



Turrbal Jagera Country Bur'uda/Hanlon Park (by BCC) adjacent to Burnett Swamp Bushcare Group Bush Tucker garden (image by author, 2023).



Keep going ... How non-Indigenous designers can advance First Nations in Australia's post-referendum projects

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As a built environment professional and in particular as a landscape architect, I am encouraged to see First Nations issues and culture are finally being given a prominent place in Australia's national conversation. Of course, for a landscape architect, extra joy arises from the concept of Caring for Country and the opportunity to enrich and mature Australian cultural life by reimagining, restoring and conserving our shared environment. Caring for Country – an interconnected concept concerning cultural, spiritual and practical ways of caring for the land – could be the cultural or, more controversially, the spiritual connection to accompany the modern practice of landscape architecture in Australia. The issue is: how is this expressed in a way that is as consultative and authentic as possible? And can non-Indigenous designers work in this space? If so, how? It is obvious that we must first engage with First Nations people, but some established and emerging ideas and protocols can help non-Indigenous designers achieve meaningful and authentic results for built projects.

Introduction

Why do we care about maturing the Australian cultural life? I am rewriting this paper after the majority of Australian citizens voted down the referendum to recognise Indigenous Australians in the Constitution, inclusive of a Voice to Parliament. A positive outcome would have given Indigenous Australians a say in their daily lives, but now, faced with this refusal, Indigenous Australians will continue to 'receive' piecemeal measures that may not align with actual needs. It is clear that there is more work to be done to raise awareness of the widening gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in terms of health care, education and opportunities available.

The referendum had three threads, each differing in its scale of ambition. The first addressed the practical and urgent need to close the gap and the second the symbolic recognition of Indigenous Australians in the Constitution, while the third made the more esoteric but equally important call to 'come to a new understanding of who we are' (Pearson, 2023, cited in Langton, 2023). It is this last thread that provides the challenge for landscape architects – as I see this as a 'call to arms' to explore the cultural shift needed to influence citizens, governments, institutions and corporations to close the gap and provide opportunities for First Nations people, which in turn will open up the opportunity to care for and heal Country.

Shifting the cultural dial is a huge ambition; it takes a coordinated and concerted effort, made in unison. Landscape architects can play our part by doing what we do best – creating design narratives that incorporates Indigenous culture, working for Country (climate-positive design), designing for the long term and working at all scales. What I have described sits within standard western design methodology and methods of production. The intention is that this is an interconnected approach that seeks to align to First Nations views of the world. However, I also acknowledge the emerging ideas concerned with decolonising methodologies by Indigenous scholars and designers, who will no doubt lead the way in this space (Smith, 2022). The idea here is to reimagine a world through Indigenous eyes, a process of Indigenising that comes about by moving beyond universalising frameworks and acknowledging the diversity of Indigenous cultures and histories (Moreton-Robinson, 2020). This reimagining is where we could witness the cultural shift occurring as we integrate Indigenous perspectives, voices and stories into a new version of how Australians see themselves.

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As a non-Indigenous designer, I recognise that there is a lot to learn, and what we bring to the table are our collaborative skills, knowledge of production and ability to interpret ideas to realise built work of cultural and environmental integrity.

The design process of landscape architects is well suited to designing on Country: we design for place using site analysis, we evoke sense of place using narratives, we understand the effects of time and we work at many different scales and for many different clients. What can be added to this process is First Nations Knowledge of Country ranging from Indigenous land management, cultural landscapes, ways of being, and stories, through to social and spiritual connections with the land (Gammage, 2012). By including this, we gain an opportunity to embed a cultural narrative into the way Australians think about Country. And in place of the previous 200 years of comparing our shared land to and imitating other places, Australians can begin to see First Nations culture reflected in and reinforced through our landscapes.

This possibility then begs the question, how do we as landscape architects help to shape this cultural narrative well? And can non-Indigenous designers participate to include, with permission, First Nations Knowledge and culture in projects? We understand that Australia has a relatively small number of Indigenous designers, let alone landscape architects (Bleby, 2023). Further, we understand the cultural responsibility and colonial burden placed on all First Nations people. To be faced with a series of losses every day, including cultural appropriation, displacement, systemic racism, language loss, health issues, stereotyping, marginalisation, and environmental and cultural erosion, is a heavy load to bear alone. Therefore, it is not a question of ‘can’ non-Indigenous designers participate but ‘how’ do non-Indigenous designers participate to share the load and, equally importantly, how do we participate as respectfully and authentically as possible?

Thankfully in 2024 we are seeing the formations of accepted pathways towards strengthening First Nations visibility in the built environment. With many taking cues from decades of work by Indigenous built environment professionals such as Kevin O’Brien, Dillon Kombumerri, Michael Mossman, Jeffa Greenaway, Craig Kerslake and Indigenous academics such as Carol Go-Sam and Daniele Hromek, the following three key areas of investigation could provide non-Indigenous designers with a baseline of knowledge for working in this space.

First, non-Indigenous designers (and their clients) could think about undergoing cultural competency training. This will bring a minimum required understanding of Indigenous issues to any engagement with Traditional Custodians, Elders or Indigenous community members. Also, if possible, encourage clients to engage Indigenous design consultants; where this is not possible, it is suggested that the best way to work with Traditional Owners rests with the client when procuring and delivering projects (figure 1). The point of this approach is to:

1. ensure Traditional Owners get paid for their knowledge (Indigenous cultural and intellectual property (ICIP) processes)
2. make Traditional Owners part of the design process from brief writing through to post occupancy evaluation of the project and beyond
3. create a level playing field when it comes to accessing Traditional Owners’ knowledge or stories through the brief process.

Note that the ideal engagement process with Traditional Owners is co-design using decolonised design methodologies. But this would be the topic of another paper co-written through a combined Indigenous and non-Indigenous lens, which might be a better way of exploring how to develop a shared design language for our shared Country.

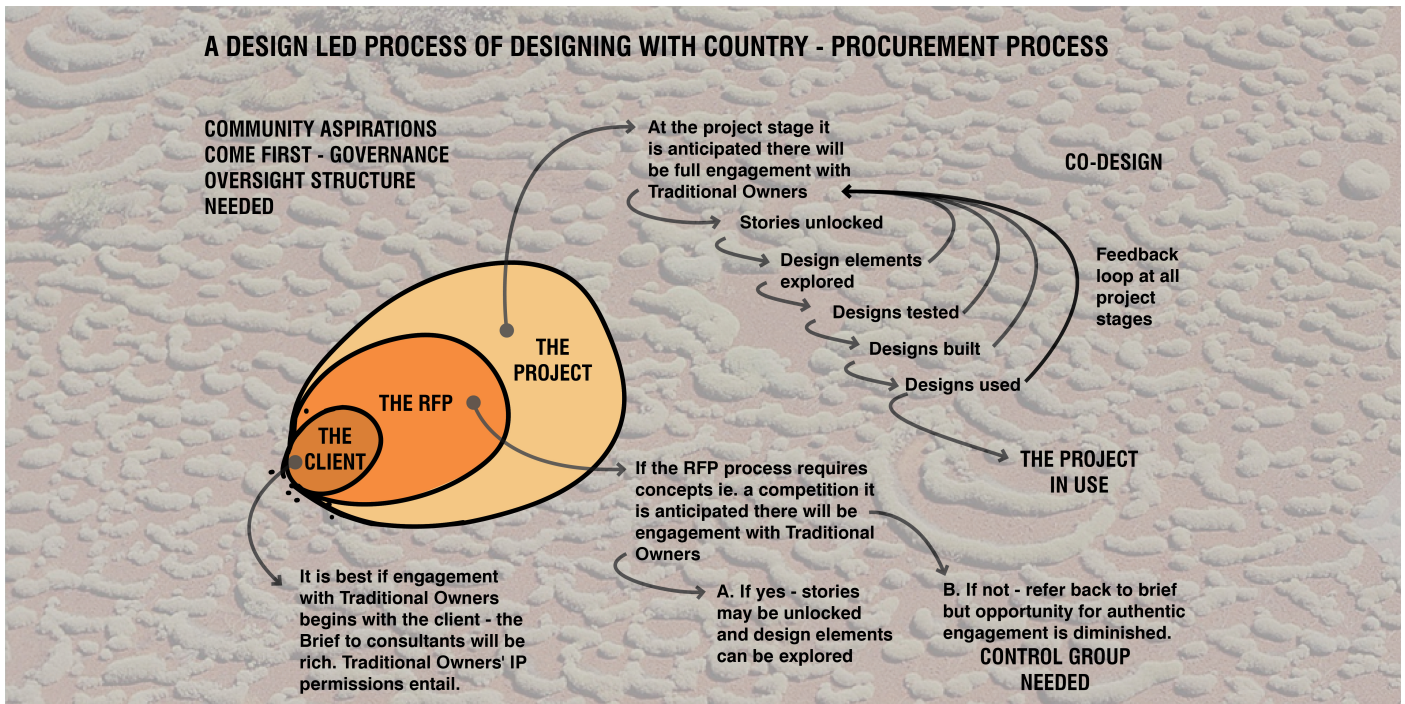


Figure 1. Designing with Country and a competitive Request for Proposal procurement process (image by author, 2022).

Second, look to the Indigenous designers, thinkers, artists and academics who are working and writing in this space, some of whom have created frameworks for others to follow. Two excellent guides in Southeast Queensland are Queensland University of Technology's (2020) *Campus to Country: Positioning Strategy* and the University of Queensland's *Campuses on Countries: Aboriginal and Torres State Islander Design Framework* (Go-Sam et al, 2021). Both invite non-Indigenous designers to follow their guidance. Another seminal work is *Connecting with Country* from the New South Wales Government Architect (2023), which is important because of its detailed description of a process of engagement, Australian ICIP and other protocols. Of note is that this work was centred around the Sydney Basin and that community's way of working, which may be different in other Countries around the nation.

Finally, look to professional and governing bodies. In particular, the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects offers excellent guidance material, governance policies and frameworks. Other relevant bodies are the emerging Indigenous Architecture and Design Australia group and the Australian Institute of Architects. All of these professional bodies uphold commitments to pursuing First Nations issues through their advocacy and values with working groups that support members' enquiries.

As this paper has shown, accepted pathways are available for non-Indigenous designers to self-educate, follow established processes and obtain guidance. What comes next? What is the opportunity? What will strengthen and pave the way for a cultural shift that reveres First Nations culture in contemporary society? I believe these questions may only be discovered through the daily practice of landscape architecture. If reports on these built works, along with discussion of the process and reflections, are then continually published and circulated, it can build up a body of work that is accessible to and features in public discourse. From there, we will begin to see what is working to deliver the best outcomes for First Nations people while making this work more visible and widely accepted. A range of projects could be relevant: just a few examples are community self-determination on Country handed back in far north Queensland; inner-city creek re-wilding projects; and new hospitals on the urban fringe creating culturally safe places for Indigenous patients and visitors. All of these projects will have a story of Indigenous inclusion to tell and celebrate. The more we see, the more all Australians will begin to gain 'a new understanding of who we are'.

Conclusion

A more mature Australian culture would recognise and celebrate 60,000 years of continuous culture, see it as the nation's superpower and want to infuse it into all aspects of cultural life in this country. As we have seen with the referendum, the opportunity to grow the national narrative to include all Australians was eroded by the denial of a bipartisan approach. The challenge for landscape architects moving forward will be to continue the good work, keep the momentum going and look for the opportunities to incorporate Indigenous culture where we can.

About the author



Deb Robbins AILA RLA has over 25 years' experience working as a landscape architect and urban designer, growing teams and collaborating with clients to create beautiful places. Over her career she has worked across many landscape typologies, such as infrastructure, education, health and wellbeing, commercial and residential towers, public realm, master planning, parklands, recreation and wetlands, retail, community consultation, streetscapes,

villages and – last but not least – play.

Deb's legacy of projects includes the Cross River Rail Bid, where she led the urban design and landscape team across four inner city precincts. It was on this bid in 2018 that Deb worked with Kevin O'Brien and his framework on designing with Country. This was a formative experience that left a strong impression on the team for its original way of expressing a layered place-based and Indigenous design language that was contemporary and, at that time, largely unexplored in major infrastructure projects.

Deb's design process leans towards the poetic by creating foundations that resonate with people and place. She is a designer whose creative and collaborative approach to landscape design is a constant throughout the design process, from the generation of design concepts, through to the evolution of living landscapes.

Her purpose is to design collaboratively with others to create places of meaning and delight.

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