

Design concepts and processes for public aboriginal architecture

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Note: Throughout this paper, the use of the term 'Aboriginal', unless otherwise evident by the context of its use, should generally be taken to include Torres Strait Islanders.

THE CHALLENGE OF DESIGNING ABORIGINAL ARCHITECTURE IN AUSTRALIA

The authors were prompted to write this paper after preparing a briefing document for use by the architectural competitors in the design competition for the new building to house the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) in Canberra. The Institute's new facility is to "provide a national focus on Indigenous social and cultural issues contextualised within a wider cultural context which will resonate a powerful Indigenous essence". This briefing document aimed to contribute to appropriate ways of thinking about and exploring possible design considerations and concepts for the new AIATSIS building and its surrounding site. Another purpose of the document was to assist those Aboriginal and Islander people who took on the role of briefing the architectural competitors and who maintained an ongoing role in providing responses and advice on schematic and developed designs.

The new Institute building is sited on Acton Peninsula projecting into Lake Burley Griffin, along with two other new buildings, the National Museum of Australia (incorporating the Gallery of Aboriginal Australia) and the A.C.T. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Centre. These three buildings have been collectively termed the 'Acton Complex'.

Based on the above experience, the authors wrote this paper in an attempt to document and describe how we thought our way through the design challenge of a public building which captures and distils Indigenous cultural assumptions, perspectives, connections, and cultural content. We know a modest amount about Aboriginal vernacular design and meaning, and about particular architectural design issues, whether these relate to incarceration, or insect control, or avoidance relationships, or beliefs about health and well being. But we do not have a good sense of how relevant this collective wisdom, such as it is, is in the context of a public or monumental building. We are also aware of the many pitfalls of prescribing something in a domain which is largely uncharted - or indeed of prescribing anything to architects, or on behalf of Aboriginal communities.

So we basically asked ourselves what might an interested architect want to know about Aboriginal cultures? What are some possible thematic elements and complexes that might lend themselves to architectural form, function and meaning? What are some good and bad examples of previous attempts to design and incorporate indigenous culture into public buildings? What would our shared views of Aboriginal design issues look like if we brought them together and selected out what seemed to be most relevant to the design of a 'monumental' building in the nation's capital?

We can commence this paper by loosely defining a piece of 'Aboriginal Architecture' as a building which in some way generates an Aboriginal identity about itself. This is not to suggest that 'Aboriginal Architecture' is some

sort of new (or hypothetical) national architectural style, but rather a design process that achieves a goal. One of our aims in this paper is to explore how an architectural process might creatively enhance Aboriginal identity without disempowering the control of the Indigenous clients or stakeholders.

In the process of designing and building public Aboriginal architecture, Indigenous people themselves must be allowed to define who they are (their collective identity) and how they wish to be portrayed through architecture and environmental statements to the wider society and indeed to the outside world. This is an important and fundamental principle. However it is the role of the Architect to take the given expressions and representations of identity and offer ways in which they can be distilled, expressed and realised in architectural form.

What architectural benchmarks can be put forward for comparison in developing contemporary projects of this type? Most of the architectural effort in relation to Aboriginal clients over the last 25 years has been in relation to housing, not public architecture. An examination of attempts by architects to design houses for Aboriginal people undertaken since c1970 indicates they are fraught with error and failure. In terms of the limited number of public buildings designed, the track record is not much better (see Memmott 1996-97; and also Dovey 1996:102 on the Aboriginal Centre of the new Museum of Victoria).

For the purposes of this paper, Public Aboriginal Architecture can be considered in the context of two general categories, the first is an architectural product designed to be used within an Aboriginal community by its own people, such as a school or health clinic. We do not intend to focus on this category in this paper although much of what we say may be relevant. The second category is that which, although being owned or managed by Aboriginal people, will be used by the wider public, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. This category encompasses Aboriginal art galleries, museums, cultural centres, research centres and various tourist facilities (e.g. interpretive centres). This category can be subdivided into those projects

of regional significance and those of national significance. Buildings of national significance are usually government-funded, such as the new Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies building which as mentioned above, was currently under design in Canberra at the time of writing.

This last category presents more complex design types which attempt to express and convey architectural meanings of significance and be simultaneously legible to both Aboriginal Australians and non-Aboriginal Australians, as well as perhaps to a smaller proportion of international visitors. The levels of understanding of Aboriginal culture will vary widely between these groups. There is a potential danger in using esoteric or private symbols. Any architectural meaning or symbolism must have the potential to communicate at some level across all user groups. Nevertheless we should keep in mind that Rapoport and others have argued that another culture's built environment is typically illegible outside of its own cultural context. Thus "..... the high style buildings usually must be seen in relation to, and in the context of, the vernacular matrix, and are in fact incomprehensible outside that context, especially as it existed at the time they were designed and built" (Rapoport 1969:1). In a monumental building which is completely out of context with a vernacular matrix, we must provide some alternate historical and cultural context as an integral part of the whole, while not detracting or distracting from the statement of the building itself. This sets a most challenging design brief.

Recent critical writing on the creation of buildings which in some way aim to reflect or portray Aboriginality, should further alert architects to the difficulty of this task. For example, a warning has been issued by Dovey (1996: 101, 102) that most architecture for Aboriginal people arguably has its source in a power structure in which "the native 'other' finds a voice only within the framework of a dominant discourse", and that "the State has an interest in seeing Aboriginal identity 'fixed' in built forms; its dangerous, amorphous power

‘arrested’.” The addressing of this problem is made all the more difficult by the existence of only a few professional Aboriginal graduates of architecture, in Australia.

So how does a non-indigenous architect create what could be termed an ‘authentic’ Aboriginal architecture based on a collaborative design approach? How does one fulfil a vision for a new building, which calls for a symbolic statement of cross-cultural respect, dignity, equality and engagement? This document hopes to equip architects with possible strategies and directions, and ways of thinking about the task, as well as cultural perspectives, considerations, and sources.

BEST ARCHITECTURAL PRACTICE TO DATE

In terms of creating buildings that incorporate important indigenous cultural elements, and which are appreciated by both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal public as well as international visitors, the following buildings are put forward as the best practice examples in Australia to date. In putting them forward, it does not imply that they are all of equal quality nor necessarily of exceptionally high quality, only that they are best practice to date. By ‘best practice’ we not only mean ‘best practice’ in architectural design, but also ‘best practice’ in terms of Indigenous project control and involvement in the design and the ongoing operation of the buildings. The purpose here is to provide some examples for use in discussion within this paper and for architects to consider in shaping their own design process, if they so wish. The buildings are:

- Brambuk Living Cultural Centre, near Halls Gap, Grampians, Vic.
- Brewarrina Aboriginal Cultural Museum, Brewarrina, NSW
- Dreamtime Cultural Centre, Rockhampton, Qld
- Uluru-Kata Tjuta Cultural Centre, Uluru, N.T.

- Victorian Aboriginal Health Service Building, Fitzroy, Vic.
- Tjapukai Aboriginal Cultural Park, Smithfield, near Cairns, Qld.

Introductory descriptive accounts of these buildings are to be found in Spence (1988), Johnson (1990), Kosterin (1992), McGuinness (1992), ‘Brewarrina’ (1993), William (1994), Tawa (1996), ‘Uluru-Kata Tjuta ...’ (1996). More critical analyses are to be found in Dovey (1996), Kesteven (1996), Memmott (1996-97), and Lochert (1997). Further references to some of these buildings are contained in Appendix 1.

Consultation

It is necessary to establish a credible and effective process of architectural consultation with the client group to optimally fulfil a brief that asks for an authentic or collaborative Aboriginal Architecture. The preferred consultation method between an Architect and an Aboriginal Client is a subject of specialised experience and expertise in itself (eg. see Heppell 1977; Lochert 1997; Memmott 1997). Some principles of consultation in relation to the construction of Aboriginal meanings in buildings have been outlined elsewhere by one of the authors (Memmott, 1996-97) and these have been included as Appendix 2.

If the client is not in fact an Indigenous group, or only partly representative of the Indigenous stakeholders, it is suggested that during the design development stage there be encouraged an informal type of interaction between the Architect(s) and an Aboriginal consultative group who act on behalf of the client. Such a relationship would be aimed at exploring common creative ground, brainstorming architectural concepts, maintaining a dialogue on the ‘construction’ of Aboriginality and stimulating ideas on how the physical elements of the building and its landscaping can somehow symbolise, or at least address and possibly embody, the vision of the client.

It is recommended by the authors that the client draw together a group of such people to have an initial interaction with the Architect(s) on the

site. This method has been successfully used by architect Greg Burgess on several of his projects, eg. in the design of the Brambuk Living Cultural Centre:

At the start, Burgess camped for a night near the site, with the Aboriginal groups and other representatives, dancing and singing, eating and drinking and telling stories. In the morning he made intuitive conceptual sketches, to which the Aborigines immediately responded, seeing the suggested form as an animated being - an Emperor Moth or a White Cockatoo...

The type of persons the authors have in mind are respected Aboriginal Elders, artists, creative intellectuals and/or ceremonial leaders. In the case of a national project of significance they should preferably be drawn from different regions of the continent to comprise a pan-Aboriginal consultative group.

If this interactive process is productive, it should be continued on several occasions during the design process of the building to provide feedback and further discussion (see more on this later).

An Initial Issue: The Relationship of the Building to the Local Aboriginal Traditional Owners

In any project involving the use and development of a piece of land, there is a need to respect the local Traditional Owner groups. There should be some gesture of recognition and acknowledgment that the building is located on the land of a local Aboriginal group(s). At the very least, local Traditional Owner representatives should have a position on any Consultative Aboriginal group for the project. How can the client 'square up' with these people over the use of their country? Should such a gesture be materialised within the architecture or landscaping of the building? These issues need to be carefully, considered. Perhaps there is also a need to obtain permission from the traditional owners to significantly re-form the landscape through any necessary excavation and imported fill, ie., to 'cut' into the earth.

A further basic issue is to ensure one's building site does not encompass any existing Aboriginal sites that may be compromised or detrimentally impacted. This is conventionally achieved through the legal requirements of carrying out Environmental Impact and Social Impact Assessment studies. Further, it is possible that such an existing site, eg a prominent landscape feature has particular meaning or significance for local Aboriginal people. It may be appropriate to orient or articulate the building within this larger landscape/meaning-scape.

There is thus a desirable balance between the indigenous local/national, culture/'country', but perhaps this is best achieved and negotiated by Aboriginal communities and stakeholders. Respect for the rights and prerogatives of those whose 'country' the building will be sited in, and traditional Indigenous institutions relating to customary 'owners' versus 'manager' rights and responsibilities, augur well for very satisfactory resolution and agreement by Aboriginal representatives.

Layers of Meaning and Significance

An important quality of customary Aboriginal meaning systems is a layered, almost 'deep structure' character, going from concrete and obvious public meanings and references to increasingly restricted ritual and sacred layers of meanings and reference, with the whole complex of meaning characterised by polysemous, multi-referential symbolic associations. It is possible that a design concept may be able to capture 'layered' meanings in the form of the building, as was consciously done, for example, with the Mormon Temple in Salt Lake City (Leone 1987).

How can 'levels' of meanings as a highly desirable quality, be embodied in the building? Looking at the 'best practice' examples of work list previously, the most successful in this regard would be the two projects by Greg Burgess Architects. In reviewing the architectural success of Burgess's Brambuk Living Cultural Centre as a 'carrier' of Aboriginal signs and meanings, one of the current authors wrote:

Whatever the architect's original logic or intent with respect to semiotics, the building has now taken on multiple associations which are being transmitted to the public in their experience of the Centre. Perhaps it can be said that an outstanding attribute of a piece of high-quality architecture is its capability to generate a semiotic dialogue with its users, to stimulate and maintain multiple meanings and associations which provide the users with an aesthetic response that combines intellectual complexity and intricacy with visual aesthetics... An essential part of the process in this case appears to be written and photographic discourse in architectural journals and other media outlets which generates further alternative interpretations." (Memmott 1996-97:56,57.)

It is recommended that a process of generating multiple meanings start as soon as possible in the project, and be done in a number of ways. One way is for the architect (with the assistance of specialist staff or consultants) to research Aboriginal culture and suggest ideas for meanings to the client. But a far more preferable way is for the client body and its Aboriginal consultants to suggest possible semantic themes and strategies to the architect. It is recommended that this proceed as follows.

- (i) That the Consultative Aboriginal Committee devise a 'short list' of recognised Aboriginal and Islander Elders, intellectuals and artists to assist with the conceptual planning of the building, and that funds be sought to bring them together for this purpose.
- (ii) That a number of key times be selected in project development for this consultative group to interact with the architect(s), the site and the media.
- (iii) The first interaction could be a combined brainstorming session with the architect on the site and a set of rituals to hand over the site for its new purpose, and to 'clean' and 'free' the site. The hand-over would have to be negotiated with the local traditional owners. The 'cleaning' ceremony would have to address the spirits of people who have possibly died on or near the site, including Aboriginal people in the early and pre-contact phase.

This could be followed by an 'entry' ritual whereby outside tribal people are allowed in (perhaps by boat as in the Torres Strait Islanders' 'Coming of the Light Ceremony').

These rituals would provide an opportunity to commence the place-making process and to introduce place meanings, thereby establishing the initial conceptual framework for the project, a multi-layered set of meanings that could be projected through the architecture and site-works. The site could also be 'marked' in various ways (e.g., by the use of fire poles as used in the Warlpiri fire ceremony - a symbol of 'square-up' or reconciliation). It is desirable that the dialogue with the media also commence at this stage to establish public interest and understanding. (This could involve such symbolic devices as message sticks).

- (iv) Some further interactive sessions will be required with the architect during the design development stage to allow participation in the collaboration of design and development of architectural meaning. (Once this stage is completed, it is usually very difficult to change the design.) These occasions could be also taken advantage of, to carry out further secondary rituals on the building site, eg, ritual burning off of the site before rain.
- (v) Although the building design may be finalised at the end of the design development stage, there may be further design of landscaping, court areas and the like, and the consultative process should continue as before.
- (vi) The next major ritual, however, could be at the commencement of construction. Once again media coverage would occur, with photographs of the model of the building being released. Explanations of the full set of architectural meanings would also be released to the public.

- (viii) A final ceremony and media exchange will occur with the opening of the building.

From an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander perspective what is most important about art, ritual and life generally is 'the doing', being part of the process. In a ritual sense this is the recreation and conjuring of the thing or event being represented. The act of painting, for example, along with the subject matter and event or place being re-presented, is what is sacred about bark painting or sand painting, not the end product itself. (This sacredness and consequentialness of the process is part of what is so problematic about commercial reproduction of Aboriginal designs on objects for retail, such as in the case of t-shirts.)

It may be the case that what is ultimately most symbolic and powerful about the meaning of a building for Aboriginal and Islander people is that they participated in the process whereby the building came about -- i.e., they were involved in the place-making and creative thinking that generated the complex. This element may be more important in making this an 'Aboriginal' building than any design elements per se.

The new building could be given an indigenous name that 'loads' the building with another layer of meaning to add to the overall significance of the complex, as in the case of the Brambuk building in the Victorian Grampians. (The term 'Brambuk' has in fact two meanings¹). An elaboration of this device, would be to give Indigenous names to different building wings, rooms, courtyards and access roads. An example worth mentioning here is 'Ksan Historic Indian Village in British Columbia whose complex of buildings carries such names as 'Frog House of the Distant Past', 'Wolf House of the Grandfathers', and 'Fireweed House of Treasures'. Alternatively the various rooms could respectively contain a different environmental theme. For example it is worth mentioning that the backdrop to many Eastern Arnhem Land paintings provide an attractive bank of patterns and motifs which principally relate to country and topographic features, such as flood plains, burnt grass, soil, watercourses, rain, fire, rock formations, etc. Such patterns

might serve as arresting recurrent motifs throughout the building, and could be subtly incorporated in textured wall surfaces, floor panels, etc.

It is important to note that the naming of a place, person or thing is of fundamental significance in Aboriginal culture, and is a part of calling the thing named into being (e.g., see Mountford 1976, Stanner 1979). Some 'primers' with respect to the multiple levels of meaning in Aboriginal design and creative expression include Munn (1973), Morphy (1991), and Taylor (1996), or any of the many good books available on Aboriginal art, e.g., Sutton (1988) or Caruana (1989), Milpurrurru et al (1993).

Strategies for Selecting Cultural Elements as Possible Architectural Signs and Motifs

One of the issues that a project of national significance raises for architects is which body of Aboriginal or Islander cultural elements should be surveyed for use as symbols and/or motifs. The term 'cultural elements' should here be interpreted widely as comprising ideas, concepts, beliefs, artworks, songs, artefacts, structures, speech and all other types of cultural products including cultural assumptions and values.

Memmott (1996/97) has elsewhere stressed the ethical importance of respecting local Aboriginal culture in architectural projects and warned against the appropriation of symbols from more distant groups. However with a project of national significance, which represents a collective facility for all of Aboriginal Australia, there is clearly a different context. There are at least three kinds of Aboriginal cultural elements to consider in such a case:

- (i) Those drawn from the local cultural group.
- (ii) Those that are truly pan-Aboriginal elements that could represent all of Aboriginal Australia; but at the same time we must warn against a reductionist simplification of symbols that would only

trivialise and mask the diversity and complexity of Aboriginal knowledge.

- (iii) A set of cultural elements could be assembled, and comprise one from each of the various cultural regions of Aboriginal Australia, to act as a composite statement on the Aboriginal cultures of Australia (a type of cultural 'mosaic').

These three categories of elements will be considered in turn.

- (i) The first option is to draw cultural elements from the local Aboriginal culture. As a matter of Aboriginal protocol, the client will have to consider what desirable level of involvement should be invited from or negotiated with this group if they are not in fact the formal project client. Achieving this balance will also involve assessing the wishes and capacity of the local group to engage in this way. A minimal approach would be to invite them to participate in a ritual to 'hand over' the site. Alternatively the client may decide to incorporate some sort of literal or symbolic element into the facility in recognition of whose land which the building is sited on. Such an element may be simply a plaque or alternatively a customary symbol or sign.

The orientation of the building itself provides an opportunity for incorporating various local cultural elements and meanings, including orientation toward the surrounding social and (possibly) totemic universe.

- (ii) In considering the second approach, that of using pan-Aboriginal elements, it should be remembered that in Aboriginal cosmology, the Ancestral Creators were totemic entities consisting of a synthesis of (a) human properties, and (b) the properties of a natural phenomenon or species. For each Aboriginal cultural group, one is confronted with a set of Ancestral Creators which reflect the local repertoire of natural species. However

some of these entities are consistent across most, if not all, Aboriginal groups of the continent (at least in a generic sense, if not a local species sense). Thus we find the following types of totemic entities widespread:

- rain, freshwater and associated phenomena such as lightning, frogs, clouds
- snakes, esp. venomous versus non venomous (pythons are particularly prevalent)
- kangaroos and wallabies
- possums and echidnas
- bird species especially eagle, hawk, crow, cockatoo, willy wagtail
- freshwater fish species and freshwater turtle species
- rainbow serpent is widespread and of special cosmological significance
- certain insect species eg mosquito, wild bee (honey producing), ant species (some honey producing), caterpillar or grub species (edible)
- winds, particularly prevailing winds
- ochres (red, white, yellow)
- fire and smoke
- dingo

One approach would be to focus on these types of elements in devising Aboriginal meanings for the facility. For an introduction to these elements, see Mountford (1976), Berndt and Berndt (1989), Morphy (1991), and Rose (1996). However one must guard against simply assembling a whimsical collection of 'Aussie animals' as distinct from an informed selection of species and elements of particular widespread and totemic importance. (Note that some of the elements in the above list are extending into a more general category of those widely used as sacred or totemic clan markers and symbolic vehicles. As well, there are the more abstract kinds of patterns used, for example, in the cross-hatching of bark paintings in Arnhem Land, where the patterns, and colours

have different meanings for different groups.)

Before responding to any of the above ideas, it is important that architects gain some understanding of what totemism is really all about in the Australian context, as the notion is typically very poorly understood. At base, it is about connectedness, to other species, to other people, and to place. Specific totemic connections define not only who one is, but also rights, responsibilities, and 'location' within an encompassing skein of relatedness and connections to the social and spiritual world. (See Myers 1986; Reser; 1994b, Rose; 1996.) The client group and their Aboriginal consultant's responsibility is to ensure that this concept is clearly understood by the architects.

Another fairly universal symbol of Aboriginal Australia, at least in the classical cultures, is what anthropologists call moiety systems, which were used in the dual classification of both people and environmental elements (animals, plants, meteorological phenomenon, people etc). Thus for example, in Arnhem Land the features of the local universe are either 'dhua' or 'yirritja' moiety. These moiety systems are still articulated in beliefs and practices concerning marriage, ritual and totemism in much of central and northern Australia. The dhua and yirritja moiety division is perhaps particularly apposite, as dhua represents the old, the traditional, the past, whereas yirritja people are the new, the contemporary, the innovative, the future. This symbolism could offer some design potential through dividing the building and/or the surrounding landscape into two parts of differing but complementary architectural character. The nature of these 'opposing' characters would have to be developed with Aboriginal consultants, but could obviously draw on the various elements and qualities that are manifest in contemporary Aboriginal cultures of

Arnhem Land, Cape York, Kimberley, Central Australia, Western Desert etc.

There are some regions of Australia where traditional life and ritual is still very strong and where there is a more elaborated understanding of the larger mosaic which articulates place, country, ritual, mythology and meaning. In certain contexts, it might arguably be better to draw from such regions as the Centre and Arnhem Land, without in any way marginalising other areas of Aboriginal Australia.

(iii) The third approach worth considering is an assemblage of environmental statements relating to connections with country, either distributed on the surrounding sites as landscape elements, or assembled in a courtyard or foyers as a set of sculptures, each of which represents a cultural region of Aboriginal Australia. Although Aboriginal leaders and anthropologists may have difficulty agreeing on a definitive set of cultural regions for Aboriginal Australia, a working list might be:

- Torres Strait Islands (perhaps separating the Kaurerag of the south-western group with Cape York Peninsula)
- Cape York Peninsula
- North-eastern rainforest area (Cardwell to Cooktown)
- Southern Gulf of Carpentaria
- Arnhem Land area
- Victoria River basin
- Kimberley
- Pilbara
- Western Desert
- Central Deserts
- Lake Eyre basin (including Arrerntic groups)
- Queensland Central Highlands
- Murray-Darling basin
- Eastern coastal region
- South-eastern coastal and highland region

- Spencer Gulf region
- South-western region
- Tasmania

(adapted from Peterson 1976)

One possible approach for the client would be to contact all of the ATSIC Regional Councils, or alternatively the Aboriginal Land Councils and Representative Bodies, and invite them on behalf of Traditional Owners, to submit a concept for a landscape element, sculpture, artifact, painting or mural.

An alternative creative approach to representing Aboriginal cultural regions may be to selectively sample a set of elements in accordance with certain cultural and/or environmental themes, eg. Salt-water/freshwater, coastal/interior, desert/riverine, plains/mountains, wet-tropical/temperate-snow. These categories might translate into material cultural items such as marine outrigger-canoe/riverine dugout-canoe, desert well/fish weir, emu race/stone quarry, crocodile trap/fur cloaks. This is merely a spontaneously derived list to trigger ideas. It would be preferable for Aboriginal groups to nominate items to symbolise their regions. Some symbols may of course be contact-historical and generate themes of oppression, resistance and survival (oppositional ideologies).

It should be noted that at the recently-constructed Alice Springs Desert Park, there was created a set of diverse landscapes with constituent plant species. However this was an expensive operation and to create a set of landscapes from diverse climatic regions would be even more problematic. Nevertheless a common feature of Aboriginal cultural centres (eg. Brambuk, Dreamtime) is to incorporate a range of flora of significance to Aboriginal people, together with interpretive devices (signs, guides).

A device or strategy for bringing together differing cultural regions and perspectives might be to have a number of 'windows' on different countries and traditions. The notion of a material culture representation or a 'window' on country is very sympathetic to Aboriginal perspectives and is often found in bark paintings

and body painting, for example, where the painting represents country, either through topographic features, totemic species, creation events, or natural elements from that country, such as wind, rain, clan wells, or tracks. Such representations of country are also found in sand paintings, sand sculpture, song, contemporary poster art, etc. The window metaphor has been very successfully used to communicate traditional understandings and connections to place, with an exhibition of bark paintings becoming almost literally, gallery walls with windows to country and 'the dreaming' of a particular people (e.g., Caruana, 1989; Reser, 1993).

There are possibilities of re-shaping the site to suggest the contours and topography of Australia or a mapping of the country, perhaps a map of Aboriginal Australia, in much the same way that the Wiradjuri or the Arnhem Landers here prepared sand-sculptured maps in rituals, or in the same way that the contemporary commercial and ritual ground paintings of the Central Australian groups comprise landscape maps. An interesting example of an Aboriginal map of Australia is that by Kimberley Elder David Mowaljarlai in his "Yarro Yarro, everything standing up alive, spirit of the Kimberley" (Mowaljarlai and Malnic 1993).

SPECIFIC THEMES FOR CONSIDERATION IN DESIGN

Connection to country.

Clearly this is fundamental and permeates almost all other concepts. The challenge is to capture this in a simple yet profound way in the form and structure of buildings.

Cosmology.

Cosmological and mythical associations might be very useful and appropriate, if they could be dealt with architecturally - notwithstanding cultural and regional differences. Cosmological orientation is probably more achievable than actual mythic elements, which could become kitsch if treated in a manner similar to, for example, the paintings of Ainslie Roberts (Roberts & Mountford, 1973; Roberts &

Roberts, 1988) or some of the contemporary animation shorts made for television. However, the power of creation beings creating the nature and topography of 'country' is very salient in Aboriginal creation cosmology and may be worth serious consideration (e.g. the Wagilak sisters of Arnhem Land).

Architects or others who may want to acquire a better understanding of how other cultures understand and articulate these processes of structuring and overlaying meanings about cosmology on the natural and built environment, are directed to Cook (1974), Huxley (1974), Purce (1974), Maclagan (1977), Biernoff (1979), Morphy (1991), Pearson (1994).

Place, country as narrative.

Somewhat different is the Aboriginal understanding of country itself as living narrative, with the story, the track and the telling conjuring and constructing the country (e.g., 'reading the country' - Benterrak et al 1984, Reser 1993, Rose 1996). Are there possibilities here in terms of a built form which, with the surrounding topography, constitutes text and communication channel?

It may be the case that the concept of 'tracks' can be linked to the layout of the buildings and complex in a particular way. In Aboriginal cultures, tracks and roads have multiple and interesting meanings in terms of the creative travels of ancestral spirits, in terms of the ritual dreaming tracks and song lines which criss-cross the totemic landscape, in terms of the underground tracks and watercourses that interconnect the world, in terms of the track as narrative, etc. The very word for 'road' in Arnhem Land for example has multiple meaning as track, kidney fat, 'string', etc. and the designation as 'road' confers a quasi-legitimacy to travel across other clans' lands, etc. Perhaps a new building and its 'site' should be connected via the approach road and other 'sites' in a particular way.

Dwelling symbolism.

The symbolism of traditional Aboriginal dwelling forms is a possible point of departure, given the formal and rich meaningfulness and

sacred qualities of dwelling features and components in many regions of Australia (eg., see Reser, 1977; 1978).

One of the authors has reviewed this potential further and has made a recommendation on the assigning of Aboriginal meanings of customary shelter to contemporary building projects (Memmott 1996-97:84-85, 60). For ethnographic writings on Indigenous shelters and structures, the reader is referred to Worsnop (1897), Roth (1910), Wilkin and Haddon (1917), Thompson (1939), Memmott (1979), Keys (1997).

Inside/outside, sacred/profane.

Clearly it would be possible to explore architectural articulations of the relationship of outside to inside space and place in a way which underscored and echoed traditional Aboriginal symbolic and metaphoric use of inside/outside. In this symbolic domain inside/outside equates with secret-sacred/public-profane, dead/living, creative past/present, etc. As well, everything beneath the ground is the creative past, which is coterminous with the present, but 'inside', underground, within the waters of the clan well, etc. This inside/outside dichotomy could resonate with cosmological reference, the inside/outside nature of knowledge and meaning systems, the inside/outside nature of cultural studies, etc.

There is another level of 'inside/outside' meaning used by certain Aboriginal groups in describing country. For example, coastal groups whose subsistence relies on seafoods and other coastal resources, and who reside largely on the coast with an external orientation to the sea, may refer to the coastal and littoral areas as 'outside country' whilst the interior bush is called 'inside country'. Similarly, arid area groups may refer to waterless deserts as 'inside country'. Such groups often overlay contrasting cosmological meanings on these two categories of country.

History, Past & Present.

An important and powerful concept relates to history, and connection to, participation in, 'the past'. As well what particularly characterises the

condition of Indigenous peoples is the juxtaposition with and insistent requirements of the future. There is also the contrast and dynamism of old and new, past and present, tradition and innovation, within Aboriginal cultural systems (such as the dhua/yirritja dichotomy in Arnhem Land). Can these connections and tensions be captured and expressed in the form and layout of the building?

Some Aboriginal groups may be interested in emphasising colonial experiences in their history such as invasion, mission conversion, resistance through guerilla warfare. These experiences could translate into a range of architectural or landscape symbols also (eg. sculptures, flags, murals etc). The descendants of the Eora of Port Jackson could have a pertinent contribution in this regard, as could the Torres Strait Islanders with the 'Coming of the Light Ceremony'.

Relatedness.

Clearly relatedness and connections are of central cultural importance, including connections to country, to people, to the past, to the natural world, etc. It is also the case that relationships between things or elements are often more salient and important than the things themselves in an Aboriginal worldview (Reser, 1994a,b.) This might have clear design implications in that the interrelationships between elements of the new building and its surroundings may be more culturally salient and meaningful than would be the case from Western cultural perspectives (compare Japanese landscape architecture and aesthetic principles).

Experience.

Aboriginal cultures place great store and importance in direct experience, on the feeling of a place. In transactions with the world, other species, and other people, a premium is placed on 'showing proper feeling' and being receptive and attentive to the emotional and spiritual qualities of relationships and place (Reser 1994a, Rose 1996). This cultural investment in direct and immediate experience and emotional response may be an important consideration in

the design of a particular building. The experience of the building, and its felt harmony with the place and its purpose, may be far more important than visual aesthetic appeal. This experience might well be positively influenced by visual access to the external environment, maximum natural lighting and sunlight, and possibly even simulated natural environments, views and soundscapes in parts of the building or background and leitmotif.

Legibility.

Obviously an important consideration with respect to public buildings is legibility, both in terms of use and function as well as symbolic meaning. This latter consideration extends to accessibility of meaning in terms of the larger design and appearance of the building as well as other meaning and use considerations. An important issue relates to multiple and very different building users and clients, ranging from international visitors to Aboriginal or Islander visitors from remote communities.

Special consideration should be given by the architects to the legibility of the entry and approach to the building. Consideration should also be given to the use of recorded Aboriginal or Islander music (and speech) in this foyer area. The role of interpretive devices could also be given emphasis by the client, such as a pamphlet explaining the meanings of the site, a book on the history of the design and collaboration on the building, post-cards, in-situ explanatory signs, knowledgeable personnel on staff who can act as informal guides when necessary. These have proven important devices in such centres as 'Brambuk' (Grampians) and 'Dreamtime' (Rockhampton).

Characteristics of traditional Aboriginal symbolic representation

It is worth briefly noting some common elements which characterise traditional Aboriginal symbolic representation and semiotics. These might be utilised in the design elements of the building. These would include layered meanings, representation of place or the whole by elements (synecdoche), shifting and multiple reference (polysemy), highly abstract as

well as figurative representation, use of human body as symbolic vehicle, physical topography itself used as symbolic vehicle and frame, multiple dimensions compressed into two dimensions, the use of 'inscape' and internal structure to represent inner realities and dimensions, fluid and dynamic totemic connections and associations, the use of colour and sound as rich and evocative symbol systems, the use of material culture item or product as symbolic vehicle for multiple meanings, etc. Clearly there are many sources here. The reader is here referred to the following works for an introduction to this area: Groger-Wurm (1973), Munn (1973), Mountford (1976), Ucko (1977), Sutton (1988), Berndt & Berndt (1989), Morphy (1991), and Taylor (1996).

More general design considerations with respect to addressing the themes.

An examination of the 'best practice' architectural consultation examples of Aboriginal Architecture listed earlier in this paper indicates two contrasting styles of architectural design.

The first is an 'organic' approach exemplified in the Brambuk Living Cultural Centre and the Uluru-Kata Tjuta Cultural Centre. Such an 'organic' approach perceptually suggests a fluid connection to the surrounding country and topography, a more open architectural structure which literally includes parts and elements of the external environment, the inclusion of the colours and textures of the land in the building materials themselves.

A different approach best exemplified in the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service Building (see Lochert 1997, McGuinness 1992) is to provide a relatively neutral architectural 'shell' for the facility and then to attach symbolic elements of Aboriginality to this 'shell' or 'fabric', e.g., flags, paintings, signs, murals. This approach can be extended, for example, in the case of the Dreamtime Cultural Centre and Tjapukai Aboriginal Park by providing or constructing further symbolic elements on the surrounding site with which the visiting public

can interact eg. Aboriginal plants (interpretive signs), customary shelters, simulated caves, artisans, etc.

FURTHER CAVEATS AND CAUTIONS FOR ARCHITECTS

1. Although the current authors have discussed an approach whereby an architect may try and distil Aboriginal cultural diversity in a search for common themes and elements, one would have to be careful not to do this in a manner which would excessively or simplistically homogenise or caricature Aboriginal culture.
2. There is a need to be aware of not only good but also bad examples of incorporating cultural elements in monumental buildings, with the examples relating to process and product as well as to Australia and other countries and continents. (For notable bad examples relating to Aboriginal Australia, see Reser 1977, Memmott 1996-97.)
3. It needs to be stressed that Indigenous Australian cultures did not have monumental architecture or large ceremonial buildings, and that any attempts to incorporate 'cultural elements' must come to terms with this. On the other hand, the landscape itself was invested with meaning and symbolism in a way which was analogous with symbolic investment in the built environment in other cultures.
5. There will inevitably be a tension between the strict functional brief and the aesthetic/symbolic/meaning brief. The Architects, and consultative Indigenous groups must be aware of this and be willing to make some functional compromises to achieve a building that 'works' in terms of statement and symbolic expression as well as aesthetically.
6. In the case of assembling cultural elements, symbols, icons etc that represent the different Indigenous cultural regions of Australian, the architect and the client committee would have to be cautious that the element of any one particular group did not offend other Aboriginal groups.

END NOTE ON THE ACTON COMPLEX

The buildings constituting the Acton Complex, particularly the AIATSIS building and the National Museum of Australia, should assist in reconnecting the people of Australia to their past as well as synchronically bridging the present and the future. The National Museum building itself, to the extent that is possible, should be both contemporary and a statement of multiple human connections to the natural environment, to cultural origins and narratives, and to cultural history and heritage. As a museum, the building should encompass more than simply conservation.

Taken together, the Acton Complex buildings should allow for their multiple meanings to be produced and created and reflected in the context of their use and cultural investment. Such an understanding of 'meaning' through use and participation is particularly sympathetic to more Indigenous understandings of meaning and value. As mentioned previously the aesthetic and the sacred are in the doing of it, in one's attitude and direct experience, and in the quality and integrity of the ongoing relationship, not in the thing itself. All buildings are, or should be, interactive statements of what they are for and about, not only with respect to form and function, but in terms of ideological statement, text and human response. Aboriginal culture has endured as a vital, creative meaning system through being continuously re-enacted, retold, re-invented, and lived. What we have of many other cultures in the world are static museum displays of material culture remnants housed in buildings designed as storage vaults. What is possible in Australia is a National Complex of buildings which plays a facilitating and invitational role in the active recreation and transmission of natural and cultural heritage. What is achievable of the Acton Peninsula site is a building complex which is grounded and architecturally connected to and expressive of the land, its peoples and its history. This requires some genuinely imaginative design thinking, and a willingness to design settings which are responsive to and resonate with multiple cultural meaning systems, needs and

traditions, and which 'work' at both the 'monumental', environmental, and individual, human scales.

In addition, the surrounds of the Acton Complex constitute a set of public spaces and places which should engage, involve, and inform, as well as enhance the surrounding environment and one's experience while there. The entire setting has the potential to be a literal and metaphorical meeting place of cultures, traditions, historical periods, technologies, and contemporary peoples/visitors from around the world, with particular thematic attention drawn to the Indigenous host culture and its complex of traditions.

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APPENDIX 1

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APPENDIX 2

A Series of Assumptions Principles and Strategies for the Effective Assigning of Aboriginal Meanings to Building

(Extracted from Memmott 1996-97:59-61)

General assumptions in approaching a new architectural project

1. There are extensive domains of Aboriginal environmental knowledge and cognitive styles and meaning systems, which provide great potential in generating semantic ideas for architectural expression.

2. For a local Aboriginal culture, there will be many signs which draw on visual references from the environment (and are thus applicable to two or three-dimensional representation). These signs will generally fall into the categories of icons or indices (eg. animals and footprints respectively), but will carry further symbolic (culturally specific) meanings. More abstract signs (ie. symbols) may display marked polysemy. It should be noted that the distribution of knowledge concerning such signs within the local Aboriginal group will vary based on age, gender, family lines and other factors.

3. In terms of creating site-oriented architecture, all of the indigenous phenomena in the vicinity of a building site will potentially bear some sort of cultural significance in the local Aboriginal culture. Each of these elements may be linked to multiple associations especially through religious constructs.

4. The traditional domiciliary architecture of the early contact period (between Aborigines and Europeans), does not in itself yield, at least as it has been analysed to date, any prolific range of architectural symbols (the exception is Arnhem Land). However there is some potential in responding to the local pattern of forms, materials and construction detailing of the local styles of this indigenous architecture, as well as to the complex behaviour patterns of domiciliary lifestyle.

5. Apart from the classical base of environmentally and religious-inspired knowledge as a source of signs, there may be other domains of Aboriginal identity that are worth exploring with Aboriginal clients, drawing on the processes of

resistance, oppression, and cultural adaption of the colonial and contemporary periods.

Principles of Consultation

6. There exists an ethical obligation for project architects to consult with and obtain permission from local Aboriginal traditional owners before using Aboriginal signs drawn from local indigenous knowledge. The traditional owners through their intellectual property rights, need to be incorporated as a 'stake holder' in such a project. In this regard, the architect must carefully differentiate between an Aboriginal client group and the local traditional owner group, as the two may not be the same.

7. In preparing a semiotic approach to building design, there is arguably a need to investigate Aboriginal environmental knowledge systems beyond published sources, employing Aboriginal experts on the subject (eg. local Elders, traditional owners, and leaders perhaps in conjunction with an anthropologist), in order to explore the range of inputs that Aboriginal clients can make in inspiring design concepts, and to ensure that meanings are employed which are of contemporary significance and applicability, and are not offensive.

8. It is usually preferable to draw semiotic references from the local Aboriginal culture. Designers should not transpose Aboriginal concepts from one cultural region to another without widespread consultation amongst the host and donor Aboriginal groups, to ensure that such a transference is ethically and legally acceptable (issue of intellectual rights).

Design Strategies

9. In choosing architectural signs which will have some communication potential, careful consideration is required to match the Aboriginal meanings with the knowledge base of the cultural sub-groups of users, whether they be Aboriginal or from other Australian or foreign cultures.

10. The use of visual signs in plan, at larger than human scale, is of maximum effectiveness at places where travellers can observe such buildings from aeroplanes. Such usage may be valueless in other contexts, especially for Aboriginal clients who are not in the practice of flying.

11. A most direct method of effectively imbuing a meaning for a cross-cultural audience is through iconic signs using one or more references known to all observer groups (eg. a crocodile, dugong). The most striking way to achieve this is for

the building to be 'sculpted' as a single icon. A more complex and subtle (but less direct) approach is to use a set of icons and/or indices represented by different building elements (walls; columns, roof, etc.), and to incorporate additional signs of a more abstract nature (symbols).

Post-occupancy Strategies

12. The use of culturally restricted knowledge in architectural expression for cross-cultural observer groups is more effective if the meanings are explained by Aboriginal guides or interpreters, or in publicly available literature or other media marketed to those groups before or during their visit to the building.

13. In the case of developing a high quality architectural work to communicate to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal public alike, the experience and perception of the building may be greatly enhanced through the incorporation of multiple associations and meanings into the design, both made overtly, and by implication through the marketing of the project in the media, using post-occupancy publicity and alternate semantic interpretations.

ENDNOTE

¹¹ A pamphlet, distributed to visitors of the Brambuk Centre in 1989 read:-

"Who and What is Brambuk? The building itself represents the myths and legends of our area. You are free to interpret it as you wish. What does 'Brambuk' mean?

There are two [meanings]:-

- (1) 'Bram' is an abbreviation of the legendary heroes 'Bram-bram-bult' throughout the area, and 'Buk' means 'belonging to'.
- (2) 'Brambuk' is the Aboriginal work for a white cockatoo, the totem of this area."