

# KIMBERWALLI – MANY STARS



## A place of empowerment for Aboriginal youth in Western Sydney

The design of Kimberwalli involved the adaptive re-use of 2 former 1970s Whalan Public High School brick buildings. The addition of a double-height verandah gives a new identity to the place and a new way of entering and framing the surrounds.

Image: Barton Taylor.

### Quick facts

**Project type:**  
Youth and education centre  
Adaptive re-use

**Location:**  
Whalan, Western Sydney,  
NSW

**Aboriginal language  
landscape group:**  
Darug / Dharug

**Project time frame:**  
2015–20

**Client:**  
NSW Department of  
Education and Aboriginal  
Affairs

**Project scale:**  
1240 m<sup>2</sup>

**Project team:**  
**Architecture**  
BVN and Kevin O'Brien  
Architects

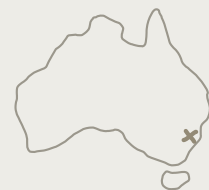
**Builder**  
PSG Holdings

**Community consultation**  
Cox Inall Ridgeway  
Kimberwalli Project  
Advisory Committee

**Aboriginal-owned  
enterprises engaged  
on the project:**  
Kevin O'Brien Architects,  
PSG Holdings, Orana,  
Merge, Yalagan Group,  
ABCO, Bunjil Energy, Indigi  
Bins, Geared Up Culcha,

iDiC: Indigenous Defence and  
Infrastructure Consortium,  
We Create, TQCSI-Yaran,  
Winya, Black Logic

**Awards:**  
**2021** Reconciliation Prize,  
Australian Institute  
of Architects NSW  
Chapter Awards



**Kimberwalli Centre for Excellence was developed in collaboration with the local Aboriginal community to support young Aboriginal people in the transition from high school to further education, training and employment. The place is dedicated to ensuring Aboriginal culture is integrated into all teaching programs, providing a safe space where community can learn and share together while nurturing pride, identity and a sense of belonging.**

### Key outcomes

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#### Healthy Country

This project has worked resourcefully and in a highly culturally sensitive way to reclaim and reframe existing structures, respecting Country through reconfiguring the relationships between internal spaces, and between internal and external spaces.

#### Healthy community

Kimberwalli provides a safe space for Aboriginal youth to learn together and share stories and experiences. This promotes cultural pride, strengthening and empowering people to connect with, speak for and protect Country and community.

#### Better places

Sensitive additions have created a strong new identity for the buildings, better integrating them with the surrounding landscape and making better use of external spaces for core activities such as meeting and learning.

The youth members of the project advisory committee were involved with the project from the outset, contributing to decision-making and consultation with the community.

Image: Barton Taylor.



### Spatial implications / tips for designers

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

**Consider building edges as places to connect with Country.**

**Stories of place should inform the design concept with guidance from local Aboriginal community, knowledge-holders, consultants, researchers and design practitioners, so Indigenous cultural intellectual property (ICIP) is appropriately respected.**



**The addition of a double-height verandah gives a new identity to the place and a new way of entering and moving through the site.**

Image: Barton Taylor.

**Kimberwalli means ‘many stars’ in Dharug language. The project involved the adaptive re-use of the existing brick buildings of the former Whalan Public High School. The design facilitates new uses and new ways of teaching to create a place that supports and empowers Aboriginal youth in their chosen fields.**

In 2015, the NSW Government committed \$20 million to establish an Aboriginal Centre for Excellence in Western Sydney to support one of the NSW Government’s key aims of ensuring that Aboriginal people, their families and communities are at the forefront of economic development in Western Sydney.

Kimberwalli aims to maximise economic and tangible benefits for First Nations communities and businesses in the area, starting with the project to adapt the existing buildings and continuing throughout the centre’s ongoing operation.

Kimberwalli interweaves its programs with other services and leaders in Aboriginal young people’s education, recognising that over 60% of the Aboriginal population of Western Sydney are under 24 years of age. Kimberwalli provides cultural education, courses and workshops, and places for meeting and ceremony to support young Aboriginal people transitioning from school to further education, training and employment.

The centre demonstrates what is possible when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are enabled to lead projects for their communities. The project has been Aboriginal-led from early formation, through design, delivery and ongoing operation.

The new double-height verandah creates an intermediate area between the buildings and the landscape, blurring the line between indoors and outdoors and connecting people and landscape.

Image: Barton Taylor.



## Maximising tangible benefits for Aboriginal communities and businesses

Through design and delivery stages, the project was proudly imagined and shaped through a strong representation of Aboriginal enterprise – 14 Aboriginal-owned businesses were involved in the project and Aboriginal people were engaged for key positions including project management, community consultation, design, construction, and supply of materials and equipment.

The project continues to support tangible economic benefits and capacity building for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Today, Kimberwalli is 100% staffed and managed by local Aboriginal staff, for local Aboriginal peoples.

## Placing Aboriginal youth in the lead

From initiation, a project advisory committee was formed of 8 young Aboriginal people aged 16–25, all from the local Western Sydney area. This was the first instance where the NSW Government placed young Aboriginal people in a project leadership position, where the consultation led to practical outcomes and direct action in the design process. Long before designers were engaged, the advisory committee worked to shape the project brief. Their influence continued throughout the design and development process, working with Kaurareg and Meriam architect Kevin O'Brien of BVN.

Regular meetings throughout the course of the project, from brief confirmation, through design, documentation and construction, ensured an open, transparent and informed flow of information and influence. This was supplemented by milestone community events to keep community informed of issues and progress.

In consultation with local Dharug knowledge-holders and the advisory committee, the 'Aboriginal Centre for Excellence in Western Sydney' was eventually renamed Kimberwalli, a Dharug word meaning 'many stars', in recognition of the centre's ambition to act as a guiding light for its community of young Aboriginal people as they start to navigate their future.

The name [Kimberwalli] honours Aboriginal language and culture and recognises the role of stars in storytelling and learning, navigating Country and following lore to sustain culture and wellbeing. The name 'Kimberwalli' also recognises young Aboriginal people can be the stars of their own destiny and there are many opportunities to strive towards.

—Kimberwalli Centre for Excellence, Aboriginal Affairs NSW

## Connecting with Dharug Country

The design of Kimberwalli involved the adaptive re-use of former Whalan Public High School. The buildings were 1970s brutalist blocks of brick and concrete construction, with poor connection internally and with their external surroundings. According to O'Brien, there were 3 primary design strategies to connect the centre to Country: creating a setting for cultural fire, making an outdoor room, and increasing connection between the interior and exterior spaces.

Kimberwalli sits on a hill with strong views towards Colomatta / Blue Mountains, a culturally significant landform. With a direct aspect to Colomatta, a fire pit is situated on the lawns a short distance from the centre itself, becoming its cultural heart. This space is a social place for both formal and informal cultural occasions such as smoking ceremonies and storytelling events.

Kimberwalli is comprised of 2 buildings: a single-storey former administration office and a 2-storey former classroom block. A new, double-height verandah opens up the old classroom building to its surroundings, linking together internal spaces to occupiable space on the exterior, creating places on Country for gathering.

External space has been an important consideration as part of the site redevelopment. The new double-height verandah reframes the sense of arrival and sense of place. Creating a new entry point and way of moving through the site, a new identity has been given to the existing built form. This also creates an intermediate area between the buildings and the landscape, blurring the line between indoors and outdoors and connecting people and landscape.

External connectivity was further developed by creating multiple smaller hybrid indoor/outdoor spaces including a garden courtyard and 'porous' edges around the building that can be lingered in. Interstitial spaces such as these become important places for indeterminate use, informal gathering, places for rest and where Country can be sensed and seen.

Internally, existing introverted spaces were opened up and connected visually by removing selected first-floor slabs and enlarging the ground-floor windows to welcome light and views to the outside. This strategic demolition created an array of varying-height spaces, making possible many different learning arrangements across functional and informal spaces.

**With direct views to Colomatta / Blue Mountains, the fire pit is the cultural heart of Kimberwalli. This is a social place for both formal and informal cultural occasions such as smoking ceremonies and storytelling events.**

Image: Barton Taylor.





Multiple small, hybrid indoor/outdoor places connect the internal and external spaces, including a garden courtyard.

Image: Barton Taylor.

## Supporting Aboriginal youth

The project sets an important precedent for Aboriginal-led initiatives for youth, strongly influenced by the perspectives of the Aboriginal youths themselves. The centre provides space and runs its own program of short courses, mentoring, upskilling, and creative and cultural workshops. Educational courses are intended to supplement practical skills, bridging between previous experience and future opportunities.

The delivery of these programs is managed by the Kimberwalli team with support from major partner organisations including Microsoft Australia, LinkedIn Australia, Muru Mittigar, National Aboriginal and Islander Skills Development Association, TAFE NSW Western Sydney, Baabayn Aboriginal Corporation, Aboriginal Employment Strategy and the Western Sydney Leadership Dialogue; a number of these are Aboriginal-led organisations.

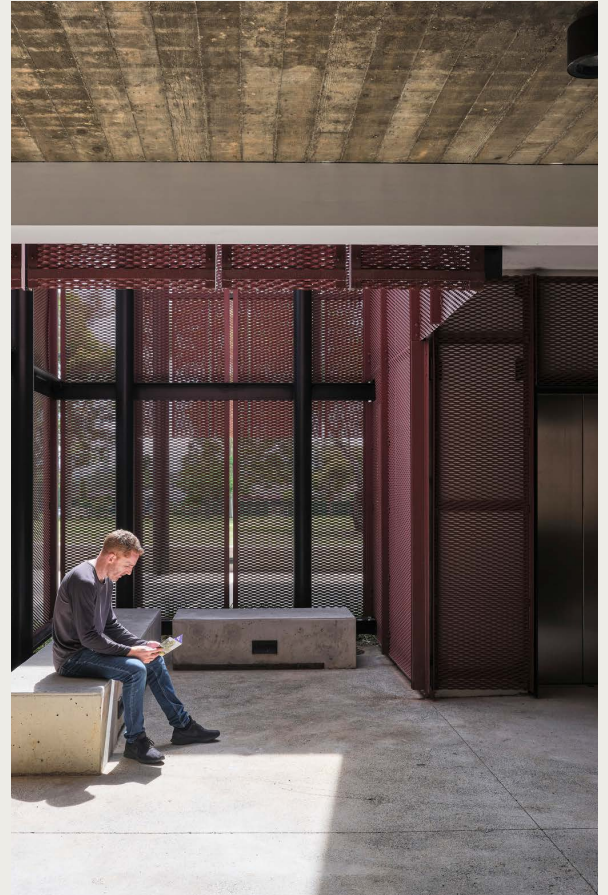
Three of Kimberwalli's core tenets are excellence and innovation, partnership and leadership, and choice and opportunity, demonstrating the centre's dedication to generating tangible benefits for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth. Through the creation of these educational opportunities, the project supports the self-determinism of Aboriginal youth and the health of their communities.

**Kimberwalli is a place where young Aboriginal people from Western Sydney come together to dream big and are provided with the tools, knowledge and skills to make these dreams realities.**

—Tilly, project advisory committee member

Interstitial spaces and 'porous' building edges become important places for indeterminate use, informal gathering, places for rest and where Country can be sensed and seen.

Image: Barton Taylor.



## Providing safe spaces for practising and learning Aboriginal culture

The last 2 of Kimberwalli's core tenets are identity and culture, and healing and connection. Alongside educational programs, Kimberwalli also runs recreational programs and educational workshops focusing on connecting youth to Aboriginal culture, including music, art and dance classes, oral storytelling events and bigger fair days for events such as NAIDOC Week. Access to ongoing, meaningful cultural opportunities is tantamount to the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as they connect to cultural identity.

Culturally safe space also operates in service of the physical health of Aboriginal people, not only in terms of general fitness, but also in response to wider health crises. In 2021 the centre was used as a COVID-19 vaccination hub for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, supported by Aboriginal clinicians and medical staff.

Kimberwalli's ongoing operations help its local Aboriginal communities to continue living cultural practices, maintaining ongoing relationships with culture, Country and community.

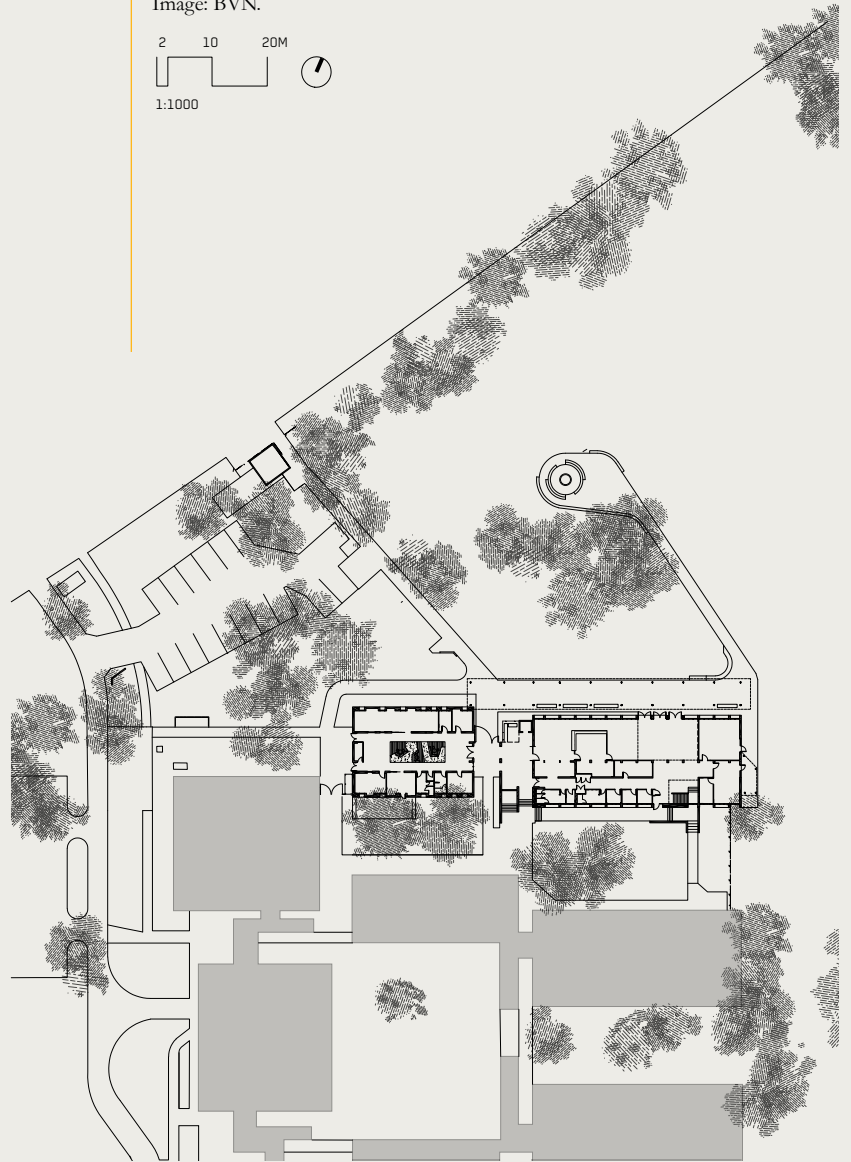
The best outcome ... is for us to belong to this place, to belong to Australia, to belong to this country. And the only way to do that is to make spaces, settings and experiences that become part of people's memories and bind them to this place. When you belong to something, you have an understanding that you have responsibilities to other people and that you actually are responsible for your actions in terms of Country.

— Kevin O'Brien, from Kevin O'Brien, the architect designing for Country webpage, InDesignLive website, <https://www.indesignlive.com/people/kevin-obrien-designing-for-country>

#### Site plan.

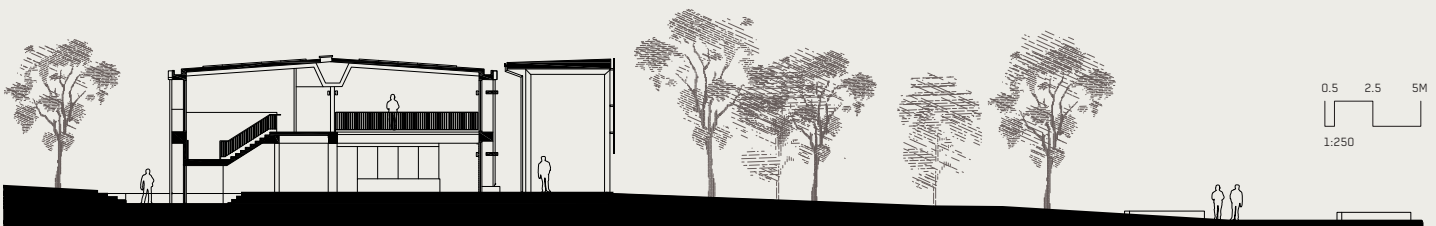
Image: BVN.

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Section illustrating the new double-height verandah along the northern building edge.

Image: BVN.



The Centre has established itself as a nationally recognised and innovative institution that supports and grows young Aboriginal people in their chosen fields. The deeply cultural Centre builds a strong, proud community, encourages harmony, and cultivates better relations for everyone. The Centre is immersed in Aboriginal culture to foster and nurture Aboriginal pride and identity. Through a dedicated space and by ensuring that Aboriginal culture suffuses the Centre and its teaching programs, a sense of belonging for all visitors has been created.

— BVN, architects

## Kimberwalli time line

**2015–2016** Aboriginal Affairs NSW held a series of community consultations, including a large workshop at Rooty Hill and smaller group meetings with school students, university students and community members.

**2017** The project advisory committee of 8 Aboriginal youth was formed to ensure the needs of young Aboriginal people living in Western Sydney were represented. Kevin O'Brien was contracted to design Kimberwalli's refurbishment, recognising his 20 years' experience working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

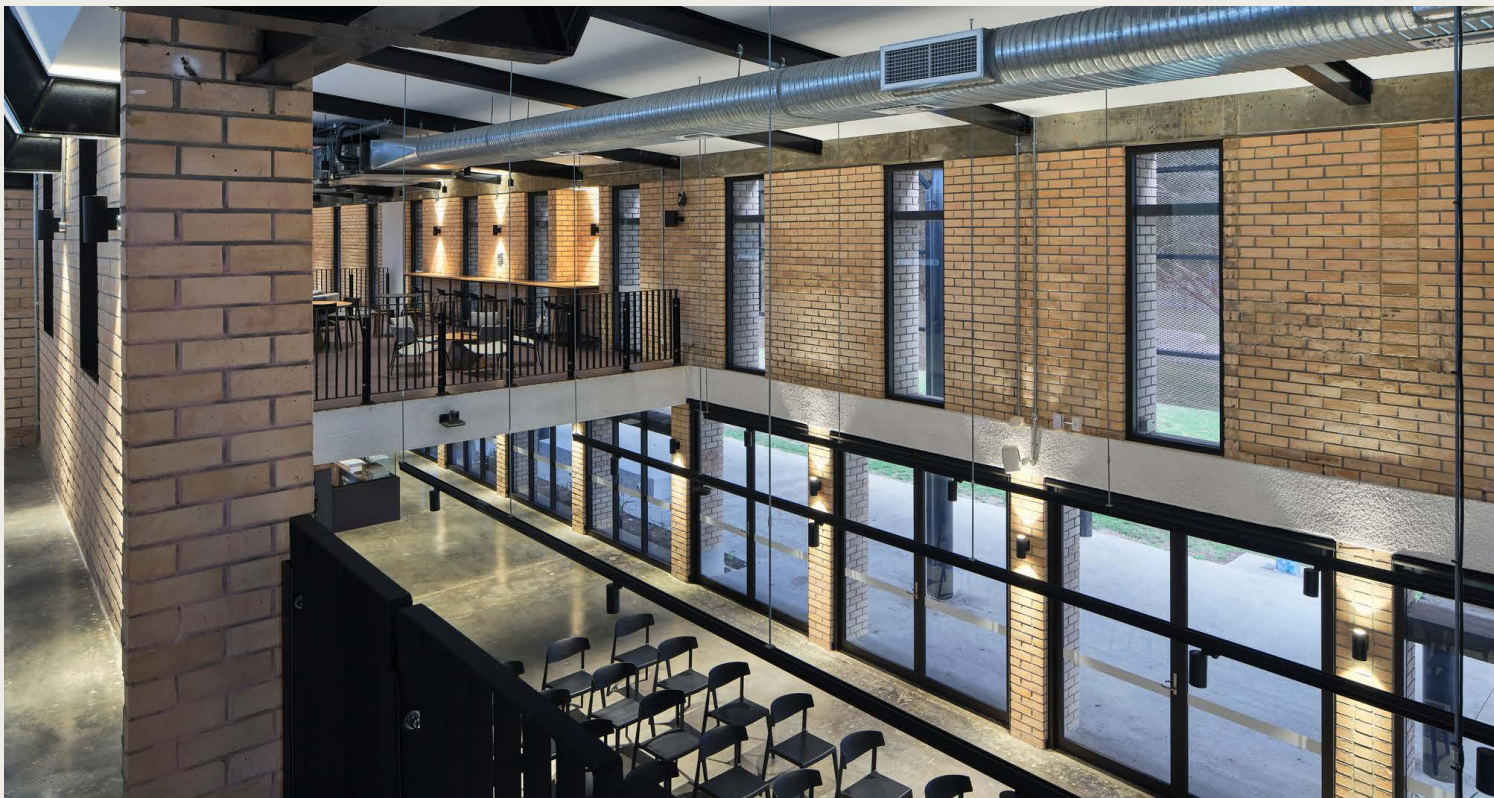
**2018** Community focus groups were facilitated by advisory committee members, and Aboriginal Affairs NSW began meeting with potential partners and stakeholders.

**2019** Kimberwalli hosted a range of events and pilot programs to test the facilities, including Changefest, a national conversation and celebration about place-based social change. By the end of 2019, Kimberwalli's staff had been appointed and a graduation was held for Kimberwalli's first cohort of program participants.

**Early 2020** A soft launch opened doors to community and partners to prepare operations, build engagement and provide key insights for a full-scale opening. In late 2020, Kimberwalli hosted a series of community consultations to share the centre's next steps and to ensure community plays a key role in shaping the centre's direction.

Strategic demolition created new visual connections, providing an array of varying-height spaces to cater for the centre's many functions.

Image: Barton Taylor.



## Further resources

### Audio and video recordings

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

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

### Books and writing

Aboriginal Affairs NSW (2019) *Introducing Kimberwalli*, Aboriginal Affairs NSW, <https://simna.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/3.-SIMNA-WS-Presentation-Kimberwalli.pdf>.

BVN (no date) *The Kimberwalli Centre for Excellence* webpage, BVN website, <https://www.bvn.com.au/project/the-kimberwalli-centre-for-excellence>.

Kimberwalli (no date) Kimberwalli website, <https://kimberwalli.com.au/>.

### Credits

**Research and writing:**  
Isabelle Toland and Janelle Woo (Aileen Sage Architects)

**In collaboration with:**  
Dillon Kombumerri (Government Architect NSW)