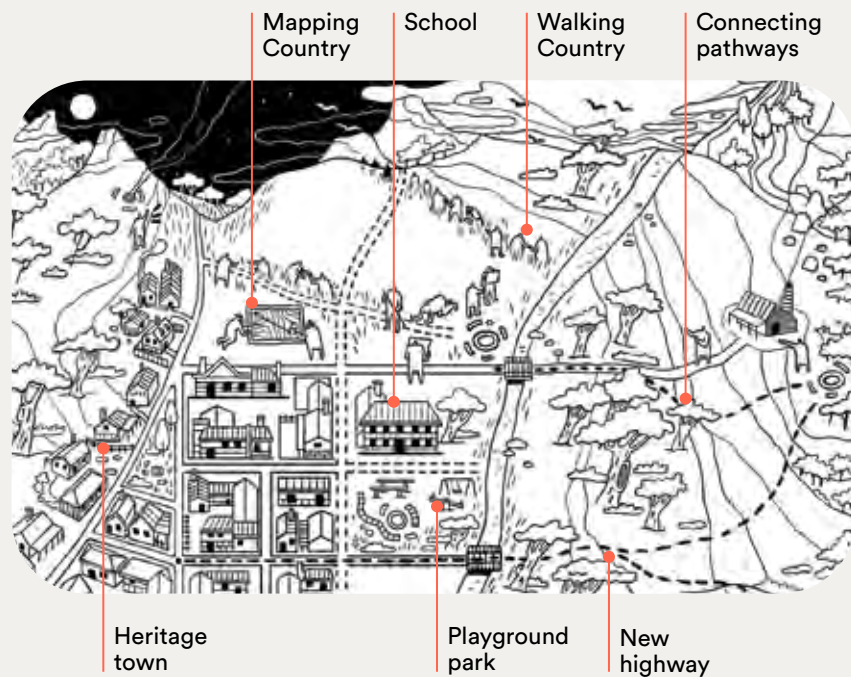
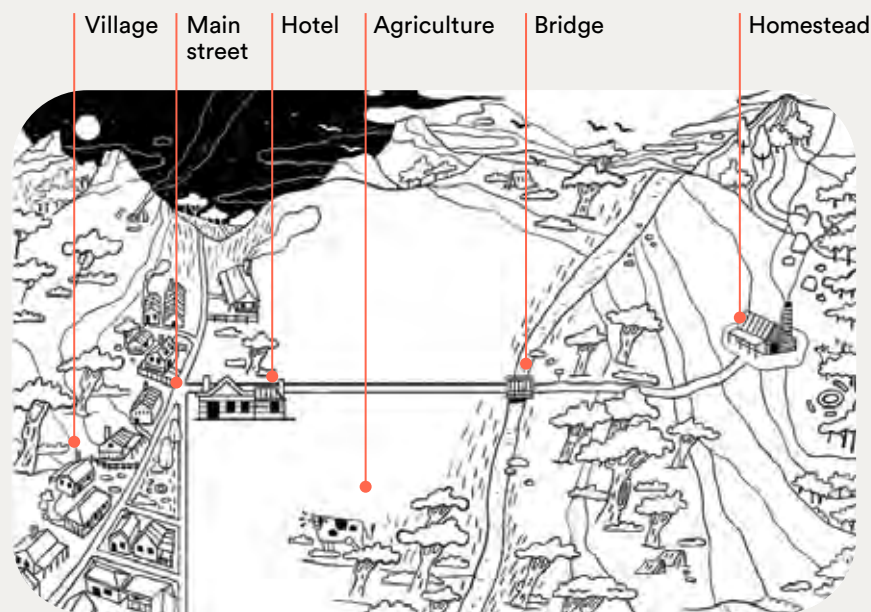
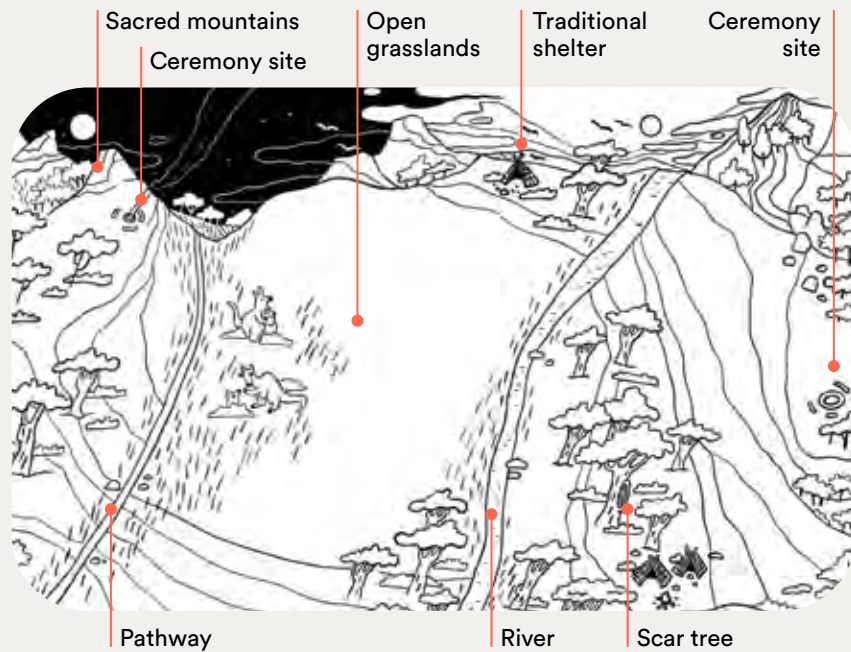


Figure 12:
Evolution of Country

Pre-colonisation
Aboriginal people in pre-colonial Australia had an intricate system of land management, using controlled burning and traditional farming techniques. They shaped the landscape to promote biodiversity and sustain resources, challenging the perception that Aboriginal people were nomads wandering opportunistically through a pristine wilderness.

Early post-colonisation
In early post-colonial settlement, European settlers capitalised on the open space meticulously curated by Aboriginal people. The settlers used these cleared areas to establish their own agricultural systems and expand settlements along original pathways built by Aboriginal people. This led to environmental degradation, loss of biodiversity, introduction of weeds and the disruption of traditional land management practices.

Mapping Country for new precinct development
Retaining the memory of history in urban settings is crucial for fostering collective identity, cultural diversity and inclusivity. It also enhances the aesthetic and architectural value of urban spaces, creating a meaningful environment for the many groups that belong within a neighbourhood. Acknowledging our shared histories will better enable a Country-centred approach to precinct development.

Refer to [precinct considerations](#) – Section 4.3.

4.2 Design opportunities

Taking a Country-centred approach can present spatial design opportunities that improve the functional design of projects and reinforce a connection with Country.

This section highlights knowledge and concepts that are significant within Aboriginal culture and offer an opportunity to extend beyond the design basics set out in Section 4.1.

There are a range of spatial opportunities for built environment design to strengthen connections to Earth, Water and Sky Country. These opportunities should:

- improve the functionality of buildings
- make spaces that are welcoming, accessible and culturally safe
- deliver more sustainable buildings that better integrate with the site and its environment.

Just as trees, mountains and rivers contain stories, the design of new places, objects and systems can be a purposeful extension of Country and imbue meaning and story into them, so that as we engage with them over time, multiple narratives are strengthened.

— Alison Page, from *Design: Building on Country*, Alison Page and Paul Memmott, 2021

Casino Aboriginal Medical Service
Casino, NSW.
Designed by: Kevin O'Brien Architects
Image: Toby Scott.



Learning from traditional Aboriginal architecture
Aboriginal people were the first designers, architects and engineers of Australia, with adaptive and innovative technology evident in the formation of structures.

Traditional Aboriginal architecture can be a tremendous source of creative inspiration. It is highly original in design and use of sustainable natural materials. Typologies can vary widely depending on the geographical and climatic conditions of the region.

Avoid mimicking or misappropriating traditional Aboriginal architecture. Instead, approach interpretation with sensitivity, respect, and a commitment to preserving the authenticity and creative authorship of Aboriginal people as referred to in Section 2.3 of this framework, 'Aboriginal cultural context, Indigenous cultural and intellectual property'.

Gunyah, Goondie + Wurley: The Aboriginal Architecture of Australia, by Professor Paul Memmott, explores the traditional architecture of Aboriginal people in Australia. It provides an overview of the different types of structures used by Aboriginal people for shelter and other purposes, including bark huts, rock shelters, and dome-shaped structures.

How project teams can apply this
Opportunities for projects to take cues from Aboriginal architecture include:

Material experimentation: Experiment with material usage to explore inherent malleability and temporal qualities, and select materials that embed the memory of place.

Interpretation of purpose: Rather than picking up spatial cues from Aboriginal architecture, learn by studying the purpose and functionality of Aboriginal designs, which can hold knowledge about protocols, social order, cultural practices and ceremony.

It's about those first ideas coming together to make new, better, innovative ideas. More sustainable, better designs.

—Christian Hampson, Woiwurrung/Maneroo, designer, 2023

Budj Bim Cultural Landscape

The sophisticated stone structures at the Budj Bim Aboriginal Cultural Landscape in Victoria were built by the Gunditjmara People, who have lived in the area for over 30,000 years. Adjacent to the dwellings, they created a complex system of aquaculture using stone channels and weirs to farm eels.

The site was added to the UNESCO World Heritage list in 2019, becoming the first in Australia to be recognised solely for its Aboriginal cultural values.

Budj Bim Aboriginal Cultural Landscape

Victoria. Design by Cooper Scaife, Architects.
Image: Tess Kelly.



Supporting living systems: Earth, Water, Sky

An important concept in an Aboriginal approach to sustainability is harmony, acknowledging that all living things exist as part of an interconnected system.

Environmental sustainability is a critical priority for the built environment, with increasing awareness and knowledge influencing design. From an Aboriginal perspective, what might be understood as environmental sustainability is a complex web of obligations, methods and knowledge systems that have been developed over thousands of generations. Aboriginal people continue to practise these methods and systems as part of their cultural obligations to care for Country. In this way, environmental sustainability is not considered in isolation, but is part of an interconnected system of humans, nature and culture.

How project teams can apply this
Consider opportunities for building projects to maintain or restore the harmony of living systems:

Topography: Analyse the existing and surrounding topography, and question business-as-usual practices of excavating, flattening and terracing sites. All sites have a topography that can be expressed and restored.

Ecology: Research the area's natural ecologies, and design in a way that supports the regeneration of the natural environment of that place. Consider incorporating endemic planting, make sure trees and plants are grouped, and where possible, retain existing trees rather than replacing them.

Biodiversity: Support biodiversity and consider biodiversity impacts throughout the supply chain and during construction. All organisms, including insects and marine life, are important in maintaining and restoring balance within natural systems.

Water: Understand water as an essential element that weaves not only through Water Country, but also feeds Earth and Sky systems. Water management is a consideration for all sites, and this is an opportunity to integrate with broader water systems.

Circular economy: Consider the impact of materiality on Country at all stages of the building life cycle. Aim to use materials from Country. Consider materials that are sourced from the local region, have a low impact on Country, are renewable, and can be deconstructed and returned to Country.

Reawakening memory

Connecting with Country provides the opportunity to reawaken the memory of place, especially in areas that are substantially changed from their pre-contact landscapes. As well as researching the built history of the place, establish an understanding of the original state of the natural environment, as well as the social and cultural importance of the place. Allow space for truth-telling, and consider how acknowledgement and celebration of memory can be embedded in the built form.

How project teams can apply this

Materiality of place: Use materiality as an opportunity to tell the story of the place.

Truth-telling and healing: Consider opportunities to incorporate spaces for truth-telling and healing.



The Female Factory in Parramatta's Norma Parker Centre Garden and Parramatta Girls Home Memorial. A place with cross-cultural significance on Burramattagal Lands. Parramatta, NSW.

Our knowledge systems are inherently part of our spiritual practices – often conflated with religion but in fact more like a vast database of wisdom.

—David Kennedy, Gumbaynggirr/Yuin, former Chair of Aboriginal Network, Department of Planning and Environment

In-between spaces

In-between spaces are an important aspect of Aboriginal culture and spirituality, holding significant meaning and symbolism.

In Aboriginal culture, in-between spaces are often seen as places of transformation, where individuals can connect and communicate with others or with the spiritual realm, undergo personal growth and development, or conduct ceremonies and rituals. In-between spaces can strengthen understanding of self, community and place, as well as convey the purpose of a space.

Examples of in-between spaces and concepts evident in Aboriginal culture include sacred sites, ceremonial grounds, campgrounds and gathering spaces, walking tracks, waterways such as rivers and lakes, and seasonal changes. Using these spaces may require permission or depend on a time of year when they can be entered.

Designing with a Country-centred approach often requires us to be working 'in between', straddling Aboriginal perspectives and standard project delivery practices.

From a non-Aboriginal perspective, the English word 'between' implies a before and an after, or a movement from one place (or state) to another. This can exist at multiple scales and in many contexts.

How project teams can apply this

In built environment projects, opportunities to explore concepts of transition and transformation through in-between spaces include:

Thresholds: The zone between 2 spaces or states of being. Thresholds occur at doorways, windows, at waiting places, like foyers, and between inside and outside.

Circulation spaces: The spaces between one location and another, including pathways, corridors, and staircases.

Interstitial spaces: The spaces between things or parts. Interstitial spaces can take various forms, and are generally unprogrammed, in-between spaces. Examples include waiting areas, foyers, vestibules, and outdoor spaces between buildings.

Country is more than just an idea. It is related to the origins of the landscapes that we inhabit and therefore our own origins.

—Dr Danièle Hromek, Budawang/Yuin, researcher and spatial designer, 2019

St Leonards Health Organisations Relocation (SHOR) Project

St Leonards, Sydney.
Design by Bligh Voller
Nield and Arcadia.



Indirect connections

Country-centred design is about finding a way to connect to Country and community. Sometimes this connection may not be reflected in the spatial design, but instead reflects more subtle, indirect connections such as through behaviour or memory.

How project teams can apply this

Indirect connections can be explored through design in the following ways:

Reflection/healing spaces: celebrating our achievements, remembering past events and promoting social cohesion.

Sightlines and views: promoting sightlines and views to connect to broader cultural landscapes.



Bundy Aboriginal Cultural Tours
guide Mark Saddler sharing
his knowledge with tourists

Wagga Wagga, NSW.

Image: Destination NSW.



4.3 Design considerations

This section presents examples of how design can support connection to Country at various project scales.

Three scenarios are presented here:

- a precinct plan
- a building-scale project
- a special, small-scale project.

Each scenario sits within one hypothetical precinct plan, as an example of a connected series.

Projects need to first consider the broadscale precinct features before working through to the finer-grained design factors relating to building scale or special, smaller-scale projects.

Every project is different and has attributes unique to its site and place. However, these scenarios are intended to highlight some common considerations that may emerge at various design scales.

shell wall 2015

Barangaroo, Sydney.
Artists: Jonathan Jones
and Esme Timbery
at The Alexander, design
by PTW Architects and
collaborating executive
architect Lendlease Design

Precinct-scale design considerations

Start by considering the broader landscape and precinct the project sits within.

How project teams can apply this

Precinct-scale considerations include:

Understand how development proposals sit within broader cultural landscapes. These cultural landscapes contain Aboriginal artefacts and cultural sites such as former gathering places, ceremonial sites on hills, scar trees and previous living places.

If possible, trace the former uses of a site. Some uses were displaced by post-1788 settlement, but in many locations, colonial uses continued the previous purpose of sites, such as former hunting grounds used for cropping, healing places used for hospitals, churches located on sacred sites, or traditional travel routes overlain by colonial roads.

Consider how to respond to a site's cultural heritage in the design and planning of new development, including connections within and beyond the site. Significant cultural sites may have important interconnecting links that need to be preserved.

Provide open-space curtilage around both Aboriginal artefacts and colonial structures, and consider cultural items in relationship to their broader cultural landscape, rather than in isolation. For example, where scar trees were cut for bark to make canoes, it is important to preserve the relationship to the river.

All trees belong to a family. Always provide opportunities for trees to connect with one another to promote a healthy and biodiverse ecology. A tree is not an umbrella to provide humans with shade.

Rather than reconstructing Indigenous landscapes, consider re-awakening them through cool burning – the DNA of the original pre-colonisation landscape is already held within the deep-time seed banks stored within the soil.



Figure 13:
Precinct-scale project

— River
— Street grid

Protect Aboriginal sites

— original pathway
— ceremony grounds
— scar tree
— riverbanks



Preserve Colonial heritage and its shared history with Aboriginal culture



Consider Cultural landscape holistically



Protect and maintain important sightlines



Building-scale design considerations

How project teams can apply this
Having reviewed the precinct scale, then building-scale considerations include:

Orientate buildings and spaces between them to preserve views and sightlines to important cultural features within the landscape such as hilltops, landforms and waterways.

Provide physical and visual connections to external spaces that respond to cultural landscapes and understanding of Country – including openable walls and high-level windows that enable views to the sky.

Follow ground contours to minimise excavation and alteration of existing topography.

Create a range of spaces so community as a whole can discuss shared business while focus groups can break away to have targeted conversations.

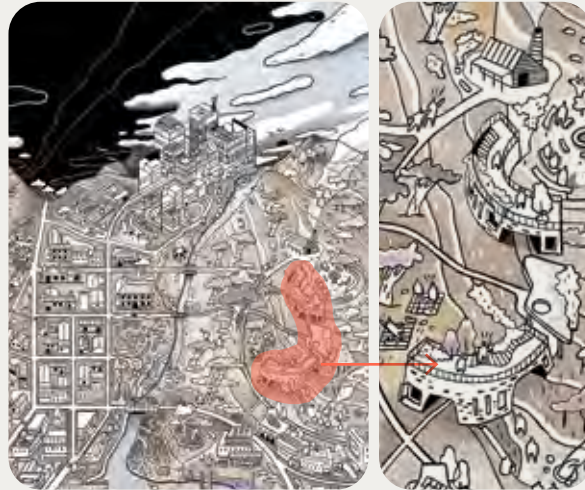
Ensure the public entry into a building is relaxed and low key – and feels welcoming. Allow for social gathering and easy movement and connection to external spaces. Locate reception counters and concierge facilities to the side of foyer space – still visible but not confrontational.

Where possible, provide multiple ways to approach a building so individuals or groups have options for how they would prefer to enter the site. Many Aboriginal communities have strong and extended family structures and at times there may be factional divisions within them. Therefore, the place or building design should provide choices for social and family groups to separate from one another if there is any conflict between them. Also, some communities still observe avoidance practices – where cultural relationships between people require them to avoid each other when respecting certain kinship obligations.

Provide space or accommodation on site for Aboriginal community to reconnect and care for Country. This will enable the community to maintain and protect Aboriginal artefacts and cultural sites, and to continue living cultural practices such as cultural burning to support the health of existing vegetation.

Select materials for projects that have a low impact on Country, are renewable, and where possible, locally sourced. Materials, textures and colours can also be inspired by the Country where projects are located.

Figure 14: Building project location within the precinct



Koori Radio
Redfern, Sydney.
Design by Tonkin Zulaikha and Greer Architects.



St John's Cathedral
Parramatta, NSW. Image: Andrew Cowen.

Design considerations for special and small-scale projects

How project teams can apply this
Special and small-scale projects should be intrinsically related to place. To promote connection and engagement with place and community:

Design places that promote reflection on deep-time memory of events and recent histories – where we can celebrate our achievements and aim to repair damaged relationships.

Ensure the work responds to the open space and landscape setting in which it is located.

Consider how public art projects will be activated by Aboriginal community, for example, through ceremony, recreational activities and social gathering. This will make the work more meaningful.

Figure 15: Special/small project location within the precinct



barrangal dyara
(skin and bones),
temporary public artwork
The Royal Botanic Garden,
Sydney. Artist: Jonathan Jones.
Image: Anna Kucera.



Gosford Waterfront Park
Gosford, NSW.
Design by Turf Design,
Photographer: Guy Wilkinson.





Key learning for Section 4:

Design basics are essential elements of designing with Country that are additional to good design practice.

Design opportunities suggest ways to further explore Country-centred design.

Design considerations span various scales, but at each scale projects need to respond to their broader cultural landscape, beyond the site boundaries.

If the stories are rooted in cultural values that reinforce our relationship to nature and compel us to care for it, then this will ultimately become our collective and cultural identity.

—Alison Page, from *Design: Building on Country*, Alison Page and Paul Memmott, 2021

Car-rang-gel (North Head) remains a culturally and spiritually significant place in the Sydney area.
North head, Sydney.

Section 5

**CASE
STUDIES**

The following case studies demonstrate projects that have been designed to successfully connect with Country.

Living culture projects



barrangal dyara (skin and bones)

Celebrating a continuing living culture through collaboration on a temporary public artwork

Project type:
Public art project
Location:
Yurong Point (Royal Botanic Garden, Sydney) NSW

Aboriginal language landscape group:
Gadi Country



MAGIC at Rick Farley Reserve

Listening to Country

Project type:
Caring for Country, connecting to culture

Location:
Willandra Lakes region, south-west NSW

Aboriginal language landscape group:
Ngyampaa, Mutthi Mutthi Barkindji/ Paakantyi peoples



Firesticks Alliance Indigenous Corporation

Caring for Country through connecting to culture and tradition

Project type:
Building community practice, nurturing Country

Location:
Australia wide

Aboriginal language landscape group:
National



Gayini

Aboriginal people reconnecting to Country, and Country reconnecting to people

Project type:
Sustainable land management – agriculture, water, environment, culture

Location:
Lower Murrumbidgee Valley, NSW

Aboriginal language landscape group:
Nari Nari

Precinct-scale projects



The Eora Journey, City of Sydney

Recognition in the public domain

Project type:
Public art and cultural interpretation, education, employment and training

Location:
Sydney

Aboriginal language landscape group:
Gadigal



Macquarie Street East Precinct

A vision for one of Australia's most significant places

Project type:
Precinct-scale master plan

Location:
Macquarie Street, Sydney

Aboriginal language landscape group:
Gadi (Gadigal/ Gadigalleon)



Wianamatta: Western Sydney Aerotropolis

A landscape-led design approach unites with Connecting with Country principles to establish Sydney's new major centre

Project type:
Precinct-scale master plan

Location:
Western Sydney

Aboriginal language landscape group:
Wianamatta, Darug



Parramatta Square, City of Parramatta

A major new civic space that marks the contemporary identity of Parramatta and houses a collection of Aboriginal spaces, elements and expressions

Project type:
Major urban renewal precinct with new public square and civic building

Location:
Parramatta, NSW

Aboriginal language landscape group:
Burramattagal yura (people), Dharug nura (Country)

International project



Sabah Ecovillage

Designing with Country

Project type:
Holistic planning, design and architecture from Country / autonomous sustainable community

Location:
East Malaysia

Aboriginal language landscape group:
Murut People

Building-scale projects



Casino Aboriginal Medical Service

Building community wellbeing through connection and engagement with people and place

Project type:
Public building:
community health service

Location:
Casino, NSW

Aboriginal language landscape group:
Bundjalung



Koorie Heritage Trust

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

Project type:
Interior design

Location:
Federation Square,
Melbourne, Victoria

Aboriginal language landscape group:
Woiwourring/Boon
Wurrung (Kulin Nation)



Bilya Koort Boodja

Centre for Nyoongar cultural and environmental knowledge

Project type:
Knowledge centre

Location:
Northam, WA

Aboriginal language landscape group:
Nyoongar



Kimberwalli

A place of empowerment for Aboriginal youth in Western Sydney

Project type:
Youth and education centre, adaptive reuse

Location:
Whalan, NSW

Aboriginal language landscape group:
Dharug

Special and small projects



Gosford Waterfront Park

Immersing traditional ideals into a world of modern settings

Project type:
Public open space

Location:
Gosford, NSW

Aboriginal language landscape group:
Darkinjung



For our Country

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

Project type:
Public memorial / pavilion

Location:
Canberra, ACT

Aboriginal language landscape group:
Ngunnawal/Ngunawal and Ngambri Country



In Absence Pavilion

In Absence is a public artwork and pavilion that speaks of the systemic erasure and destruction of Aboriginal knowledge, culture and industry

Project type:
Public art / temporary pavilion

Location:
Naarm (Melbourne, Vic)

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



Bara-Eora Monument

A major new permanent artwork to celebrate the First Peoples of Sydney, the traditional custodians of Gadigal Country

Project type:
Public artwork / sculpture

Location:
Warran (Sydney Cove), NSW

Aboriginal language landscape group:
Gadi Country



Yarrila Place

A community and cultural building in the town centre of Coffs Harbour in northern NSW

Project type:
Community / cultural / civic building

Location:
Coffs Harbour, NSW

Aboriginal language landscape group:
Gumbaynggirr



Central Park in Chippendale on Gadigal Lands was awarded a 5 star Green Star rating and features vertical hanging gardens, cantilevered heliostat and other sustainable elements. Chippendale, Sydney. Design by Ateliers Jean Nouvel and PTW.

APPENDIX

Pilot program and community engagement

A summary of project team feedback and engagement workshops with Aboriginal community representatives.

Pilot program overview

Following the release of the *Draft Connecting with Country Framework* in 2020, GANSW collaborated with a range of NSW Government agencies to test the implementation of the framework as part of a 2-year pilot program. Eight projects were selected to pilot the framework, led by different agencies. The pilot projects ranged in scale and typology.



Community consultation on the draft Connecting with Country Framework

Project teams' lessons learnt

GANSW met with the project teams throughout the pilot period. In 2022, at the end of the period, GANSW engaged Indigenous consultancy Thirriwirri to facilitate a workshop on the testing of the framework. Thirriwirri produced a summary paper that included recommendations from the pilot projects, and this has informed the final version of the Connecting with Country Framework. Key issues and lessons learnt are summarised here.

Project teams and cultural literacy:

—Clearer guidance is required relating to Indigenous cultural and intellectual property, including whether cultural knowledge collected through engagement can be shared between projects.

Engagement processes:

- Project teams often faced challenges in determining who to engage with in Aboriginal communities, particularly in urban contexts or where most Aboriginal people are off Country.
- Timing and budget allowances for engagement was often not adequate.
- Developing protocols for engagement helps to build relationships based on mutual respect.
- Building ongoing relationships is a key outcome, and clients, rather than project teams, need to nurture those relationships.
- Consultation fatigue was evident among the Aboriginal community.
- There is an opportunity for strategic coordination and prioritisation of projects so Aboriginal knowledge and resources are elevated, and efforts directed to the projects where input from Aboriginal community can be most effective.

Upskilling Aboriginal communities:

- Strengthen spatial skills within Aboriginal community, and understanding of how shared knowledge is incorporated into a design response.
- Projects can be used as a vehicle to build capacity within the community.
- Purpose of connecting with Country is not a design output, but to support social, economic and environmental outcomes for Country and community.



Community engagement workshops

In early 2023, GANSW engaged Indigenous consultancy Cox Inall Ridgeway to facilitate a series of workshops with the Aboriginal communities involved in the selected pilot projects.

The purpose of the community engagement sessions was to understand the experiences of community who were involved in testing the framework, including what worked and what could be improved. Additionally, the restructuring of the framework and major content changes included in the 'Process', 'Actions' and 'Outcomes' sections were presented and workshopped with community. Following these engagement sessions, Cox Inall Ridgeway produced a summary report, including recommendations for the framework.

Community consultation on the draft Connecting with Country Framework

Reflections and recommendations

Engagement

- Early engagement has the most influence over cultural heritage outcomes.
- Involvement in engagement processes can support Aboriginal community connecting with Country and culture, and provide an opportunity for sharing and cultural practice.
- Engagement can also provide a healing and learning opportunity for Aboriginal people who were prevented from or unable to connect during their childhood or because of trauma caused by colonisation.
- Establish good engagement practices to support mutually beneficial outcomes and create a culturally safe environment where community feel respected and empowered, and where their input is valued. Examples of good practice include:
 - providing clarity on the scope of influence
 - organising meetings at accessible times for community
 - putting in place mechanisms for accountability and measuring outcomes during project implementation
 - providing regular updates to community
 - including Aboriginal people in the governance processes that support engagement, for example, by helping to set the scope and parameters for engagement.
- Allow time for community representatives to follow cultural protocols, which may include:
 - going back to community to seek input from appropriate community members
 - getting permission from community to share cultural knowledge
 - connecting with other groups who hold specific knowledge.
- Be as inclusive as possible when engaging with community, as different groups may hold different knowledges or skills. Have clear guidance from the Aboriginal community on who can speak for Country.

- Look for opportunities to show respect and involve community throughout the development process, such as:
 - being invited to site when turning the first sod
 - being invited to perform a Welcome to Country ceremony at important milestone events, noting that a Welcome to Country needs to be done by Traditional Custodians.

Cultural awareness and cultural safety

- Cultural understanding includes being open to different world views and mindsets, and recognising the trauma that has been experienced by Aboriginal people, which may be a result of destruction of Country, colonisation, or intergenerational or cumulative trauma.
- Meaningful engagement can be fostered by a commitment from project teams to develop cultural awareness, show respect for cultural protocols, and practise deep listening.
- Immersion, such as through walking Country, can cultivate deeper cultural understanding. By sharing the cultural practice of walking Country with Aboriginal knowledge-holders, project teams can connect with the energy of the place, and learn techniques about interpreting Country, which may offer a pathway to a design response.
- Everyone, including both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, is on a learning pathway.

Built environment

- Explore opportunities to broaden the scope of influence through a project, and think beyond the project's brief. Consider opportunities to support living cultural practices and the health of broader cultural landscapes.
- Consider a project's relationship to Country beyond the site alone, as part of a broader landscape, for example, by respecting topography.
- Avoid totemic appropriation or misrepresentation of cultural narratives through the building form.
- Where sensitive issues arise, for example, the uncovering of remains during archaeological investigations, engage with the Aboriginal community about culturally appropriate practices.
- In urban or significantly changed landscapes, it is often not possible to reveal or reinstate a pre-colonial version of Country. The design challenge for these environments is to explore how a shared history can be acknowledged while supporting a strengthened connection to Country.

Incorporating recommendations into the framework

Feedback from Aboriginal community is reflected in the following updates to the framework:

- Greater focus on cultural safety has been integrated into the framework.
- Additional information has been added to address identified gaps, including recognition of trauma.
- Protocols that support more meaningful engagement have been added as suggested actions.
- Governance mechanisms to improve accountability and reporting of engagement processes have been suggested as part of project delivery.
- The outcomes of Country-centred design have been presented in a way that demonstrates they are interconnected and each contributes to healthy Country.

Thank you

Thank you to the following Aboriginal community members for their feedback and involvement in these workshops:

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Workshop 2

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Jackie Jackson (NSW Health)
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Christian Hampson (Yerrabingin)

GLOSSARY

Aboriginal community / Traditional Custodians / recognised knowledge-holders	<p>Project teams need to ensure they are collaborating with people from the Aboriginal community with recognised links to the Country where they are working. In most cases, it is people who are from or of Country that are the Traditional Custodians. In the context of Sydney, the Aboriginal community in any given area often includes people who are from off Country (that is, their traditional Country is elsewhere in Australia). Knowledge-holders, commonly referred to as Elders, are recognised by their communities as having valuable cultural knowledge and wisdom about their Country, community and history. Knowledge-holders are regularly nominated spokespeople for that community.</p> <p>Finding the right people to talk to can be challenging – we recommend you start by contacting Aboriginal lands councils having jurisdiction over places where the project will be developed, followed by local Aboriginal organisations. Often local government has strong relationships with local Aboriginal communities and organisations and may also be able to help with contacts.</p> <p>Some useful websites: Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations – oric.gov.au Supply Nation – supplnation.org.au New South Wales Indigenous Chamber of Commerce – https://nswicc.com.au/</p>	Deep time	From an Aboriginal perspective, deep time encompasses a timeless understanding of and interconnectedness with the past, present, and in some contexts can also include the future.
Better Placed	Better Placed is the NSW Government design policy for the built environment. For more information, refer to <i>Better Placed: Integrated Design Policy for the Built Environment of NSW</i> , published by GANSW (2017), and the GANSW website: www.governmentarchitect.nsw.gov.au/policies/better-placed .	Design	Design is both a process and an outcome – a way of thinking and a result of making. For more information see Better Placed.
Built environment	The constructed environment, understood as distinct from the natural environment. It includes all aspects of our surroundings made by people. The built environment includes cities and towns, neighbourhoods, parks, roads, buildings, infrastructure, and utilities like water and electricity.	Design process	A series of actions or steps taken to achieve a particular end. Design processes are not linear; they are iterative, collaborative, and circular, where feedback and ideas are intertwined and continual. Design processes help provide solutions to complex problems where many inputs and concerns are needing to be resolved.
Connected	A building, place, or space that establishes links with its surrounds, allowing visitors and residents to move about freely and sustainably.	Engagement	A consultation process, for example, community engagement whereby a particular group is engaged to gather their input in relation to a particular proposal, challenge, or outcome.
Country	Country includes Earth, Waters and Sky. It encompasses tangible and intangible aspects, knowledge and cultural practices, belonging and identity, wellbeing and relationships. People are part of Country.	Equitable	A built environment that is fair and accessible for all people.
Cultural knowledge	Cultural knowledge is directly associated with Aboriginal lore. Aboriginal people connect to Country through their lore, and through lore, people acquire knowledge of all aspects of their environment, along with responsibilities, obligations and behaviours that are required to sustain their survival. Cultural knowledge has been passed on through the generations in a complex system of stories, language, art, songs, dance, ceremonies and customs that have been practised since the time of creation. The lore continues to govern all aspects of life for Aboriginal people on their traditional land/Country and waters.	First [First placenames, First peoples, First nations]	First, as in original, to emphasise the prominent importance and meaning this word brings to the term it references.
Cultural practice	The various customs, traditions, rituals, behaviours, and activities that are collectively shared and passed down within a specific cultural group, serving as a means of expressing identity, values, beliefs, and social cohesion.	Governance	The overarching model or framework of rules and practices that govern a particular project, company, or group of people who are working together.
Deep listening	From an Aboriginal perspective, deep listening is the culturally rooted practice of attentively and empathetically engaging with others, their stories, and Country, while recognising the interconnectedness of all beings and the wisdom that can be gained through active and respectful listening.	Indigenous cultural and intellectual property (ICIP)	The unique and collective knowledge, cultural expressions, and traditional practices that are rooted in the heritage, identity, and world view of First Nations peoples, protected by international law. In NSW, this term is sometimes referred to as Aboriginal cultural and intellectual property (ACIP).
		Knowledges	Knowledges (as a plural) recognises that Aboriginal knowledge comes from different nations and family groups. Knowledge (singular and plural) is multifaceted and may incorporate many different views.
		Master plan	A framework document showing how development will occur in a given place and including building parameters like height, density, shadowing and environmental concerns. It is a visual document that details a clear strategy or plan for the physical transformation of a place, supported by financial, economic and social policy documents, which outline delivery mechanisms and implementation strategies.
		Peoples	Peoples is used in plural in reference to Aboriginal peoples, recognising there are different nations and family groups.
		Place	A social and a physical concept, a physical setting, point, or area in space conceived and designated by people and communities. In this sense, place can describe different scales of the built environment, for example, a town is a place and a building can be a place.
		Resilient	A building, place, or space that can withstand or recover from difficult conditions.
		Shared history	The interconnected narratives, events, and experiences that are collectively remembered, experienced, and passed on by different individuals or communities, highlighting common aspects and links within a broader historical context.
		Strategy	A plan of action designed to achieve an aim, vision, or outcome.
		Sustainable	Relates to the endurance of systems, buildings, spaces, and processes – their ability to be maintained at a certain rate or level, which contributes positively to environmental, economic, and social outcomes.

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Redfern Mural, a historically
significant public artwork
for the community, with
Sydney city scape behind
on Gadigal Lands.

Redfern, Sydney.



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