



A discussion paper for all stakeholders engaged in built environment projects that impact Aboriginal communities as well as their culture and heritage. GANSW March, 2020

**Aboriginal people know that if we care for Country, it will care for us. For tens of thousands of years they have managed, cultivated and cared for the landscape where our towns and cities were established and continue to grow.**

**Aboriginal culture is developing a stronger presence in the NSW planning system. Undertaking archaeological investigations and recording Aboriginal heritage is a well established part of the planning process, but response to Country and culture in the design of places is a relatively new idea.**

This discussion paper presents a series of questions and issues that Government Architect NSW (GANSW) has identified through their work. Some of these issues also emerged from the “Designing with Country Forum” held in Sydney in 2018, hosted by GANSW in partnership with the Australian Institute of Architects, the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects, and the Planning Institute of Australia.

Designing with Country is not possible without engaging with, and more importantly, being guided by Aboriginal community and recognised knowledge holders.

To address the challenge of how to 'design with Country' GANSW will lead a series of engagement processes inviting Aboriginal community members, recognised cultural knowledge holders, design and planning industry experts, and government representatives to consider and respond to the themes explored in this document. These responses will help inform a set of Cultural Design Principles and a framework to apply them to all built environment projects delivered by government.

## Defining Country

Dr Daniele Hromek  
(Budawang / Yuin)

**‘Country’ (capital C) has a different meaning to the western understanding of the word ‘country’ (small c).**

**The western experience of land is one of property, an appropriated ground given a monetary value, a landscape that is tamed, built upon, produced, owned. In the Aboriginal sense of the word, Country relates to the nation or cultural group and land that they/we belong to, yearn for, find healing from and will return to. However, Country means much more than land, it is their/our place of origin in cultural, spiritual and literal terms. It includes not only land but also skies and waters.**

**Country soars high into the atmosphere, deep into the planet crust and far into the oceans. Country incorporates both the tangible and the intangible, for instance, all the knowledges and cultural practices associated with land. People are part of Country, and their/our identity is derived in a large way in relation to Country. Their/our belonging, nurturing and reciprocal relationships come through our connection to Country. In this way Country is key to our health and wellbeing.**

**So caring for Country is not only caring for land, it is caring for themselves/ourselves (Hromek 2019). Country holds everything including spaces and places. Spaces and places, even those in urban centres, are thus full of Country (Hromek 2018), and therefore need appropriate cultural care to ensure healthy landscapes.**

## Why 'Design with Country'?

**There is a clear need for tools and strategies to assist both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities to share knowledge about Aboriginal places as well as places of shared cultural and heritage significance – and to understand how we can all work to respect and protect sensitive sites and to strengthen culture.**

By developing practical guidance for the design industry to respond to current directions in planning policy, GANSW hopes to contribute to better understanding of, and better support for, a strong and vibrant Aboriginal culture in our built environment.

In 2018 the *NSW Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979* was amended to promote good design of the built environment and require sustainable management of built and cultural heritage, including Aboriginal cultural heritage. GANSW supports this through its policies and guidelines, including **Better Placed: An integrated design policy for the built environment of NSW** (GANSW 2017) and other documents such as the *Design Guide for Schools* (GANSW 2018). By developing a cultural framework, exploring methods of connecting with Country, and cultural mapping, GANSW aims to support these and other regulatory requirements in a practical way.

Many types of maps of the Sydney landscape are used to inform planning and design decisions across the city. They include layers of roads and transport, land use and zoning, heritage, waterways, ecological lands, geological and topographic maps, among others.

Aboriginal values are identified only in specific locations of archaeological and heritage value. As a result, current planning and design approaches have a narrowly defined consideration of Aboriginal understanding of landscape and environment during the planning process or design of the built environment.

Through our research and conversations with Aboriginal knowledge holders to date, we know that Aboriginal values of landscape integrate multiple scales, from large-scale meaning and symbolism, to detailed land management of specific important sites. This discussion paper aims to generate conversation and feedback that will help to enable future development in our State to be designed with and connected to Country. This feedback will inform GANSW to identify appropriate ways to map and design with Aboriginal places as well as those with shared significance to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

# Can lost memory of cultural landscapes be restored?

Dillon Kombumerri  
(Yugembir / Goori)

**‘Terra nullius’ (no-one’s land) has been overturned in the legal system, but the sentiment remains embedded in many of our assumptions and regulatory processes – largely because there is little knowledge amongst non-Aboriginal people about the issue.**

In Bruce Pascoe’s book, *Dark Emu*, it is clear that early post-contact, few colonists were here to marvel at a newly discovered civilisation; they were here to replace it. Most described a landscape from which they could profit. Few bothered to acknowledge a fertile existing agricultural economy because they knew it would be subsumed. Similarly, almost all of the original villages were destroyed leaving only a few remnants of innovative structures responding to local environment and landscape settings. An example of such a remnant is the stone housing at Lake Condah, part of Budj Bim landscape (which has been nominated for World Heritage status).

The devastating impact of colonisation, with its disruption to Aboriginal landscape, people and cultural practices, has over time created a collective amnesia regarding this history. However, the large gaps in memory can be restitched together if dormant Country can be reactivated. One practical way this can be done is by “walking Country” with local Aboriginal Elders.

Other countries are also grappling with how to make restitution for their past mistreatment of Aboriginal people. Many saw an opportunity for addressing this by signing up to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

The Australian Indigenous Design Charter launched in 2018, aims to help facilitate accurate and respectful representation of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture in design and associated media. The role of the Charter is to assist design practitioners, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Designers can also use the Charter to promote understanding with their clients and the buyers of design including governments, corporations, businesses and not-for-profit organisations.

To demonstrate their commitment to reconciling with Aboriginal people, Canada showcased its first ever Aboriginal-led entry at the 2018 Venice Biennale of Architecture: “Unceded: Voices of the Land”. No other country has made such a bold and gracious gesture on this internationally recognised platform. “Unceded: Voices of the Land” acknowledged how Aboriginal architecture is in harmony with the land, incorporates a total expression of cultural values in relation to the ecology, and is connected to the places where people live.

The exhibit highlighted how Aboriginal Canadian people think of the world in terms of relations to:

- ancestors and future generations (seven generations previous plus seven generations future)
- interrelationship with non-human life – landscape, animals, nature.

Similarly, in Aotearoa New Zealand, the Government is looking for ways to strengthen its country’s Indigenous culture and heritage. Maori culture and identity particularly highlights Aotearoa New Zealand’s point of difference in the world and offers significant design opportunities. The Te Aranga Maori Design Principles for Auckland City are a set of outcome-based principles founded on intrinsic Maori cultural values and provide practical guidance for enhancing the design environment as the city grows.

Designing with Country Forum  
December, 2018

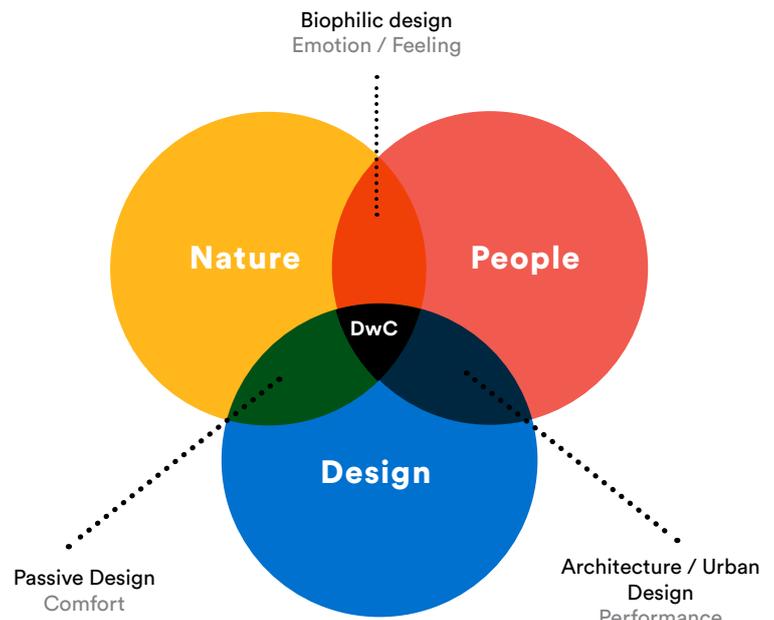
**Our exhibit is about storytelling. You can’t look at a building without hearing the dances. You can’t look at a building without seeing the landscape behind it or beside it, you can’t look at a building without hearing the voice of the architect and them referencing their families.**

—David Fortin (Métis), architect and co-curator of the Canadian Pavilion at the 2018 Venice Biennale of Architecture

# Elements of designing with Country

Our research to date suggests three essential elements of designing with Country: nature, people and design. The interesting binary relationships across these three elements offer different design approaches:

- 1 — Architecture considers design and people (informed by nature). Architecture without people is just a sculptural object.
- 2 — Passive design considers design and nature, and when used by people becomes environmental design.
- 3 — Biophilic design considers the innate relationship between people and nature. Informed by design, this relationship could be understood as a genesis for Indigenous architecture.



## Connection to Country

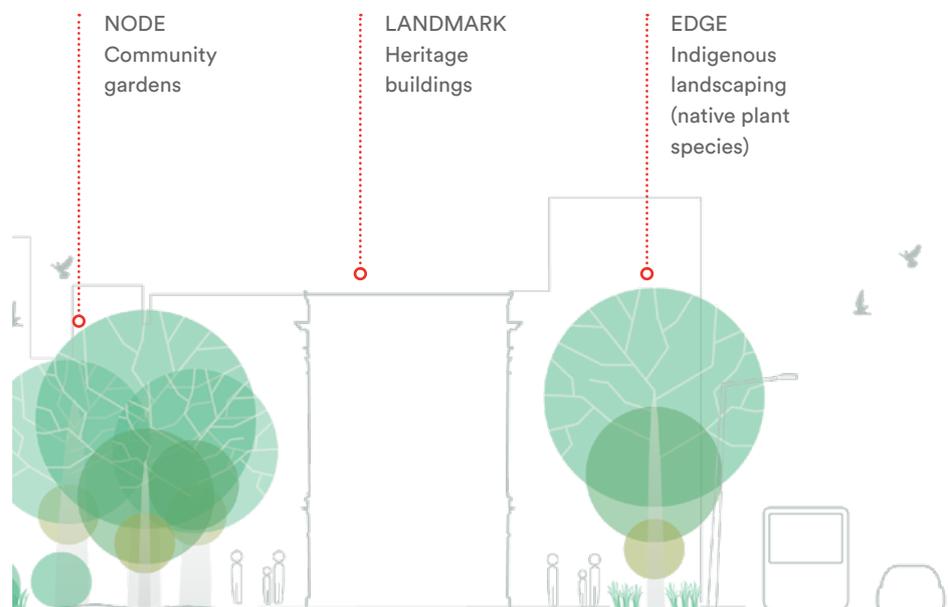
Traditionally cognitive mapping by Aboriginal people was done through walking Country and learning about important sites, cultural lore, and wayfinding through storey telling. This can be argued as a universally human trait where our brain (like animals) senses place – using mental models of space to navigate and remember important features in the environment.

—Stephanie Golik – Mapfit 2017

In 1960, urban planner Kevin Lynch proposed that mental mapping has five elements:

1. paths
2. edges
3. districts
4. nodes
5. landmarks

These features can be incorporated into the design of our places.

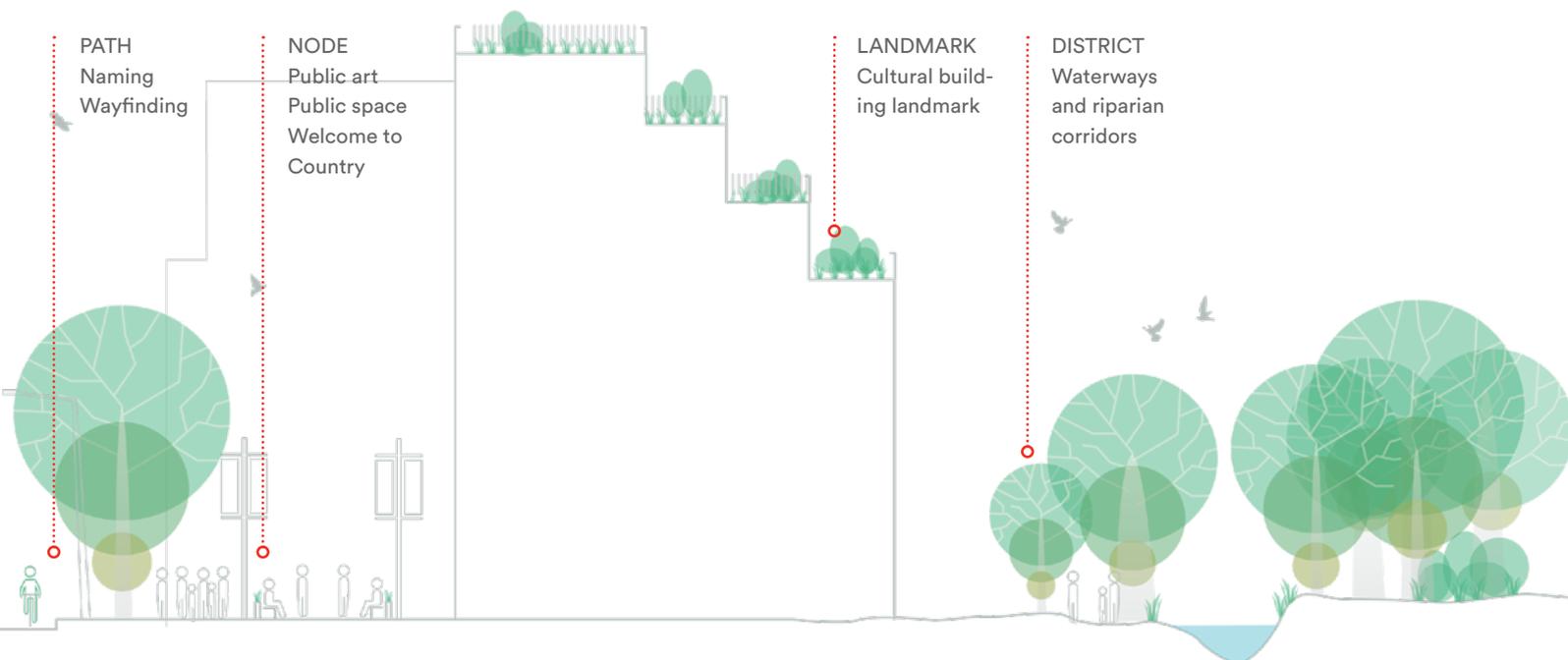


# Human-centred vs Country-centred design

Prioritising people and their needs when designing is widely regarded as fundamental in contemporary design and planning. However, appreciating an Indigenous or Aboriginal world-view suggests that there are limitations imposed by an entirely human-centred approach to design. If people and their needs are at the 'centre' of design considerations, then the landscape and nature are reduced to second order priorities. If design and planning processes considered 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 world.



Ego-centric v Eco-centric diagram  
adapted from Art Tawanghar, Designer, San Diego (2016)



# Reflections from Designing with Country Forum, November 2018

**The forum asked participants to consider a key question: how can we, as a design community, respond to Aboriginal culture and heritage, responsibly, appropriately and respectfully?**

Through discussion prompted by this question, GANSW proposed to gain a better understanding of the challenges faced in practice when engaging with Aboriginal culture and heritage in the design of projects and places. Guest speakers were invited to reflect on recent project experience and the opportunities offered by recent policy changes (specifically the *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act*).

Discussions also reflected recent research and engagement undertaken by GANSW in relation to an approach to considering Aboriginal culture and heritage as part of a holistic concept of the urban environment. This conceptual approach is provisionally called the 'Ochre Grid', inspired by a similar approach to landscape and topography called the 'Green Grid'.

**Why ochre grid? ... it sounds like a term that's almost colloquial: a grid to sort of lay something over like a frame, and to set something up neatly. It's a conceptual scaffold around which people can gather. It's a way to make the unseen seen, to connect the fragments of memory that sit in the fractured hydro-ecological system that we have in a place like Sydney, and also some of the memories that we've lost... the idea of the grid is a scaffold, on which we can start to make new ways of working on the same thing together.**

—Mark Tyrrell (Landscape Architect and AILA President, NSW Chapter) – summarising his thoughts in relation to designing with country, and the concept of an 'Ochre Grid' to follow the Sydney Green Grid.

Ochre was chosen to describe this idea because it is both a colour and a substance. By being a colour it belongs to the grey (roads), green (parks, landscaping) and blue (waterways) layers of infrastructure familiar to current design and planning for Sydney. Ochre was also chosen because the substance is used in ceremony and painting by Aboriginal people to share cultural knowledge.

Local and international perspectives and experiences shared at the forum demonstrated the critical importance of ensuring that Aboriginal professionals, experts and community representatives are afforded the opportunity to be directly participating in decision making at the early stages of built environment projects. It is clear that designing with Country is not possible without engaging with and, more importantly, being guided by Aboriginal community and recognised knowledge holders.

**The spirit of reciprocity is central to building a relational model rather than a transactional model. That's really pivotal in terms of starting to build that trust. Often it starts with a simple conversation well before you're actually entertaining the prospect of a project...**

**Just rocking up and having a chat with somebody, having a coffee with somebody, starts to build that capacity to start to have a deeper conversation when one moves to a project, for instance. But also, one has to be wary – there are examples where people go on Country to engage with community and they'll sidle up to the oldest-looking person in the community, assuming that they're the elder of the community. But the reality is, in a lot of communities, particularly where there are higher mortality rates and the like, it's actually the young fellas who can be the elders. So, you're actually speaking to the wrong person. There are those sort of cautionary notes to actually engage with the right people as well.**

—Ros Moriarty of Balarinji during panel discussion.

# Designing with Country – in practice

The following project snapshots have been chosen from a set of case studies being developed by GANSW. These projects have been selected primarily because they demonstrate a genuine intent to build mutual respect and trust between the Aboriginal community and the design team. The projects have a strong landscape connection; address cultural, political, and social issues; and demonstrate an innovative design response.

## Casino Aboriginal Medical Centre – Casino NSW

**Client** – Office of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health (OATSIH) and Bulgarr Ngaru Medical Aboriginal Corporation

**Architects** – Kevin O’Brien Architects in association with AECOM

The project was to provide a dedicated building to service the medical needs of local Aboriginal communities in the area. An understanding of the social role of the medical centre for the community was an important consideration.

The building has a robust street presence, asserting its place in the town centre. Bricks made from the earth of Bundjalung Country feature heavily in the design. They are used selectively, with subtle details and patterns that insert cultural meaning into specific parts of the building.

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

Internal courtyard and arrival space  
Casino Aboriginal Medical Centre.  
Photography: Toby Scott





## **Wilcannia Health Service – Wilcannia NSW**

**Client** – Far West Local Health District

**Aboriginal Custodians** – Barkindji

**Project team** –

**ARCHITECT** Government Architect's Office Merrima  
Aboriginal Design Unit

**LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE AND ENGINEERING**  
NSW Department of Public Works and Services

The original Wilcannia Hospital building was designed by Cyril Blacket and built in 1879. Located on the edge of the town, on a bend in the Darling River, it was oriented north towards the street, away from the river. The building was inadequate as a modern health facility, but together with its site provided the starting point for a new approach to community health and wellbeing.

The design was not constrained by the limitations of the original building, instead rethinking how the existing building could best be valued and re-used, and recognising the opportunity to deliver the complex functional requirements of the new facilities in a purpose-built form that could both build on the old while optimising the benefits of the site with its riverside location.

Services are designed to support Aboriginal people in a holistic way – providing integrated healthcare in one place. The new centre addresses and connects with the river – the Barka – acknowledging the river's spiritual and cultural significance for the local Barkindji community. The buildings and landscape have been designed to create an expression of identity and place that is appropriate and respectful.

The key to this design approach is to include Aboriginal people in decision-making regarding their built environment, from the outset and throughout the project. This self-determination was enabled by a sustained dialogue with the community to create an architecture that respects and sustains cultural practices and pays close attention to the significance and meaning of Country. The project was facilitated by the Wilcannia Community Working Party with representation from community Elders, youth, government agencies and the local land council.

The Merrima Aboriginal Design Unit consisted of Aboriginal Architects and designers who were able to contribute cultural expertise and sensitivity as well as architectural and design excellence.



## Kamay Botany Bay National Park, Kurnell Draft Masterplan – Sydney NSW

**Client** – Office of Environment and Heritage NSW

**Project team** –

**ARCHITECT** Neeson Murcutt Architects Pty Ltd

**LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT** Sue Barnsley Design

**INTERPRETATION CONSULTANT** Freeman Ryan Design

**COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT SPECIALIST** Context

This is a highly significant site in Australia – the place of first contact on the east coast of Australia between Aboriginal Australians and the crew of the Endeavour in 1770. Yet, its physical experience is underwhelming and disproportionate to this significance. Driven by the upcoming 250th Anniversary of Cook's landing in April 2020, the masterplan positions this place as a destination, locating Kamay Botany Bay within a local, national and global context.

It aims to provide a balanced view that equally recognises Aboriginal stories and perspectives alongside European historical accounts. The foundation of the masterplan is respect for all cultures and heritage, for landscape and the natural environment, and for time past, present and future. It aims to rebalance the perspectives and recognition of Indigenous stories that are currently significantly underplayed and under-acknowledged by comparison to the dominant European narrative.

A healing process is also sought, to acknowledge past actions and wrong doings, bridge cultures, regenerate the landscape and give voices to those who deserve to be heard.

The former Office of Environment and Heritage commissioned a community engagement specialist to work with National Parks & Wildlife Services (NPWS) on a community and stakeholder engagement program for the masterplan project. A Community Reference Panel was established prior to commencing the masterplan project to provide input into the project brief, the site analysis and the overall masterplan design. The Community Reference Panel included Aboriginal community members, representatives from the offices of state and federal members of parliament, local government and community interest groups.

NPWS acknowledges the role of the Aboriginal community in telling its stories at Kamay Botany Bay National Park. It is anticipated that the Aboriginal community will play a key role in the detailed design and delivery of new facilities and educational and interpretation programmes and resources in the national park, including the new exhibition space in the visitor building.

Above: Interior view (design render) Café  
Pavillion Kamay Botany Bay  
Image: courtesy of Neeson Murcutt Architects

## A starting point for mapping culture

Many types of maps of our landscape are used to inform planning and design decisions across the city. They include layers of roads and transport, land use and zoning, heritage, waterways, ecological lands, geological and topographic maps – among others.

Mapping layers include various categories of the physical and social landscape, but do not represent an Aboriginal understanding of the landscape. In current maps Aboriginal values are identified only in specific locations of archaeological and heritage value. This provides protection for specific known sites of significance, but does not address broader Aboriginal understanding of the landscape. As a result, current planning and design approaches do not take Aboriginal understanding of the landscape into consideration during the planning process or design of the built environment.

Several Aboriginal community groups have begun to map this type of information. All of these projects are valuable, however, they generally occur at a very local level, they are not consistent across the state, or even across Greater Sydney.

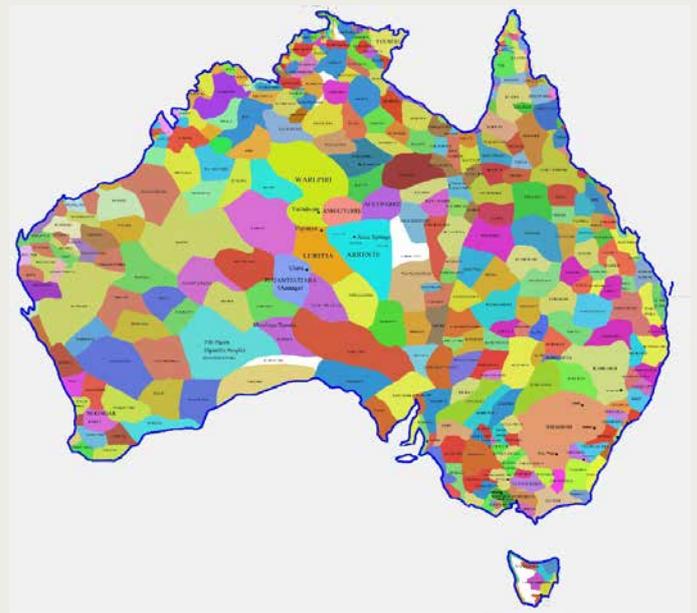
As part of the Connecting with Country project, GANSW will continue to identify the work completed and understand how this information could be used to inform the application of cultural design principles.

The digitising of mapping using geographic information system (GIS) data is now an important part of the planning and design process. The power of GIS data allows for the collection and presentation of multiple values and complex information. It will be important to explore ways to appropriately identify and represent Indigenous values in this process.

**Greater Sydney holds a special place in Australia's history because it is where the first major point of contact occurred between European and Aboriginal people. However, during the making of the city post 1788, the multidimensional nature of Country has never been deeply considered, reconciled or remembered.**

**Greater Sydney has the largest gathering of Aboriginal people in Australia with many families originating from homelands in wider NSW and throughout the nation. The Australian Bureau of Statistics estimated in 2016 that 57,000 Aboriginal people**

Many people now appreciate how mapping occurs simultaneously at multiple scales. The interactivity of mapping, and the increasing use of Google Maps and other global positioning system (GPS) software means more people are understanding and using multi-scalar mapping. This is important way to engage with Aboriginal values of landscape as part of Country across multiple scales.



Top: The AIATSIS Map of Indigenous Australia, David R Horton (creator), © Aboriginal Studies Press, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) 1996.

**live in Greater Sydney, representing approximately nine per cent of the national Aboriginal population.**

**It has taken 230 years for a shared understanding of Greater Sydney's landscape to emerge. This shared vision will draw on both spirit and nature to guide respect, reconciliation and recognition, bringing the depth of Aboriginal culture and custodianship to the fore in the future planning of Greater Sydney.**

—Excerpt from the Greater Sydney Commission's A Metropolis of Three Cities: Greater Sydney Region Plan (March 2018).

# Connecting with Country: opportunities and next steps

**Discussions and early feedback to the challenge of 'Designing with Country' reveal an urgent need to develop effective ways to share knowledge between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities about Aboriginal places, as well as places of shared culture and heritage significance.**

The Connecting with Country Project will develop cultural design principles and a broader cultural design framework to support better strategic planning and place-making. Acknowledging the diversity of Aboriginal cultures across NSW, the intent of the framework is to support meaningful engagement with the cultures and knowledges of Aboriginal peoples of NSW.

Feedback to this discussion paper and associated activities will be used to support the development of Connecting with Country cultural design principles and implementation framework.

In response to the growing awareness of the significance and value of contemporary Aboriginal culture as well as Aboriginal heritage, NSW planning regulations now require the sustainable management of built and cultural heritage *including Aboriginal cultural heritage*. A broadly applicable set of cultural design principles could help with this and other regulatory requirements in a practical way, and be a useful tool to help government, local communities, designers and developers create better places.

The development of cultural design principles reflects the need for practical guidance for the design and planning of projects to support and implement a range of government policy including: Closing the Gap; NSW Premier's Priorities relating to Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islanders; GSC regional and district plans (Aboriginal statement of commitment).

The Connecting with Country project is one part of a wide ranging suite of initiatives being delivered and developed by DPIE including the Aboriginal Land SEPP, specific Aboriginal actions in the Regional and District plans, the Roads to Home programs and others that address issues of education, reconciliation, and social equity.

## Supporting education

In recent years, there has been progressive support for a national education curriculum that includes Indigenous culture more prominently. This teaching is important as it shapes the values and beliefs of future generations.

## Reconciling with the truths of history

History defines how we have come to be in the present, and can guide our future. It is therefore essential that we record a balanced and truthful account of history. We need to correct historical inaccuracies or omissions to develop a shared identity.

## How can you be involved?

We would like to hear about how you're engaging with, collating and protecting knowledge, teaching culture and keeping language alive in your projects. Connecting with Country is building an understanding of the body of Aboriginal knowledges that should be leading and informing projects in our built environment. GANSW will collate all responses to inform the cultural design principles and include key issues in a follow up forum discussing protocols for connecting with Country, late in 2020.

**CONTACT US & REGISTER YOUR INTEREST:  
[government.architect@planning.nsw.gov.au](mailto:government.architect@planning.nsw.gov.au)**



Above: Australia's Bicentenary 1988, Aboriginal protest. Image: Fairfax Media.  
Left: Students mark reconciliation, 28 May 2015. Image: Port Lincoln Times.

# How can we, as a community, respond to Aboriginal culture and heritage responsibly, appropriately and respectfully?

Recent changes to the planning regulations now require that Aboriginal culture and heritage are sustainably managed in the built environment. So, how can we all, especially designers, respond to this – responsibly, appropriately, and respectfully?

Designing with Country proposes a way to support integrated and successful design responses to Aboriginal culture and heritage. This discussion paper is an early step towards a better understanding of Aboriginal concepts of Country.

Over the coming months, GANSW will be gathering feedback from Aboriginal community groups and representatives, we will be speaking with recognised knowledge holders, as well as representatives from government, design and development industries. This feedback will inform the development of Principles of Country for designers, and an implementation framework that can be applied to government projects in the built environment.

Our research across existing policies and initiatives shows many commonalities. We've identified a number of important themes that we need to address in order to effectively align with several key programs, including the NSW Premier's Priorities, the NSW Reconciliation Action Plan, the OCHRE Plan, and the Closing the Gap strategy.

We will continue to host webinars and events as well as targeted conversations with community and industry representatives throughout the course of this project. Please email us to register your interest in hearing about these events: [government.architect@planning.nsw.gov.au](mailto:government.architect@planning.nsw.gov.au)

GANSW provides design leadership in architecture, urban design and landscape architecture. In this role, GANSW is charged with working across government, the private sector and the community to establish policy and practice guides for achieving good design. GANSW provides strategic advice across design, planning and development to support good policy, programs, projects, and places. Find out more at [ga.nsw.gov.au](http://ga.nsw.gov.au)

All images: Government Architect New South Wales unless stated

Please let us know what your thoughts are about the following questions:

1. Is mapping relationship to Country an appropriate way to understand Aboriginal culture and heritage?
2. Would recognising our shared responsibility to Aboriginal culture and heritage help the way our shared history is understood?
3. Would sharing cultural protocols nurture a duty of care for knowledge and obligations to Country for Aboriginal **and** non-Aboriginal people?
4. How can governance systems respect Culture and positively influence the planning and design of the built environment?
5. How can Aboriginal leadership be incorporated to decision making in the planning and design of the built environment?
6. Who is accountable for the health and wellbeing of Country?
7. How can we value and measure the economic impacts on Country and culture that result from built environment projects?
8. How can we understand and measure the correlation between Country, education and health outcomes?

To provide feedback please send us an email – responses to the above themes will inform the development of cultural design principles:  
[government.architect@planning.nsw.gov.au](mailto:government.architect@planning.nsw.gov.au)

Or contact:  
Dillon Kombumerri (Yugembir Goori)  
Principal Architect GANSW  
T: +61 (02) 8217 2007