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# Belanjee

## Connecting and Designing with Country

Report and Community Engagement

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Proposed Hunter Indoor Sports Centre

# About Belanjee CV

Belanjee is an owned and operated Indigenous business specialising in design concepts within the Built Environment. Liz Cameron as Director, leads a team of Indigenous (First Nation) professionals who specialise in community engagement, creative design and architecture. To ensure all aspects of Country infiltrate design principles, the team at Belanjee comes with a range of diverse skills and knowledges to fulfil each projects needs and requirements. Liz is a Dharug Spatial Designer, (PhD), academic and researcher who weaves cultural knowledge into the design of physical environments. Guided by Country as teacher and collaborator, her work emphasises deep cultural, ecological, and spiritual connections. Through responsive design, she shares the stories of place that reflect a relational worldview, where everything is interconnected. Her work aligns with the principles and practices with Connecting and Designing with NSW Country Framework.

## **ACADEMIC QUALIFICATIONS**

Ph.D. Indigenous Knowledges (Bangawarra Naa- Making on Country) – Newcastle University, 2014 Post Grad. Social Health - Macquarie University, 2008 Indigenous Research Methodologies Masterclass –Northern Territory, 2000 Diploma in Fine Arts - TAFE NSW, 1987

## **RECENT EMPLOYMENT HISTORY**

### **Associate Professor – School of Architecture and the Built Environment, University of Newcastle, NSW**

Specialising in academic teaching, leadership, and research across Indigenous Knowledge Systems, cultural landscape restoration, creative research methodologies, and environmental health. This role involves mentoring students and early-career researchers in culturally grounded design thinking and guiding interdisciplinary projects that bridge architecture, landscape, and Indigenous worldviews. With a strong focus on restorative practices, the position supports research that connects built environment disciplines with Country, addressing environmental degradation and social injustice through spatial and artistic interventions.

My current research explores how cultural landscapes can be revitalised through Indigenous-led design, integrating creative practice, decolonial methodologies, and ecological stewardship. Teaching activities emphasise co-design, cultural safety, and embedding Indigenous principles into architectural curricula to foster more inclusive and sustainable design futures.

### **Belanjee - Spatial Designer and Indigenous Cultural Consultant**

Embedding spatial strategies, design concepts, and place-based frameworks that respond to both client aspirations and community needs through the integration of cultural, environmental, and functional values. This role involves working closely with Indigenous communities, Elders, Knowledge Holders and stakeholders to ensure that each project reflects local identity, cultural continuity, and a deep respect for Country.

As a Spatial Designer I work at the intersection of design, culture, and Country. My role involves shaping built and natural environments in ways that respect and reflect Indigenous Knowledge Systems, cultural protocols, and the deep interconnection between people and place. I design spaces— public, private, urban, or landscape—that are grounded in the cultural narratives, ecological rhythms, and values of the local First Nations communities. This includes master planning, wayfinding, built form concepts, and landscape integration that respects Country and supports belonging. I guide project teams, architects, planners, and developers through appropriate processes for Indigenous engagement. This includes advising on cultural protocols, facilitating Walks on Country, and embedding Traditional Custodian input into every stage of the design. I lead the development of culturally informed artworks, signage systems, and interpretive installations that communicate stories of place and deepen the public's relationship with Country.

## **MEMBERSHIPS**

2025 Board Member – NSW Government Environment and Biodiversity 2023 Lead Indigenous Councilor – Biodiversity Australia

# Introduction

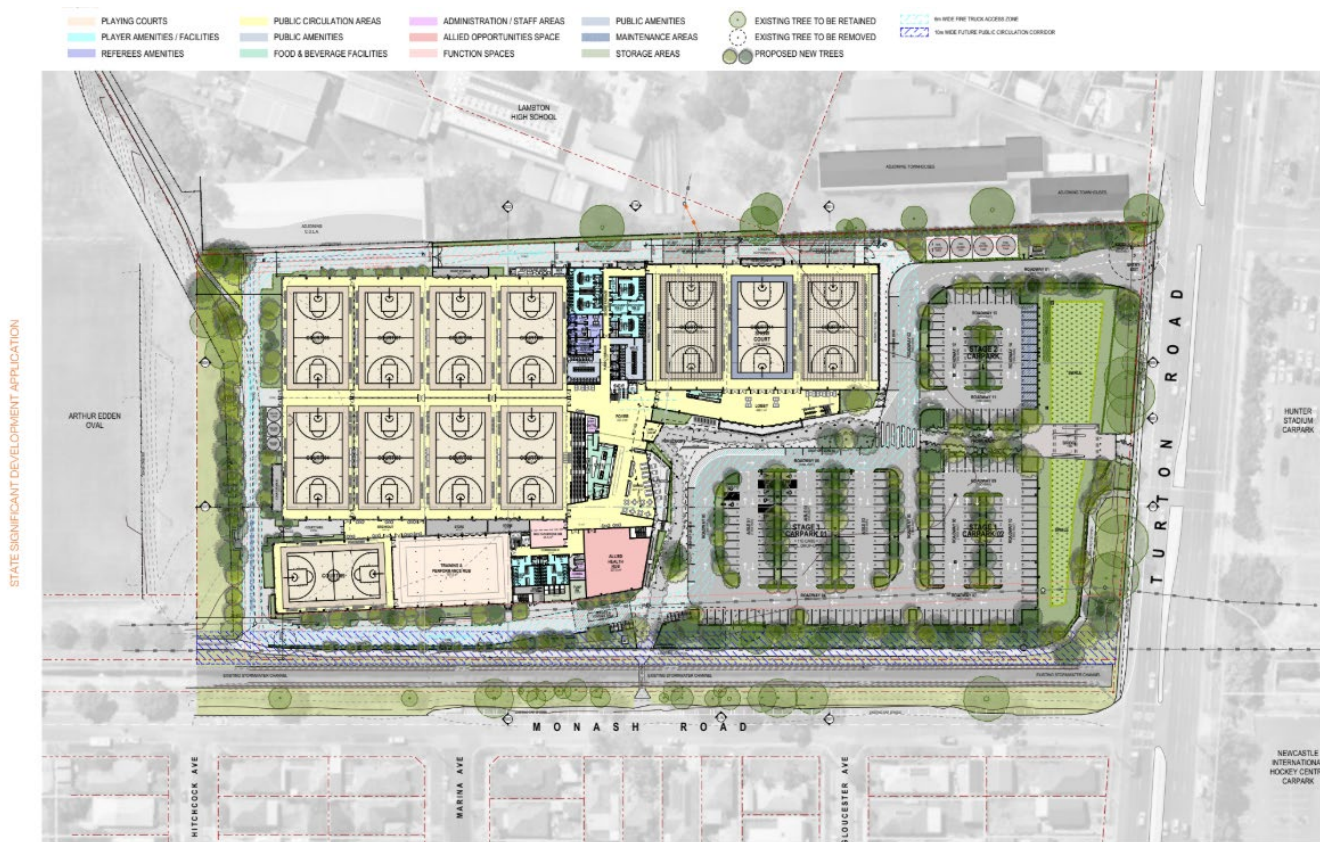
## Purpose of the Report:

The purpose of this report is to outline the design principles, strategies, and processes employed in the development of the Hunter Indoor Sports Centre to ensure that it aligns with the values of *Connecting and Designing with Country*. The report aims to comprehensively analyse all facets of Connecting and Designing with Country, encompassing several critical dimensions:

- Cultural Integration: Assessing how Indigenous cultural knowledge, traditions, and storytelling are integrated into architectural and urban planning practices.
- Environmental Stewardship: Evaluating sustainable practices that align with Indigenous ecological knowledge and principles of cultural land management.
- Community Engagement: Examining methods and outcomes of community consultation, ensuring meaningful participation of Indigenous communities in all facets of design processes.
- Impact Assessment: Assessing the social, cultural, and environmental impacts of projects designed under Connecting and Designing with Country frameworks.
- Future Directions: Proposing recommendations for enhancing Indigenous-led design approaches, fostering innovation, and addressing challenges in implementation.

The primary objective of this report is to ensure that the stadium is not only a functional sporting facility but also a cultural and environmental asset that respects Country and the communities it serves.

Additionally, this report provides an overview of the stakeholder engagement process, the integration of cultural values in design, and the implementation of sustainable building practices.



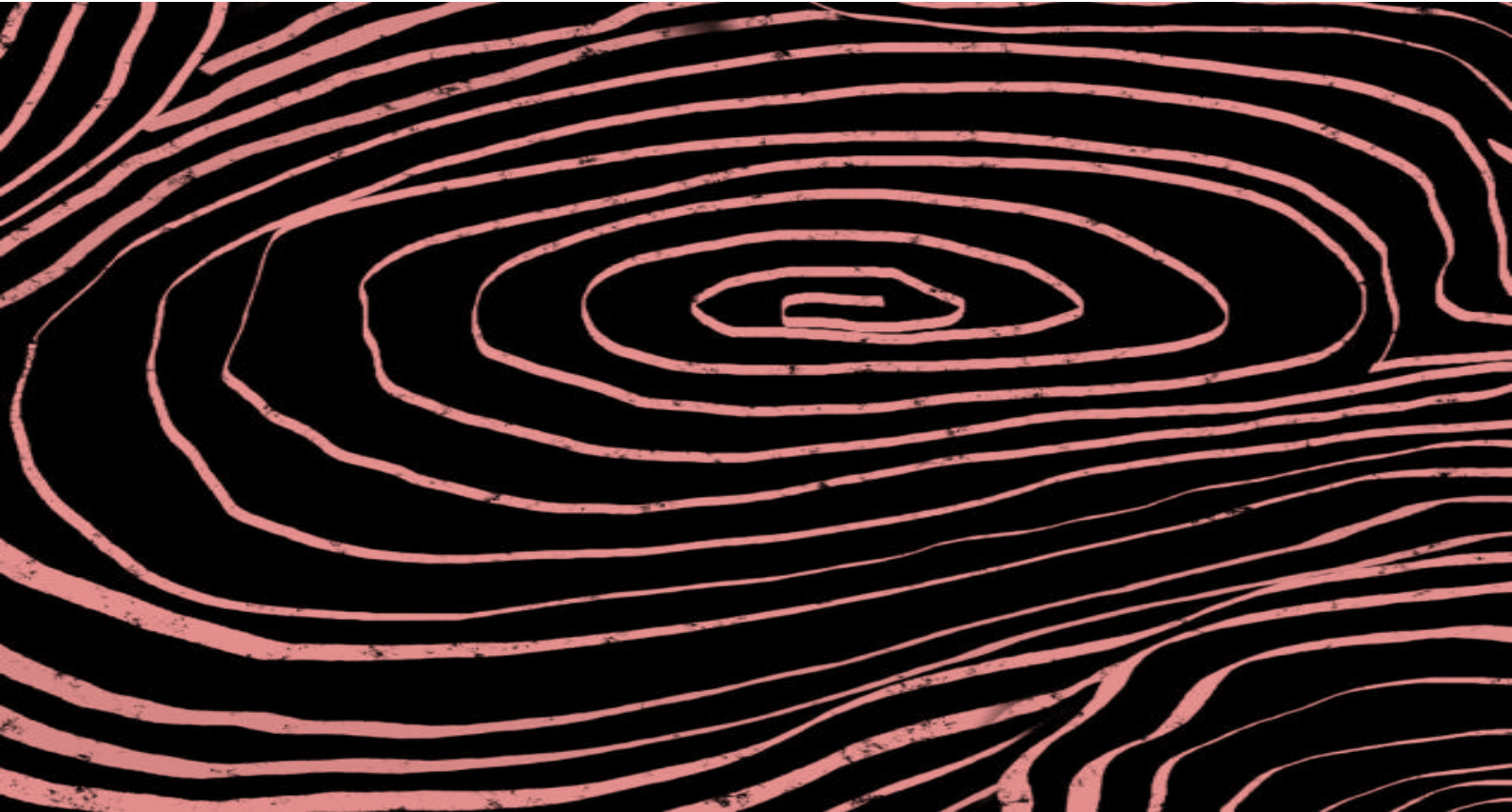
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## Scope of Report

This report encompasses the comprehensive design, planning, and implementation strategies for the basketball stadium, that includes the following key areas:

Review of community engagement and consultation processes and recommendations for improved consultation and indigenous engagement

- Review of the Hunter indoor Sports Centre in alignment with Designing and connecting with Country
- Future Directions - Areas for future focus
- Community Engagement - Advisory group



# Review of community engagement and consultation processes and recommendations for improved consultation and Indigenous engagement

## Introduction

EJE and Terras have undertaken comprehensive training in cultural awareness, appropriation, and sensitivities, enabling them to effectively navigate the Connecting and Designing with Country framework. This report outlines key principles and strategies adopted to integrate Indigenous cultural values into urban design, focusing on water-sensitive urban design, connection to Country, increased social outcomes, and visual impact.

## Preliminary Cultural Considerations

The proposed Basketball Stadium development is currently subject to Native Title. Consideration of Native Title implications and cultural significance is essential to ensure lawful, respectful, and inclusive planning practices that align with government policies and Indigenous rights.

## Native Title Considerations

Native Title refers to the recognition in Australian law that Indigenous people have rights and interests to their land and waters according to their traditional laws and customs, as defined under the *Native Title Act 1993 (Cth)*.

## Community and Cultural Considerations

Basketball holds cultural significance and social value among many Aboriginal communities. Anecdotal and observed evidence suggests that Aboriginal individuals and groups across the region actively participate in basketball, both recreationally and at competitive levels. It is a sport that fosters community cohesion, intergenerational participation, and health and wellbeing outcomes. A stadium of this nature, if sensitively designed and governed, holds potential to act as a culturally inclusive and community-strengthening space. However, meaningful engagement with Traditional Custodians and local Aboriginal organisations will be crucial to ensure cultural appropriateness, respect for Country, and broad community benefit.

## Report on Consultation with Newcastle Basketball First Nations Working Group

On 7 November 2023, Artefact attended a meeting of the Newcastle Basketball First Nations Working Group. The consultation process revealed significant concerns regarding the adequacy and inclusivity of community engagement efforts. The format of the meeting, structured primarily as a group workshop, posed challenges in fostering meaningful individual connections with local Aboriginal stakeholders.

Key stakeholders in attendance included:

- Roimatta Selway (Roi): A committee member deeply involved due to her children's participation in basketball.
- Kristy Crooks: Represents Hunter New England Local Health District (HNE LHD) and serves on the Newcastle Basketball (NCL BB) board, co-chairing the Working Group.
- Gerald Bradshaw: Office of Sport Aboriginal Development Officer, providing crucial insights from a governmental perspective.

## Walk on Country with Awabakal LALC 18 Jan 2024

A walk on Country was conducted with Matt Syron and Kumarah Kelly of the ALALC and the project team. The location was identified as being a place that could give a sense of what Country was like before colonization. Key takeaways from this discussion were that the plains were a place rich in resource and place of movement and gathering for both people and animals. Further Outcomes can be seen in the Artefact CWC report 30 April 2024

## First Nations Newcastle Basketball workshop

A first Nations Newcastle Basketball workshop was held on 11th April 2024. Two community members attended. Key takeaways were creating an environment where First Nations players feel welcome. Further outcomes can be seen in the Artefact CWC report 30 April 2024

Despite the presence of these stakeholders, the group-oriented approach limited opportunities for nuanced discussions that could address individual concerns and insights. This format may have inadvertently hindered the depth of engagement needed to capture diverse perspectives effectively. Furthermore, the workshop structure may not have sufficiently accommodated the varied schedules and preferences of community members, potentially excluding voices crucial to the consultation process. The singular workshop format, while beneficial for collective insights, may have overlooked the importance of one-on-one interactions and personal connections that are essential

for building trust and understanding.

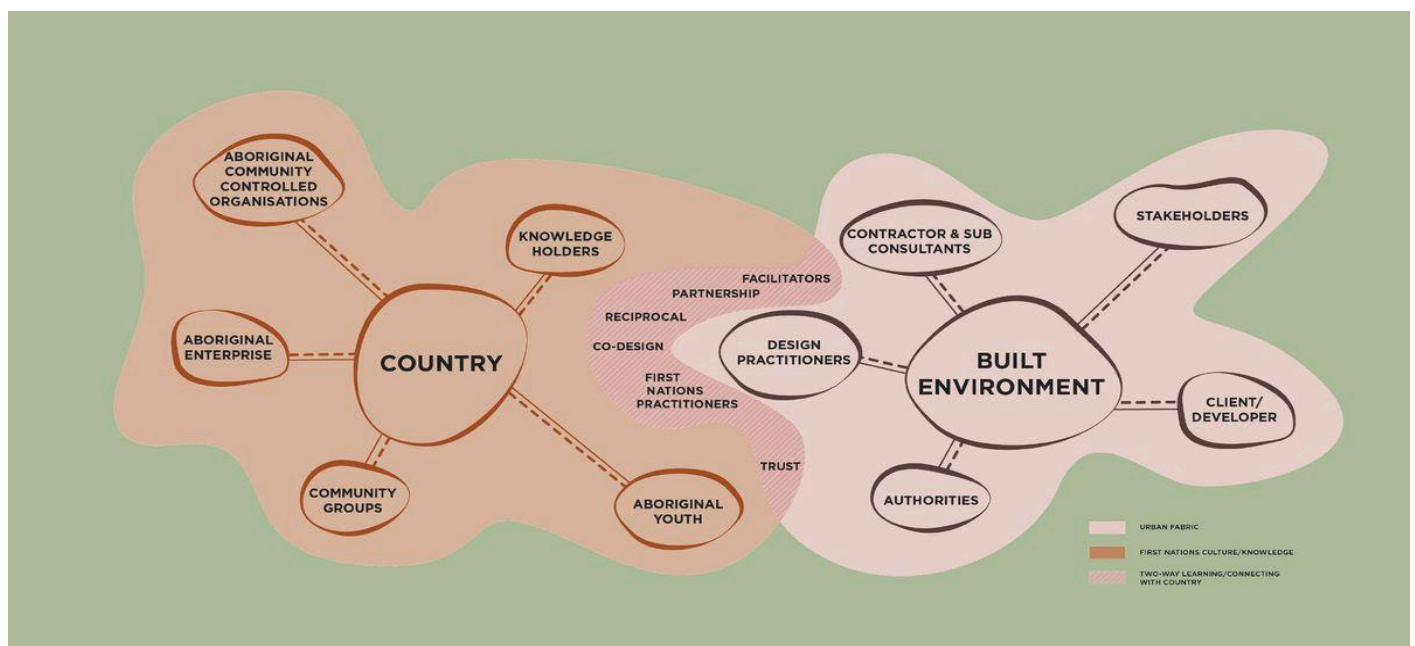
There remains a recognised need for more inclusive and diverse engagement strategies. Future efforts should consider more comprehensive representative community input.

To address the concerns raised regarding the inadequacy of the consultation process, it is recommended that an Advisory Group be established. This group of five should consist of Indigenous specialists in the built environment, an Aboriginal Elder with expertise in community networking, a Knowledge Holders of Awabakal descent and a community member with a specific interest in basketball should be included to ensure representation of those directly involved in the sport.

**The Advisory Group would play a critical role in:**

- Providing expert guidance on the cultural and environmental significance of the project.
- Facilitating connections between the project team and the broader Aboriginal community.
- Ensuring that local Indigenous knowledge and perspectives are integrated throughout the development process.
- Offering a platform for ongoing dialogue and feedback between stakeholders, fostering trust and collaboration.

This more inclusive and representative approach would ensure a more meaningful engagement process, empowering the community while respecting the cultural context of the project. The group would meet with EJE and Terras regularly throughout the lifespan of the project such as key milestones.



# Review of Hunter Indoor Sports Centre in alignment with Designing and Connecting with Country

A preliminary meeting was held with Belanjee to discuss aligning the practices and processes in Designing and Connecting with Country.

The centre offers a significant opportunity to integrate sustainable design principles that align with the broader framework of Designing and Connecting with Country. This framework emphasises a respectful and reciprocal relationship between the built environment and the natural world, particularly in the context of Indigenous cultural values. In this review, we highlight key aspects of the project that support the principles of restoring natural settings, sustainability, and cultural integration.

## Restoration of Natural Settings and Native Plant Regeneration

One of the project's key strengths is the potential to restore and regenerate the natural environment surrounding the stadium. By prioritising the reintroduction of native plant species, the design can help restore the ecological balance that has been disrupted by industrial development. This restoration is not merely an aesthetic but serves a functional purpose in enhancing local biodiversity, providing habitat for native fauna, and improving the overall health of the landscape. The integration of native plants will also create a more harmonious environment that aligns with the principles of Designing with Country, fostering a sense of connection to Country for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous community members.

## Consideration for Water Preservation and Sustainability

Sustainability is a critical consideration in the design of the Basketball Stadium, especially in terms of water preservation. The proposal should include water-sensitive urban design (WSUD) strategies that incorporate rainwater harvesting, stormwater management, and efficient irrigation systems to minimise water usage. By designing with a focus on water conservation, the project can contribute to maintaining the health of local water systems, reducing the burden on municipal water supplies, and addressing climate resilience challenges. These initiatives will support the community's long-term environmental health and align with sustainable development goals.

The current scheme has included bio retention swales, detention basins and endemic planting to slow the movement of water from the site and provide water polishing. Given the close proximity to the Creek and the site previously being part of the Hunter Plains opportunity exists to educate users around these principals and the concept of caring for Country whether it be in information signage or soundscape format.

## Inclusion of Stories and Narratives of Place

The inclusion of Indigenous stories and narratives of place is central to ensuring that the stadium design reflects the cultural and spiritual significance of the land. The integration of these stories within the fabric of the design—through artwork, signage, and architectural features—will provide a deeper understanding of the land's history and cultural significance. This approach is essential for creating an environment that is not just functional but meaningful. Indigenous knowledge holders, elders, and community members must be consulted to ensure that these narratives are accurately and respectfully represented, fostering a strong sense of identity and belonging for local Aboriginal communities.

The design has acknowledged the former site as part of the Hunter plains and seeks to tell this story through pavement patterning, vegetation selection and materials. It is proposed that the Indigenous advisory group be engaged to continue to develop this narrative particularly with regard to the use of language, artwork and narratives. The opportunity for a soundscape within the design is a key element that has been identified and has potential to add another dimension to the user experience.

## Enhancing the Environment: Moving Beyond Industrial Complexity

The current environment surrounding the proposed site is characterised by industrial complexity, with numerous developments that detract from the natural beauty and cultural significance of the area. This project provides an opportunity to reclaim the space, simplifying and humanising the environment by integrating natural materials, native vegetation, and open spaces. By reducing the dominance of industrial elements, the stadium can become a focal point that enhances the overall environment, making it more welcoming and connected to the land. The use of local and sustainable materials externally, such as timber and stone, will contribute to creating a space that blends seamlessly with the natural surroundings. Opportunity exists to review the architectural facade to ensure the integration of the built form into the landscape

### Inclusion of Indigenous Knowledge in Design

Incorporating Indigenous knowledge into the design process will ensure that the project reflects a relational worldview—one that acknowledges the interconnectedness of all aspects of the environment. This knowledge can guide the design to be more responsive to the land, water, and people it serves. Indigenous principles of sustainability, care for Country, and ecological stewardship can inform decisions around site layout, materials, and plant selection. This will not only enrich the design but also create a deeper connection between the stadium, the community, and the land.

The design has developed key principles in line with sustainability and caring for Country with WSUD, use of endemic species and the creation of habitat.

### Visual Presence and a Welcoming Environment

A critical goal of the stadium design is to ensure it becomes a welcoming space for all members of the community, regardless of background. Current proposals within the landscape scheme including the use of language, a Welcome to Awabakal Country sign, location for an Aboriginal Flag, creation of gathering spaces and proposed artworks to the building awning and entry foyer, all contribute to the user experience. It is important that these ideas are developed through the next phase of the design to realise their full potential.

The visual presence of the structure should be rooted in a design that celebrates both cultural heritage and the modern purpose of the centre for future directions. Indigenous artwork, signage, and design elements can help create a visually distinct and culturally resonant space. These will be further developed in consultation with the indigenous advisory group in the next phase of the project. These features, paired with natural landscaping and sustainable practices, will ensure that the stadium is not only functional but also a symbol of respect for the land and its people.

### Outcomes for Country – PROJECT RESPONSE MATRIX

The outcomes of a Country-centred approach are presented in this section as practical indicators of success, using the categories described in the GANSW Connecting with Country Framework (section 3.5). The below is a response to the recommendations proposed in the Artefact Draft CWC report (section 11) based on the current proposal.

Health country	
Healthy Ecology	The landscape plans incorporate native flora and encourage the regeneration of endangered species
	The ESD report provides commentary on the clean energy aspects of the project
	The design incorporates a detention basin, rainwater gardens, and swales
	The native plant list provided by Tracy Howie has been incorporated into the proposal
The Physical form of Country remains recognisable and restored where possible	Colour schemes and materials of the landscape proposal are based on natural materials and a muted colour palette. Architectural finishes to be further developed during consultation
	A hydrology study has been undertaken with detention basins, swales, and bioretention basins proposed
	Native flora incorporated. No endangered species were identified within Tracey Howie's plant list

## Healthy Community

Strong cultural identity, connected to place and community	Opportunities for CwC interpretation are included on the Terras CwC page. Art/heritage interpretation will be further developed in consultation with the CWC Advisory Committee.
	Local Aboriginal artists and designers will be engaged as part of the next phase of works
Cultural safety	An Indigenous Advisory group is being formed to ensure the project is not tokenistic
	Language, Aboriginal flag, gathering spaces, artworks, and other elements are being developed to ensure the space is welcoming to Aboriginal basketball players. Welcome to Awabakal Country, sign to be included on site entry
	The advisory panel will be consulted on culturally safe spaces in the next phase of the project. Currently, areas have been provided for gathering externally to the building
	An advisory panel is to be set up to ensure consultation is ongoing
Relief for Aboriginal communities who are fatigued by the workload imposed on them by project teams seeking their advice on Country	Local artists will be engaged for the artworks
	An advisory panel is to be set up in the next phase of the works to ensure consultation is ongoing
	Noted that Supply Nation to be utilized. Liz Cameron has been brought on board as a specialist First Nations Spatial Designer
Training	Liz Cameron on the IAP will help guide and educate other members in spatial design and understanding of the design process
Employment opportunities	Local artists will be engaged for the artworks. The Indigenous Advisory Committee is to be formed as a paid position providing ongoing consultation

## Protecting Aboriginal cultural heritage

Aboriginal cultural advisers guiding project teams and clients to better connect with Aboriginal community	CWC framework to be indicators going forward as evidenced in this table making referent to GANSW section 3.5 and Artefact CwC report Section 11
Project teams and processes for project delivery respect ICIP	Limited ability to consult with Awabakal LC due to land claim; however, Indigenous Advisory Panel to be set up to provide ongoing consultation
Aboriginal language placenames are used	Dual place names proposed to be used internally within the building. Language is to be used within the landscape elements. The eagle is not currently proposed within the design, but discussion is to be had around this going forward, as it is the totem for the Awabakal people
Access to Country is provided	Gathering spaces are provided throughout the site for families to have a yarn. The bridge over the detention basin provides a gathering threshold where ceremonies such as Welcome to Country could be undertaken.

## Cultural competency

Cultural competency Ongoing cultural awareness training develops skills and competency in delivering Country centred design projects	Walk on Country undertaken at project inception
	EJE and Terras have undertaken cultural awareness training within the company. The project team had a walk on Country at project inception
	Noted Cultural awareness training to be included in procurement contracts

## Better places

Planning and design projects create places that are connected with Country	The site's former state as part of the Hunter plains has been referenced within the design to educate visitors to the site. Vegetation will be used to revegetate the site in keeping with its original state.
	Dual language is proposed within the building, and language is to be used in furniture elements
	Noted the need to follow the heritage and archaeological recommendations in the ACHAR (Artefact 2024). This is to be reviewed and implemented
Planning and design outcomes support living cultural practices.	It is proposed that there will be information panels speaking to the former Hunter Plains and the history of the site, which will be developed in consultation with the IAP
Original landscapes are repaired or restored.	Native species are proposed to ensure that the site is revegetated to create a natural environment.

# Future Directions

## 1. Community Engagement and Participation

- Shift from group consultations to more flexible, individual meetings with key community leaders, knowledge holders, and local residents.
- Establish a clear platform for continuous community feedback throughout the development stages.
- Create opportunities for younger community members to voice their opinions, ensuring a broad spectrum of age groups is represented.

## 2. Cultural Representation and Inclusivity

- Deepen the integration of Aboriginal cultural elements into the design through consultation with local cultural practitioners, storytellers, and artists.
- Explore how Indigenous knowledge systems, such as seasonal calendars and star maps, can inform the design.

## 3. Environmental Impact and Sustainability

- Further consider sustainable material selection during the next phase of the work to minimize the project's environmental footprint

## 4. Ecological Restoration and Biodiversity

- Develop a detailed plan for habitat restoration that goes beyond plant regeneration, including the protection and restoration of local wildlife corridors.
- Partner with local ecological and Indigenous land management experts to develop a habitat monitoring and regeneration program.

## 5. Land Use and Spatial Design

- Encourage further the relationship between indoor and outdoor spaces, creating more seamless transitions between the built environment and the natural surroundings.
- Investigate the potential for multi-functional spaces that can be used for cultural events, educational programs, and recreational purposes.
- Integrate Indigenous principles of space that reflect local land practices.

## 6. Water Management and Conservation

- Introduce sustainable irrigation systems that utilise greywater recycling, rainwater harvesting, and moisture-retentive native plants.
- Consider creating community building materials to avoid industrial look and feel.

## 7. Accessibility and Welcoming Environment

- Ensure the design caters to all abilities, with inclusive pathways, seating, and signage that reflects both cultural and physical accessibility.
- Further develop spaces that are not only physically accessible but also culturally welcoming, ensuring that all visitors, especially local Aboriginal communities, feel a sense of belonging.
- Further develop elements like visual and audio storytelling and tactile experiences that allow diverse groups to engage with the space in meaningful ways.

## 8. Indigenous Knowledge Integration

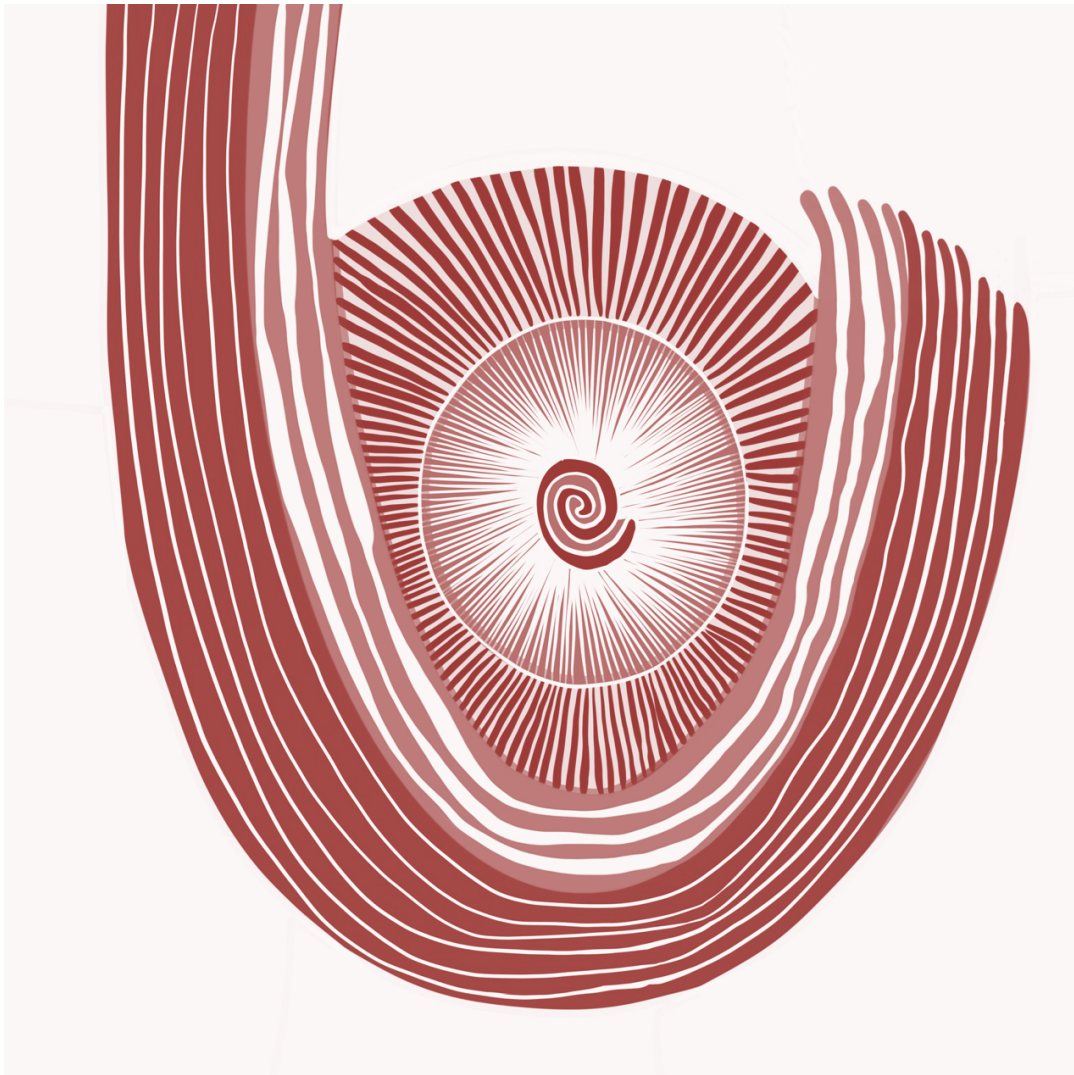
- Delve deeper into the integration of Indigenous knowledge in ecological and land management practices, such as controlled burns, bushfood cultivation, and the use of native plants for medicinal purposes. This can be interpreted in information panels.
- Consider how Indigenous governance and decision-making processes can be included in project management, ensuring that Aboriginal communities have a leading role in the stewardship of the land.
- Collaborate with Indigenous language experts to incorporate the local language into wayfinding and design elements, fostering a deeper cultural connection.

## 9. Ongoing Consultation and Relationship Building

- Formalise the role of an Indigenous advisory group, ensuring consistent and authentic representation in decision-making processes.
- Further develop conceptual ideas identified in the TLA CWC page with the Indigenous Advisory Working Group
- Build relationships with local Aboriginal businesses and craftspeople to ensure the inclusion of community-driven economic benefits.
- Commit to long-term consultation that extends beyond the completion of the project, ensuring that the space remains relevant and meaningful to future generations.

## 10. Technology and Innovation

- Further explore the idea of a soundscape to bring Indigenous storytelling and land-based knowledge into the physical space, enhancing visitor engagement.
- Incorporate smart building technologies that promote energy efficiency, reduce waste, and help monitor environmental impact, in alignment with the project's sustainability goals.



# Community Engagement Indigenous Advisory Working Group

## Role and Function of the Indigenous Advisory Group in Ensuring Designing and Connecting with Country Principles

The Indigenous Advisory Group will collaborate with EJE and Terras to ensure the principles of Designing and Connecting with Country are fully integrated into the Basketball Stadium project. This group will serve as an essential body for guiding the design process, ensuring that the project remains culturally and environmentally aligned with the values of the local Aboriginal communities.

Belanjee proposes to set up an advisory group for the project during the next phase to ensure consultation is continued going forward and integrated into the developed design in an appropriate way that celebrates First Nations knowledge and creates a sense of community where all users feel welcome.

## Key Responsibilities of the Indigenous Advisory Group:

1. **Cultural Oversight and Consultation** - Provide cultural oversight throughout the design, planning, and development phases, ensuring that Indigenous cultural knowledge, protocols, and values are woven into the project.
2. **Guidance on Ecological and Environmental Practices** - The group will assist with advising on land management practices that respect Indigenous ecological knowledge, including sustainable plant regeneration, water management, and biodiversity restoration.
3. **Monitoring of Cultural and Environmental Impacts** - Provide ongoing advice on sacred or culturally important places in the area.
4. **Community Consultation and Relationship Building** - Act as a bridge between the project team and the local Aboriginal community, facilitating communication and ensuring that community concerns are heard and addressed throughout the development process.
5. **Review of Proposed Designs and Updates** - Review the design elements, including public artwork, landscaping, and integration of cultural narratives, to ensure they are accurate, respectful, and culturally appropriate within budget restraints.

Recommended Indigenous working group - 5 key members of the community for ongoing consultation.

Liz Cameron – to lead Advisory Group

Kiana Ward – Indigenous Architect with specialization in cultural design elements

Cheryl Newton – Elder in residence – Wollotuka

Christy Crooks – PhD candidate in Health and Basketball Player Community member – (male) tbc