

Design, culture and health – fundamental issues

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Landscape for Health: Settlement planning and development for better health in rural and remote indigenous Australia, Jim Sinatra and Phin Murphy, RMIT ORA Programme, Melbourne, 1997 122 pages.

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THIS BOOK IS NOT ABOUT FORM, or aesthetics, design process or any of the topics that dominate the literature; it is about the much more primal issue of how design relates to culture and, more specifically, about how design relates to health. Not that the connection between landscape design and culture is discussed in so many words.

Conceptually this critical relationship arches remotely over the top of a book that focuses on issues and approaches to the design of healthy environments in the Australian Aboriginal communities of remote and rural Australia. Contemporary Aboriginal settlement design in this part of Australia has generally been derived physically and conceptually in western cultures and has failed to meet the physical and cultural needs of its Aboriginal users (Pholeros et al 1993). The authors argue, convincingly, that this failure is causing chronic ill health in these communities and propose alternative approaches to settlement design that they believe will help address this situation.

This is not, however, a designer's how-to-do-it handbook, nor is it a full discussion of the entanglements between the notions of culture, philosophy and design that underlie the issue of culturally appropriate design: it is rather a book that treads the path in between. In part and most obviously, it reads as a discussion of the issues and approaches to design for remote and rural Australian Aboriginal communities. In this, it will be interesting to anyone working in Australian Aboriginal and other indigenous settings. Less obviously, but no less importantly, the book can be read as a case study on the ecology of culture and how this affects design. It is not just about design in an Australian context; it can also be read as a model for the relationship between design and culture in general. Given the increasingly pluralistic character of many of the world's societies, this should be of interest to many designers.

The book addresses three thematic areas. It begins by discussing settlement planning and development principles for better health, both in text and in a series of evocative photos of the Aboriginal communities. The second part of the book is a series of brief essays that make some convincing linkages between Australian Aboriginal culture and design, and the resultant state of Aboriginal health. Finally, there is a description of a design proposal for a family encampment, which is presented as an appropriate design model to remedy these health issues. The supporting appendices take up nearly a third of the book and in varying degrees of detail describe the community work on which the book is based.

This book reflects the exciting reality of the creolisation of other cultures by Aboriginal people and the rise of culturally pluralistic societies. However, these issues are very much in the background of a book that adopts a pragmatic stance on issues, principles and design solutions for health in the cultural setting of Aboriginal communities. This cultural-systems approach to design reads like an extension of

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Ian McHarg's seminal work *Design with Nature* (1969) and in some ways this is the book's greatest strength. It is certainly an exciting ideal and points the way to landscape architects who are not only concerned with aesthetics and environment management, but are also working as social interpreters and cultural advocates.

I found the book interesting, largely convincing and in some ways exciting. However, as I read it I found myself wanting more. I wanted more technical and design-centred information and more material on the case studies. A clearer model of how to design appropriately in an Australian Aboriginal context would have been achieved by expanding on these areas, centering the book more firmly as 'applied', which appears to be the authors' intention. However, as the book is based on three case studies only from very different geographical and presumably cultural locations, it would be inappropriate to expect it to provide a definitive pan – Australian perspective. Interestingly, issues of representation and applicability are not discussed.

I would also have liked to know how these two white men became involved with the Aboriginal communities they worked with and what processes they followed in working with them. 'Colonists' are frequently criticised for their work with indigenous peoples (Fixico 1996, Jacobs 1994, Reilly 1995), and therefore a discussion of Sinatra and Murphy's connection with this cultural setting would have helped empower their book.

These criticisms may be unfair about such a short and readable book, and the gaps I see may be inevitable given the mixed readership the book will attract or they may be the result of strictures placed on the authors by the communities they were working with. However, they remain areas that I would like more information on, which suggests there is scope for a sequel.

Most people reading this review will, like me, never anticipate working in remote and rural Australia, or with its Aboriginal population. For us, this book could be seen solely as an Australian or an outback artifact, curious but of no particular value. However, it would be wrong to do so. Clearly, this book's potential value is in addressing the issues of settlement design and good health in indigenous Australia. It also has a broader significance as a case study on the cultural ecology of design. For me the book's most important contribution is the portrayal of design with deep cultural responsibilities. The issues of culturally responsive design can and should be applied to powerful and powerless, indigenous and immigrant communities around the world. Our challenge as landscape designers and educators is to see how the framework this book provides can be applied in the communities where we live and work.

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