

| CONNECTING TO COUNTRY

Aboriginal Design Principles

Old Castle Hill Rd, Castle Hill // Bidjigal Country //
WSP Indigenous Specialist Services // December 2025





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Front image: [Contest with spears, shields and clubs], [ca.1817],[Joseph Lycett], National Library Australia

*This document acknowledges the elders, past and present, of the **Bidjigal People** as the traditional custodians of the land in which Castle Hill sits.*

“The Castle Hill area was known as the place where the clever men would meet.

The clever men, or Koradgi in the Darug tongue were believed to have special powers and could visit the sky country - the abode of the ancestors and home of the sky father Biami.”

Chris Tobin, Darug man and artist, 2005.

Aboriginal Design Principles

Indigenous design statement

Indigenous peoples and the built environment have had a problematic relationship as settlements, roads, and railways often cut through and disrupt the connection between people and Country.

Our projects change the environment in significant, and often positive ways, yet Aboriginal people often ask:

“How are you going to leave my Country better than what it was before?”

How can we reconnect the relationship between Country and people? Projects offer an opportunity to acknowledge and celebrate the Aboriginal Country, Culture and people of the land on where the project is located.

Through the project's design elements and our place-based landscape interventions (architecture, infrastructure, art and the like), **we can acknowledge Country** and reveal the site's latent Aboriginal history.

This document describes the principles we use as a starting point to engage with the Darug people and Country. While more consultation and permission must be sought from the local elders, the ideas set out in this document should be seen as an introduction to the engagement process.

Aboriginal design principles

Aboriginal led/ Aboriginal people (designers, elder and community members) should be leading or co-leading the Indigenous design elements.

Community involvement/ The local Aboriginal communities to be engaged in this process; can we use their patterns? Can they design patterns for the project?

Appropriate use of Aboriginal design/ All Aboriginal design elements must be approved by consulted Indigenous elders and community members. If approval is not given, the knowledge will not be used on the project.

Design approach

Image - Signage/surface treatment/ walls/art/ Signage tells the Country and its people's story. Surface treatments use local Aboriginal design knowledge, commissioned from artists, or urban designers who engage with community for approval.

Space - Indigenous space/ landscaping/ Aboriginal Space. A space or landscape where Aboriginal culture can be celebrated, including cultural land-management practices, firestick farming, daisy yam propagation, and the like

Language - Using language in the built environment to use it and keep it alive.

Country focused design

Aboriginal Australia has a simple but quite different hierarchy when it comes to their connection to nature. It is best contrasted against human-focused design, which puts man on top of the triangle.

How might this shift or enhance current practices?

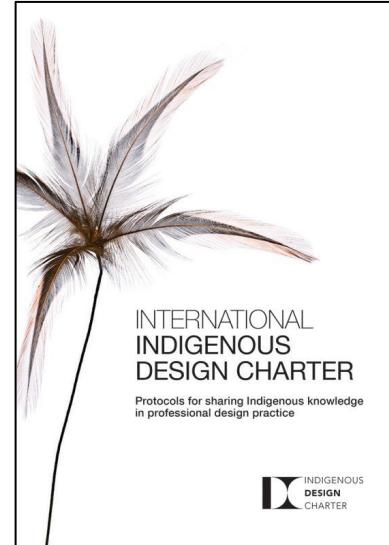
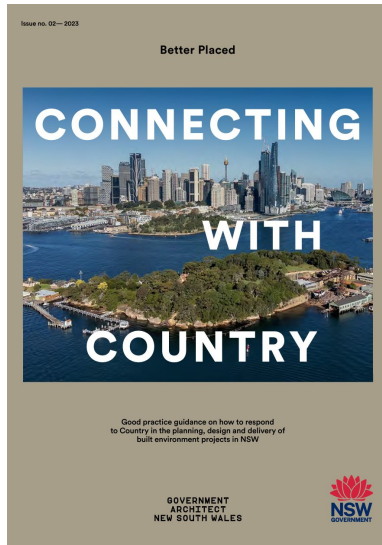
**Country, over
Community, over
Individual**



Country focused design

Guiding Documents

Our team are guided by the following documents and guidelines to ensure we are following best practice in the work that we do.



Indigenous Design Charter



Reconciliation Australia's three pillars: Relationships, Respect and Opportunities

NSW Government Architects Connecting with Country and Designing with Country Frameworks.

How - Engagement strategy

Who:

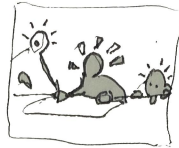
Relevant Aboriginal Elders and Knowledge Holders

How:

- Digital Yarns over TEAMS
- Meetings at the site, an Elders place of choice (park, their house etc)

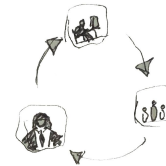
1. Engagement

The first step will be to engage with the relevant Aboriginal group (artist / elder, Lands Council etc), early and often, through a series of 'yarns' or conversations about the potential opportunities to incorporate the theming contained within the document (or other themes) into project outcomes.



2. Co Design

To kick of the co-design process design teams are given time to integrate the themes and ideas into the scope of the project



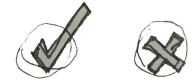
3. Co Design workshops

Engagement workshops with the relevant Aboriginal group will everyone gets in the room to co-design cultural solutions to project outcomes, yet Aboriginal voices should be given preference to ensure they are heard.



4. Endorsement:

All content that uses local Aboriginal theming will be endorsed by the Aboriginal group.



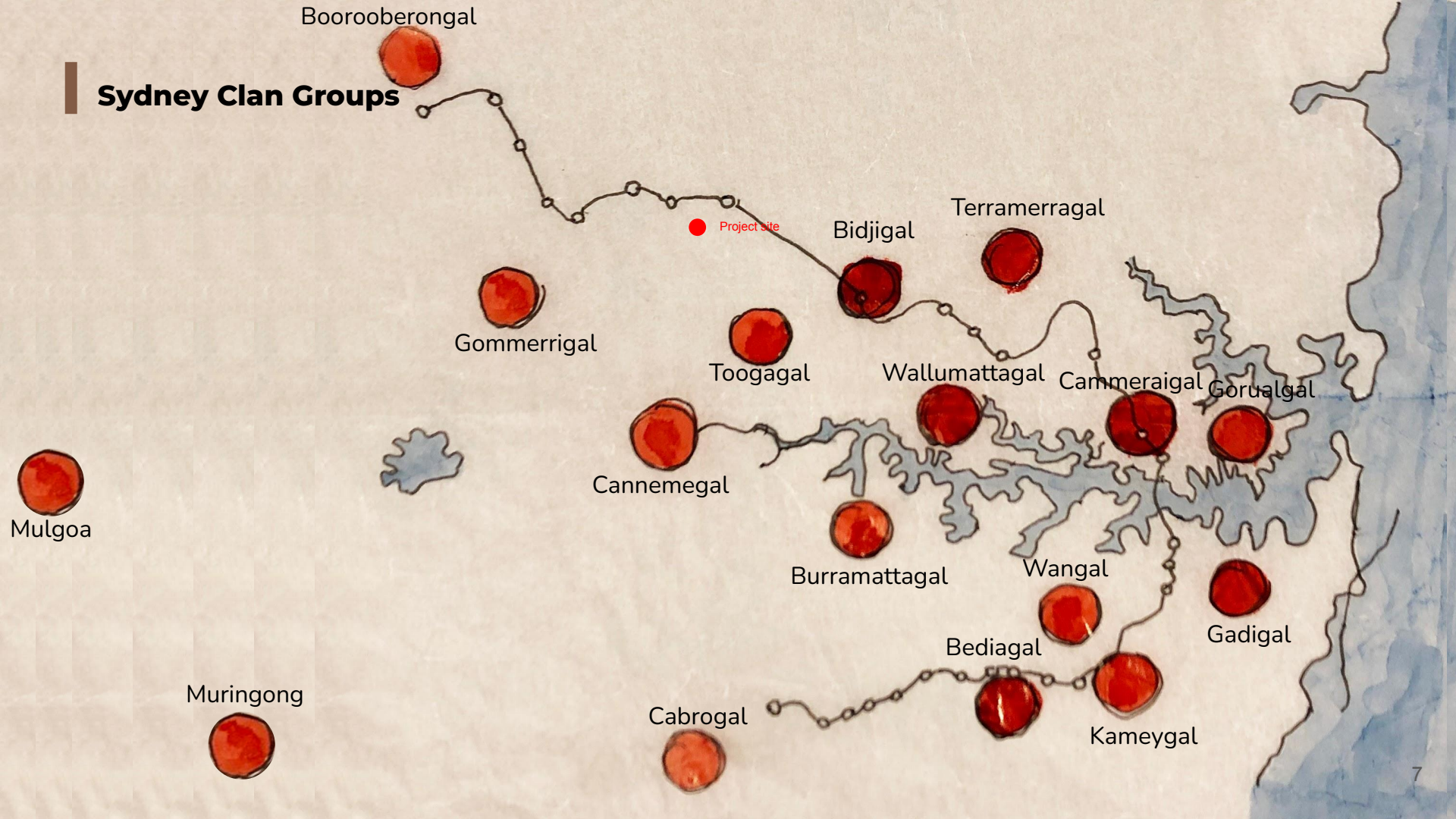
5. Other opportunities:

Should be highlighted and put forward to ensure the local Aboriginal community has opportunities, economic outcomes and better connections to their Country, through the project



**Country,
people,
culture**

Sydney Clan Groups



Darug Country

A Country of Beauty

Early settlers to Western Sydney 'found environments which reminded them of the manicured parks of England, with trees well spaced and a grassy understory'. The country west of Parramatta and Liverpool was described in 1827 as

'a fine-timbered country, perfectly clear of bush, through which you might, generally speaking, drive a gig in all directions, without any impediment in the shape of rocks, scrubs and close forest'.

Arthur Bowes Smyth from The First Fleet described the landscape around Sydney as

'... fresh terraced, lawns and grottos with distinct plantations of the tallest and most stately trees I ever saw in any nobleman's grounds in England, cannot excel in beauty those whose nature now presented to our view'.¹



Joseph Lycett 'View upon the Nepean River, at the Cow Pastures New South Wales 1824-1825'
Source: National Library Australias

A Country Curated by Fire

Aboriginal people in this Country utilised sophisticated environmental management conducted over long periods of time — in particular, traditional cultural fire management.

The First Fleet officer John Hunter noted that Aboriginal people around Sydney 'set the country on fire for several miles extent'. He recognised that the purpose was 'to clear that part of the country through which they have frequent occasion to travel, of the brush or underwood', as well as enabling women to get at edible roots with digging sticks and hunting kangaroo.¹

The mosaic of landscapes was 'maintained by Aboriginal burning, a carefully calibrated system which kept some areas open while others grew dense and dark'.²



Joseph Lycett 'People using fire to hunt kangaroos, 1817'. State Library of New South Wales

Darug Resources

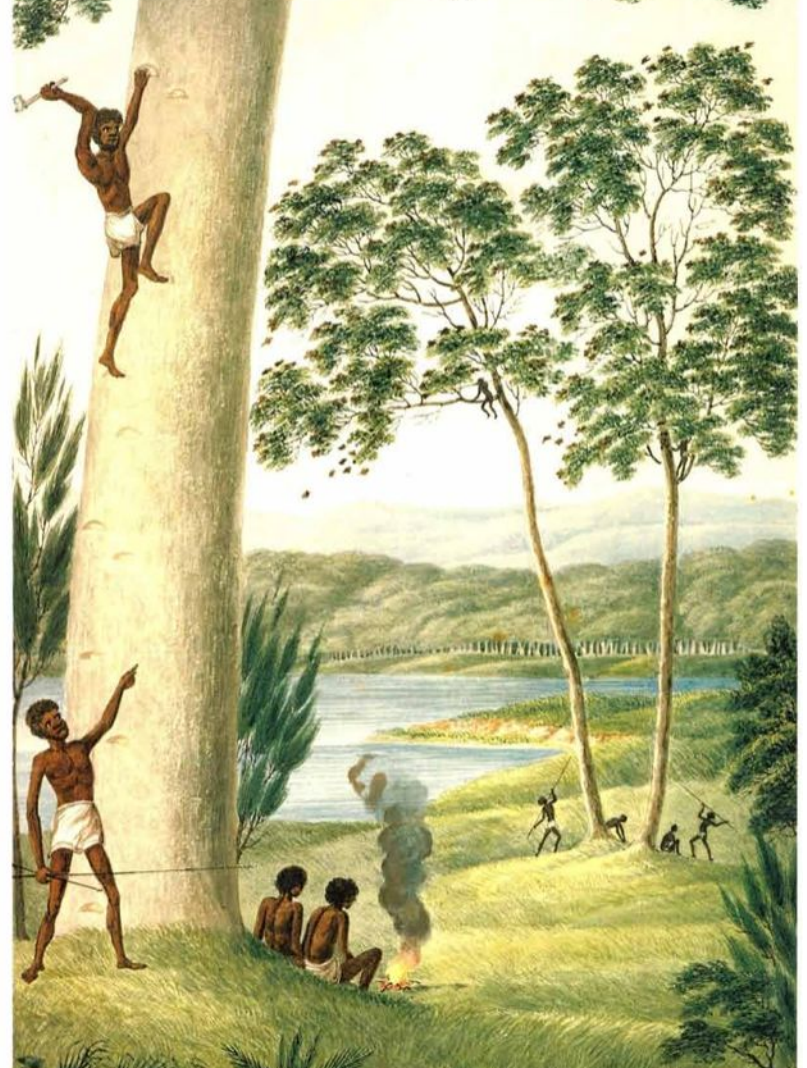
Inland clans of the Darug language group fished for mullet and eels in rich lagoons, but much of their food came from yams dug out from the river banks and worms known as 'cah-bro' extracted from river driftwood.

Colebee and Ballederry called these people the 'climbers of trees' after their practice of skilfully ascending gums in pursuit of possums, cutting footholds in the trunks with a stone axe.

More hunting traps were plotted in the area from Parramatta to Richmond than any other part of Sydney. These included 'bird decoys' full of feathers, hollowed-out trees, and a tapering chute at the foot of Richmond Hill 'between forty and fifty feet in length', constructed of earth, weeds, rushes, and brambles.⁵

The freshwater creeks such as South Creek and Eastern Creek, wetlands and rivers such as the Hawkesbury-Nepean in the west and north and Georges in the south were also known to be fundamental to the Darug subsistence economy.⁵

Aboriginal people climbing trees, two
Aboriginal people sitting by a fire, others
spearing birds, Joseph Lycett, National
Library Australia



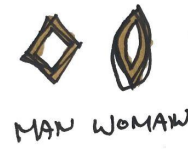
Darug Design

Sydney's Aboriginal people express themselves visually across many different mediums including on wooden and stone surfaces, body scarification and painting, incised designs on weapons and tools, and etchings on skin cloaks.

Darug people created tools from silcrete stone which is unique to their area, some tools from this area have been found to the north in other regions where this stone is not available, indicating trade networks between groups.¹²

The consistent element is line based design, as opposed to dots, the line is primarily used to identify tribal families and individuals around this area.

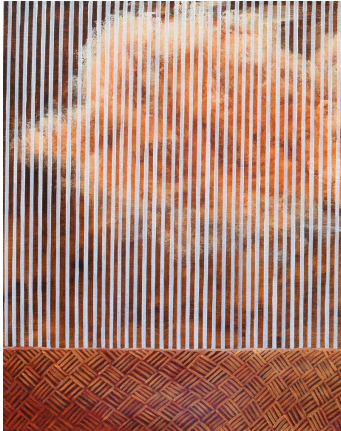
Each group distinguished itself from other groups in having different designs and decorations on their tools and weapons. They also distinguish themselves by having different body decorations – for example painted designs worn during certain rites and ceremonies, and the cicatrices (scarification) formed during initiation rites. Some groups also had distinctive hair styles.¹²



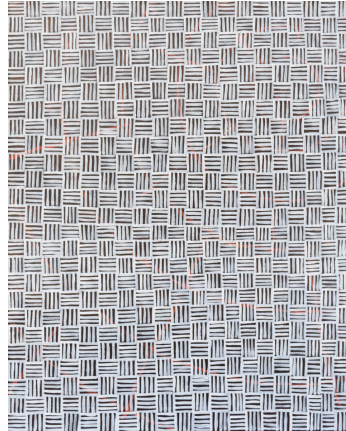
Dr Shane Smithers
Darug
Loreman,
artist and
academic

Dharug Design

Shane Smithers, Darug artist and academic describes the horizontal lines as representing Wiari, Mother Earth whom, along with Biari Father sky, is held in the highest respect. Together their generative power is the basis of Darug lore.



Here the sky is represented by windswept clouds against a dusty backdrop. The white lines indicate our connection to the sky father Biari. Darug Country is a place where sky meets earth, the generative forces of Wiari (mother earth) and Biari (Father Sky). The hatch pattern represents Country



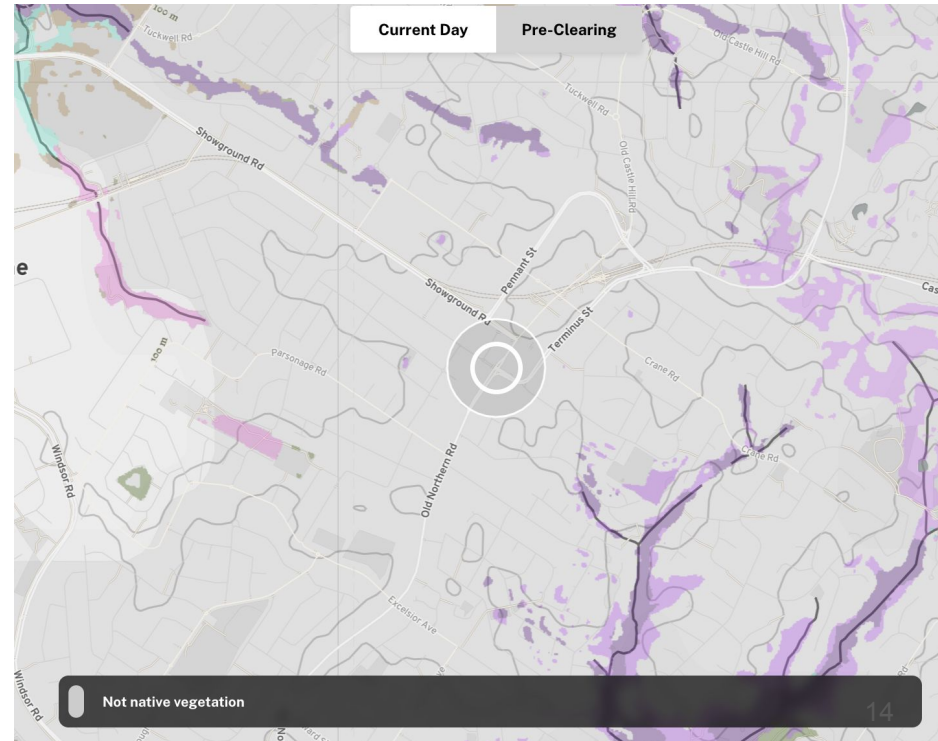
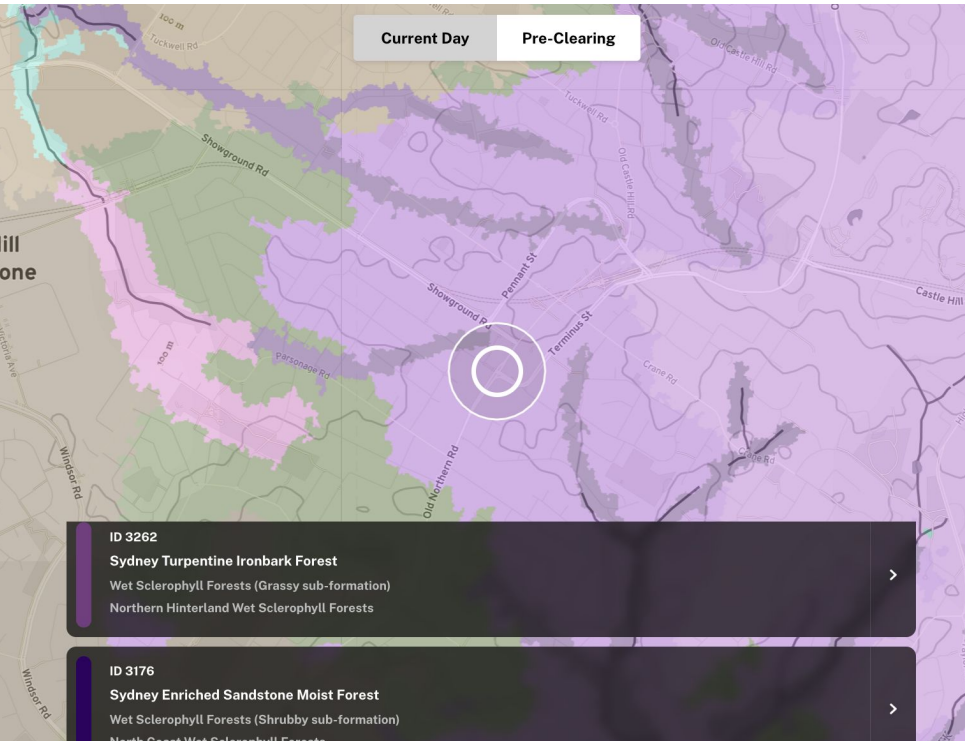
Vertical lines represent Father Sky, horizontal lines represent Mother Earth. The Hatch here represents community and the multifaceted nature of interaction and how community is located with a landscape.

Nadeena Dixon is a Wiradjuri, Yuin & Gadigal (Dharug -Boorongberrigal clan) Indigenous Multi disciplinary Artist , Her practice encompasses Print Making , Multi Platform Production including Photography, animation, video , editing , sound , webpage design and integration



Dixons Dillybag Series are the result of an ongoing process of exploration responding to the Cosmology of traditional Dillybags and their role in Aboriginal Society

Vegetation Communities

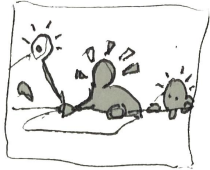


Engagement strategy

Aboriginal co-design process

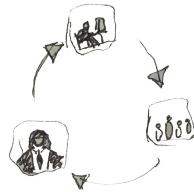
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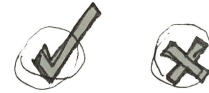
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1st Yarn with Dr Shane Smithers

In 19th November 2024, the design team met onsite with Dr Shane Smithers to talk about the site and project. This is what he said:

- One of the main points gained through engagement is the importance of early engagement with Elders, knowledge holders and community members.
- It is important to spiritually connect to the country you are on, even if you're not from this country. Additionally, you can still connect to Country if you not originally from this country.
- The site location was most likely a habitation or recourse zone, with more ceremonial spaces up on the hills where festivals would occur. The festival would include trades with seedlings or seeds. Mt Annan had many species brought there from these festivals.
- Many species were culturally introduced through this practice, some by human's, others by birds. Both birds and humans would carry tree seeds and deposit them leading to native flora being spread around the area. This process helps maintain biodiversity and allows tree species to spread across various regions.



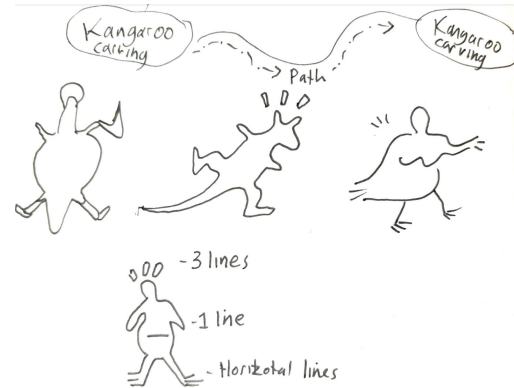
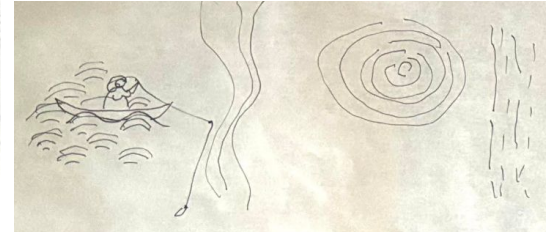
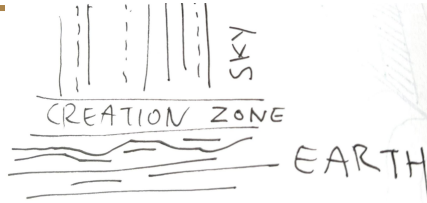
1st Yarn with Dr Shane Smithers cont.

- However, the location of the project site is problematic as it is extremely developed. It is hard to get a cultural sense of the place as there is minimal flora, fauna or original landscape to be found. This limits the ability to connect to Country.
- It was said that this Country was abundant in food and resources. People would be able to dance here all night because of this. This meant that some cultural areas could be developed more than others leading to elaborate and diverse cultural expression.
- The rich tradition of body painting, rock carving and cave art in this area is a testament to the deep cultural and artistic heritage of its people and Country. Additionally, this area features more cave art than anywhere else in the world. This cultural practice should be continued in the contemporary form of public artworks working into the existing dynamic art. This can preserve culture and honour Country and the people.



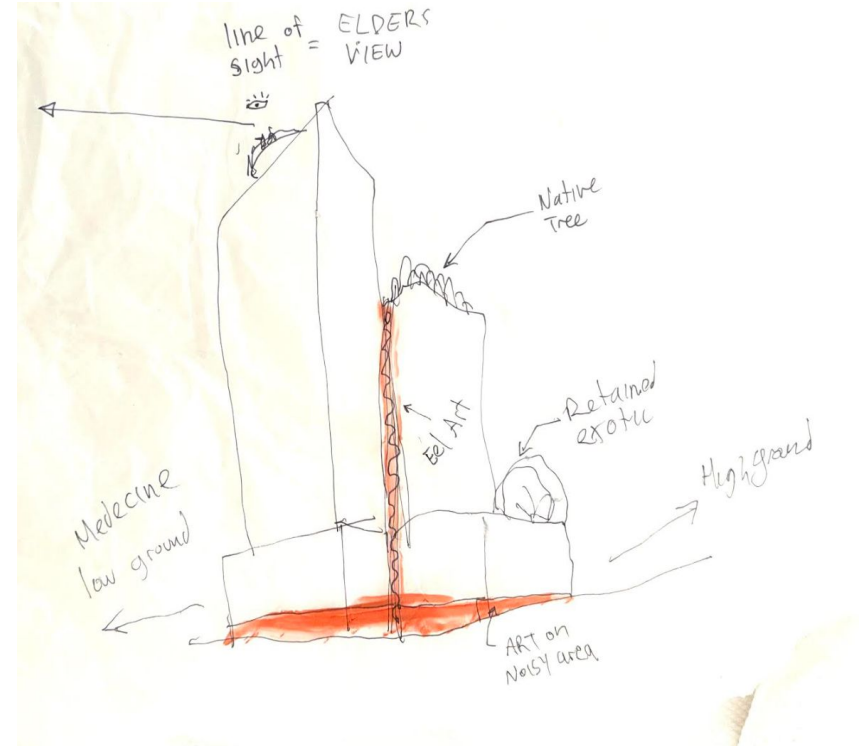
1st Yarn with Dr Shane Smithers cont.

- There is a difference between what to tell adults and children, there is a line in what knowledge should be shared.
- Muka / Biarni was the Darug sacred creator. It means the sperm or father or all. Similar to christianity, but quite different in values (nudity etc)
- Mother earth is the bringer of life. We (humans) united earth and sky together. God formed adam from the dust of the ground. Air and spirit = life. God used clay to form man, and breathed air, this gave life.
- Symbols to join this together
- Falling water is masculine, standing water is feminine.
- The building should be connected to the earth, but connected to sky
- Team should think and talk about mother earth and sky father
- Symbology is important and should be connected to meaning. Abstraction is important but should be overlaid with geometric forms
- Shane liked the idea of the lower building can be considered earth and the newer glass can connect to sky Country. Lightweight on top with green, mother earth below.
- Laneway should facilitate water going back into the soil, back into Country.
- Urban gardening should be considered. Common wart weed for example
- Shane likes the idea of the project and location. Stressed importance of echoing sandstone and stone formations that are of this place.

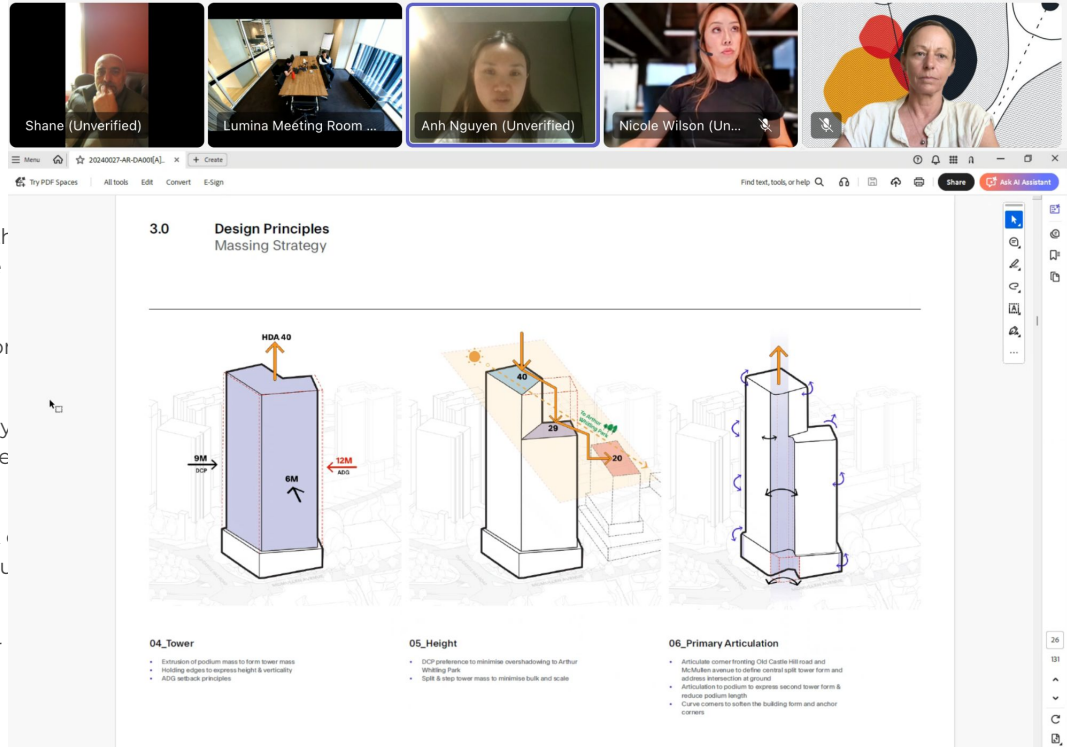


Sketches by Michael Hromek during the meeting

Sketch made during the session



Follow up Engagement



An online meeting was held on the 1st December 2025 to allow the design team to share how the design has progressed with Uncle Shane Smithers, Darug Knowledge Holder and artist.

The design team shared how the height has increased by 20 floor. Footprint is the same, but the height has increased.

Uncle Shane asked about the number of units (= 371). He is happy that the size of the buildings have gone up but not out- therefore retaining the garden spaces.

Stillness of water resonated with the design team from the Walk Country. Patterning, nodes, community spaces. Creating sanctuaries for people, Country and kin.

Water is important in the landscape. Explore ways to allow water feature in the landscape and the play areas, mist areas with zero depth.

Explore Water Sensitive Urban Design elements around the edges of the site.

Connecting through local ecology, view corridors, Sky Country important for outdoor spaces and residents.

Sensory garden- bush tucker, outdoor garden, Sky Garden etc.

Design ideas





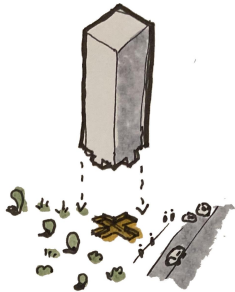
Key Issues for Darug Design

Connecting the site to Country

This site was on the edge of important waterways and resources, crossings and other cultural and settlement related activities.

How might we honour Country and ensure it's dignity is still intact after the project?

Any new building should honour Country and the people associated with this land through tangible and intangible outcomes.

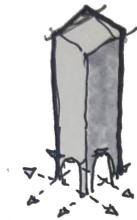


Connect the buildings to Country

Open up the site

Ensuring the building is welcoming to people of all ages, culturally safe and educational

How might the building bring people closer to important themes? Water, the eel, etc.?



Connect people to the site

Celebrate Country

Use colour to celebrate and enhance connection to Country.

Can the project provide a space to celebrate this important Country?



Connect the building to Darug Design

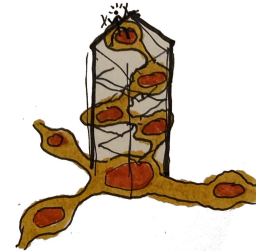
Tell our stories.

Western Sydney is a place of ceremony, lore and settlements. There are many latent stories associated with this place waiting to be told through place based interventions.

How might we tell the stories of this Country and it's first peoples in the design of this building?



Invite Country into the building



Connect the building to Culture

Aboriginal Planning Principles

Principles for the architect to consider and incorporate.

Understanding Country.

An Aboriginal persons connection to Country is personal and highly contextual to region or place. Each person is a custodian for where they live, to ensure it is always abundant in resources, but also to ensure it's honour, spirit and integrity is kept intact.

Understanding Country begins with:

- **The Earth.** The earth is often referred to as Mother and everything about it is held in great reverence. The type of rock determines vegetation, tools and trade, and minerals set the prosperity of a Country as trade was sure to follow.
- **The Sky.** The Father and Grandfather are often associated with the sky and sun and is where we came from and go to in the afterlife.
- **Water:** Water sets the structure of Country in the way it interacts with Earth. It carves Country up and sets the rhythm and flow of how humans experience it. It also determines where people plants and animals live by providing rich resource areas in rivers, billabongs, wetlands and riparian zones.
- **Vegetation,** determined by the above, provide the resource, tools and fuel for people to live well.
- **People.** We take the Above four points and make art, culture, civilisations etc. Understanding these 4 points about Country but in a highly localised context starts to get the the idea of what Country is for Aboriginal people.

Hills and high places hold spiritual and practical significance including important places for stone and other alpine resources, such as bogong moths, plants, medicines etc.



Open forest a cool place important for giving cover to people and animals as well as resources and food providing a diverse range of habitats that support many species.



Plains / Park lands are important hunting grounds which are kept open using cultural fire management to provide easy access for animals and people.



Wetlands are important as they filter the water before entering rivers and provide the structure and resources for an abundance of food, ecological niches and resources.



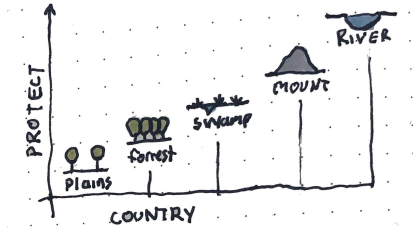
Rivers / Water are perhaps the most significant practically and spiritually, as water sustains and promotes life.



Aboriginal Planning Principles

Principles for the architect to consider and incorporate.

Value Hierarchy. All Country is important, yet some hold more spiritual and practical significance for Aboriginal people, the most important being River, Mountains and Swamp lands.



Share the Country. Keep the important places open for all to use and benefit from, this includes the hills, high places, and mountain tops as well as rivers, waterways of well systems. Don't build too close to the river, or too high on the hilltop. These places become opportunities for parks and recreation places.

Orientation and high points. The old folk knew where the prevailing winds would come, and where the sun would go over the sky and thus plan for this in the placement of their settlement areas, cultivation areas and other engineering projects such as fish traps and aquaculture.



Promote biodiversity. Before introduction of the hard hooves of cow and sheep, Aboriginal Country had a diverse range of plants, fruits, nuts, yams, berries, grains and resources. Land was designed and cultivated to promote the difference and ensure a large range of produce / resources were available at all times of the year.

Let Country be what it wants to be. Often we fight against Country when building infrastructure and make many mistakes when placing buildings towns and cities. Let the low areas be wet, the high areas be forested, the plains be wide and open. High value areas can be planned from the central point out in all future land use schemes.

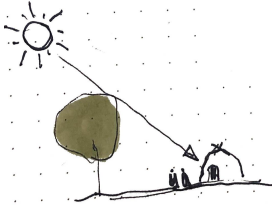


The regular flooding of Parramatta, Hawkesbury and Nepean rivers reveals what this Country wants to be, a floodplain.

Aboriginal Planning Principles

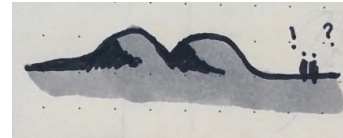
Principles for the architect to consider and incorporate.

Solar Control. Using vegetation, orientation and placement of buildings, optimum solar efficiency can be achieved depending on the season.



Promote Culture. The way we design Country can enhance our sense of culture, of our diverse and rich differences, but also our commonalities. We can plant weaving materials or healing gardens, or reflect Aboriginal design through the landscape and building design. We design our environments, then in turn they design us.

Topographical features are important wayfinding and teaching areas, we need to design considering these features.



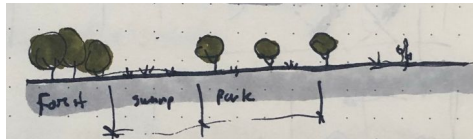
Area rotation. Resource use and harvesting of resources need to be managed and timed to allow Country to recover. A deep understanding of the cycles of Country, and how seasons impact upon animals and vegetation is necessary for appropriate management.



High View Points are important to establish and understanding of Country and your place in it. Maintaining the integrity and quality of high points is important.



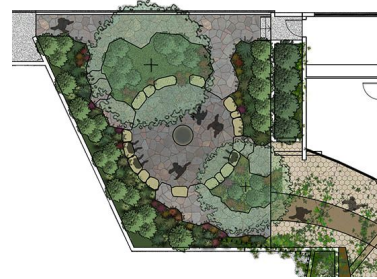
Diverse Vegetation. Country was kept rich in biodiversity through rigid Cultural Land Management Practices (CLMP) yet subsequent farming with hooved animals has threatened it. As such how might we heal Country using CLMP techniques?



Aboriginal art facade precedents



Aboriginal landscape precedents



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