

Country Centred Design Principles for Campus Developments



Protocols for engagement
with Traditional Owners
or Custodians on Flinders
University's campus
development and
infrastructure projects.



**Flinders
University**

Background

As part of our first Reconciliation Plan, Balarinji was commissioned by Flinders University to develop Guiding Principles for future campus development around the Flinders Village that reflect the University's commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The intent, where appropriate, was also to incorporate the design of cultural spaces for the community that recognise and build on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' ways of connecting with place and valuing the environment.

As part of the Balarinji work, a series of workshops were held with Aboriginal communities who are locally connected to Flinders University campuses. Co-design is a methodological practice that directly involves the local Aboriginal community in collecting the site's narrative and expressing the narrative within the project. This approach allows for a deeply connected and authentic response to place. It ensures local Aboriginal Elders and Knowledge Holders are at the centre of decision making.

It's important for true co-design to occur throughout all stages of a project – from the earliest stages of design through to completion. This will ensure that the project, and all parties involved, remain committed and transparent when engaging with connecting to Country principles, creating mutually beneficial outcomes for all people connected to Flinders University campuses.

As an extension of the Balarinji work, this document aims to meet the objectives of Flinders' second Reconciliation Action Plan by outlining the guiding principles for protocols of engagement with Traditional Owners and Custodians regarding future infrastructure projects.

Introduction

The Guiding Principles should be used to:

- learn about Country and the Traditional Owners or Custodians who are connected to the Countries on which Flinders University campuses sit
 - explore the stories of these Countries from the perspective of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities
 - inspire design teams to connect with Country through culturally informed co-design methodologies, and use this connection to prioritise Country in design outcomes
- ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9819583/
- aboriginalaffairs.nsw.gov.au/research-and-publications/completed-research-and-evaluation/Report-Co-designing-recommendations.pdf
- instruct and inform design teams on how Country can influence the design of Flinders University campuses and their future development
 - ensure the project supports Aboriginal people to gain tangible and intangible intergenerational benefits
 - support mutually beneficial capacity building across Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities.



What is Country?

What is Country and how can it influence campus design?

In order to guide future project teams in engaging with the Traditional Custodians of the Flinders University campus locations in a process of co-design that deepens the sense of place experienced by staff, students and visitors, the concept of Country must be understood.

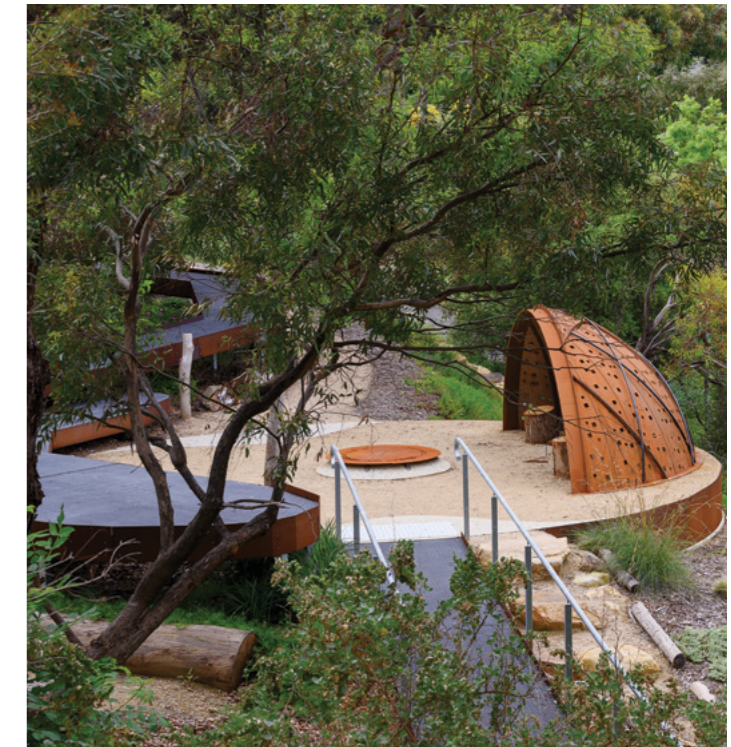
The following information on Country and how it can influence design has arisen from the knowledge and experiences of Balarinji's Co-founder's Managing Director Ros Moriarty and, Chair and Cultural Director, Yanyuwa man John Moriarty. John is an alumn of Flinders University and his continued connection with his alma mater was a driving force behind the collaboration between Balarinji and Flinders University in the development of this report.

Country has multiple purposes and functionalities; however, it always lends its name to the people who are connected to it and have responsibilities for it – those who call that Country home. For Flinders University campus locations, these are:

- Kurna – Adelaide Region
- Ngadjuri- Nuriootpa (Barossa)
- First Peoples of the River Murray & Mallee Region- Berri, Renmark includes Ngaiawang, Ngawait, Nganguruku, Erawirung, Ngintait, Ngaralte, and Ngarkat
- First Nations of the South East - Boandik, Meintangk, Southern Tangankald) – Mount Gambier
- Ngarrindjeri – Murray Bridge
- Ramindjeri – Victor Harbor
- Arrernte - Alice Springs
- Larrakia – Darwin
- Jawoyn - Katherine
- Dagoman - Katherine
- Wardaman – Katherine
- Yolngu – Nhulunbuy

Country is not a Western concept; it is an Aboriginal world view. It is nature at a deeper level, where all things are interconnected, and the spiritual underlies the physical. The Aboriginal sense of Country is that past, present and future are not confined by time, they merge into a continuum. Aboriginal thinking, therefore, embraces what was on Country before, what is there now and what might come back or evolve in the future. It is about a continuum of place too, where borders and boundaries are open to culture crossing Country, and where stories interconnect with surrounding peoples.

Country commands care and respect. Respect between people, animals, plants and earth is required to keep Country healthy so Country can care for and sustain life. Aboriginal principles for sustaining Country are embedded in language, stories and Songlines which all reflect physical and spiritual understandings of the land. The diversity of traditional language groups, stories and Songlines reflects the diversity of Country's landforms and ecosystems. The significance of ceremony and lore between language groups ensures caring for Country principles and responsibilities to Country are shared across Australia. All things belong to Country; Country does not belong to anyone.



Yungkurinthe Inparilla. The Wardli (Kurna Shelter) was designed by Kurna artist James Tylor and Wiradjuri architectural designer Samantha Rich.

Since colonisation, Western philosophies have shaped Country to their own ideologies and understandings of nature. This has significantly disrupted the ecosystems that had been carefully managed by Aboriginal people in order for Country to thrive.

Increasing loss of biodiversity, natural disasters and the broader implications of climate change all signify that Country is suffering. However, the resilience of Aboriginal people and their commitment to caring for Country have allowed traditional knowledge to continue to be passed down through generations. Country underpins the social organisation and utility in Aboriginal Australia, enabling over 60,000 years of sustainable living in Australia.

Aboriginal knowledge of Country provides alternative thinking that can influence a wide range of disciplines such as design, agriculture, land management, geology and health and wellbeing.

Aboriginal people have a deep and interconnected relationship with the physical and spiritual elements of Country. Their lives are entirely integrated with the places where they belong, where language, culture, knowledge, Law/Lore, and ceremony are interdependent and one with Country. A change in one of these elements affects all the others.

As well as its spiritual dimension, Country has an enduring physicality. Deep knowledge and respect for Country, developed over centuries and passed down through generations, traditionally informed the patterns of daily life, for instance, food and water availability, when to plant and cultivate crops, where to reside at different times of the year, when it is time for ceremony or gatherings, and the materials that are utilised for tools, building and artefacts.

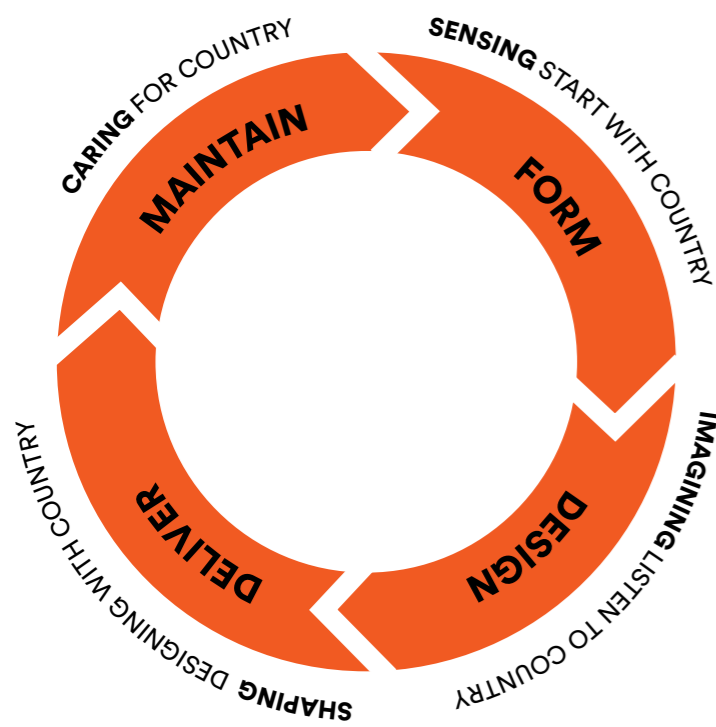
How can Country influence design?

The future development of the Flinders University campuses has the potential to embed Country at the heart of design, sustaining and healing Country and supporting the wellbeing of all staff, students, local community members and visitors of the campuses.

Australian Aboriginal culture is phenomenally resilient. Aboriginal people have successfully sustained life on our fragile, ancient continent for 60,000+ years. Aboriginal know-how has much to say about sustainable construction and wellbeing.

A central pillar of Aboriginal culture is a collective responsibility for sustaining Country for generations to come. Caring for, and sustaining Country involves a complex biodiverse system that has been managed for tens of thousands of years within cultural rules and protocols. Country is more than nature, it is Dreaming, an all-embracing concept from the Aboriginal worldview which has no European equivalent. Regeneration is at its heart.

However, despite the resonance Country can bring to the whole of the design, it is still more common to see Aboriginal elements integrated into precincts as art installations or in Aboriginal-influenced landscape design than in built form. There are very few architectural examples that have been deeply informed by the Aboriginal worldview, whether through the creative team lacking a cultural design principles toolkit, or the Aboriginal narrative not being considered relevant or important for contemporary urban developments.



Country and the cycle of projects

Yet, the philosophies of Aboriginal society, culture, and wellbeing, including the importance of family, and the principles of living close to and looking after Country, have great potential to influence how Australian designers, architects and builders think about climate, sustainability and the intimacy of built form. Collective obligation to care for Country is an Indigenous protocol with cooperation at its core. Urban thinking shaped by Country is a cultural driver of biophilic design. These are ancient ways of being that focus a new lens on resilience planning and illustrate how Country can influence design.

For the future development of Flinders University campuses, Country-centred design should be strongly considered. The idea of embracing Country at the heart of design emerged across all four workshops that took place. It was important to the community that any campus development be co-designed with the community, site-specific and local-to-place, and consider the specific Country, Dreaming Stories, Ancestors and language of each campus location.

The Aboriginal worldview on spirituality, science, cosmology and ecology is an original frame of creativity for architects, designers, builders and artists to explore. It is not possible to take this knowledge theoretically or without collaboration, deep engagement and co-design with locally connected Aboriginal stakeholders. Nor is it ethical to do so. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people rightly expect an evolution away from past approaches to integrating Aboriginal culture and knowledge into built projects. For instance, the 'shallow' solution of installing Aboriginal artwork that is unrelated to a place in a completed project or the 'exploratory' approach (still the most common on public projects) of 'provide us with your stories and images, and we'll bring you what we've done for approval' are not best practice. The goal is to provide a positive pathway for deep engagement and authentic co-design for the future development of Flinders University campuses.

This Core Narrative report for Flinders University campuses embraces a Country-centred co-design intention that is based on deep engagement with Aboriginal stakeholders and community-endorsed creative practitioners local to place. It aims to activate an authentic voice to draw out knowledge, protocols, history, culture and the contemporary stories of Aboriginal communities, for co-designed interpretation from the beginning to the end of projects. The objective is transformational design thinking informed by the Aboriginal worldview.



Principles

Through consultation with the locally connected Aboriginal communities and stakeholders, design themes were identified to help guide Flinders University project teams.

These themes are outlined below, along with icons, principles for action and summaries of the discussion of these themes from the workshops.

Stakeholders expressed the desire for ongoing and supportive partnerships with Flinders University. The trust and respect that these relationships will be founded upon requires ongoing partnership. Stakeholders discussed the importance of working collaboratively with Flinders University staff and project teams. An ongoing relationship of collaboration, rather than consultation, needs to be established. This relationship must be founded upon a recognition of Traditional Owners and Custodians and their representative organisations as the owners of locally connected cultural knowledge. Ongoing partnership through co-design occurs over the lifetime of a project from project conception and planning to representation through architecture, art, language and landscaping, through to the ongoing maintenance and material project outcomes.

1. Connection to Country

Country is everything. From the sky and stars to the land and the people within it. Technology, cosmology, biology, ecology, philosophy and society are all determined by Country. Country is every-changing and ephemeral.

Traditional Custodians and Owners hold the knowledge of Country. Knowledge about Country is passed through oral tradition from generation to generation, from experience and location-activated storytelling. Through engaging with Traditional Owners and Custodians as authorities of knowledge, narrative, meaning and connectedness to Country can be integral parts of Flinders University campuses.

Connecting to Country through reintroducing native planting, native materials and respecting Mother Earth is significant for the community and will reconnect the site with thriving culture.



Engaging knowledge owners principles

Principles for action:

- Offer written agreements with Traditional Owners and Custodians that put in place the mechanisms for co-design and formally recognise Traditional Owners and Custodians and their representative organisations as the cultural authorities for the campus located on their Country.
- Consult widely with locally connected Aboriginal stakeholders.
- Work in close partnership with Traditional Owners and Custodians and their representative organisations across the entire lifetime of projects.



Local to place principles

Principles for action:

- Represent and reflect local Aboriginal culture in design thinking and implementation.
- Follow a process of deep collaboration and co-design to embed local culture and knowledge systems.
- Consider art, architecture, landscaping and language integration as complementary mechanisms to make a campus local to place.



Country centred principles

Principles for action:

- Adopt local land management practices that can be run by community-owned/controlled organisations.
- Work with Traditional Owners and Custodians on the preservation and strengthening of local ecosystems including flora, fauna and waterways.
- Plant landscapes using flora that is native to the area.
- Integrate local flora and fauna into art and design with a focus on how these integrations can give a sense of being grounded in place.

2. Aboriginal cultures are living cultures

Flinders University campuses are on Country where there are many Songlines and stories. Despite hardship, Aboriginal culture has thrived in many ways in South Australia and Northern Territory, giving way to strong and healthy Aboriginal cultures and communities.

The old and the new are deeply intertwined, with history and cultures informing cultures today and in future, developing resilient and thriving communities. The communities engaged are clear that their cultures are very much alive across South Australia and wish for their stories, and connection to Country, to be evident in the future projects at campuses. Flinders University can enact this principle beyond individual projects by creating culturally safe and supported relationships between locally connected Aboriginal communities and the University that span all the different interactions community members may have with community as students, staff and visitors to its campuses.



Ancestors principles

Principles for action:

- Work with Traditional Owners and Custodians to represent ancestors on Flinders University campuses that reflect their achievements.
- Develop representations of ancestors through co-design with Traditional Owners and Custodians.
- Encourage access to these representations for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities even where they do not normally engage with campus locations.

The information presented below, where not directly attributed to a Knowledge Holder, was compiled through desktop research. While this information provides broad points that provide a knowledge basis for project teams, such sources are often compiled from a Western perspective and present an incomplete account. Given knowledge of ancestors is influenced by family connections, stories can move as families or family members migrate or in the past were forcibly moved to other areas. This movement is a reason why Aboriginal people introduce their Country with their name and names of family members. This practice allows for an understanding of connections and allows those involved to see where they are orally when speaking about family and Country. Knowledge Holders need to be consulted to provide more holistic accounts of the below ancestors and to decide what aspects of their lives are most appropriate to reflect through design.

Across the workshops, stakeholders discussed the need to recognise ancestors in future projects. Acknowledging ancestors is a way to articulate truth-telling on campus. It is beneficial for the wider community to be better grounded in truth-telling and the work ancestors have done to advance Aboriginal rights. It also has benefits that are exclusively for Traditional Owners and Custodians who spoke of their ancestors and the work they have done as a motivator for them to continue their legacy and a source of belonging and energy.



Dreaming principles

Principles for action:

- Recognise Traditional Owners and Custodians as the authorities of Dreaming Stories.
- Do not share or interpret Dreaming Stories without the consent of local Knowledge Holders.
- Continue to consult with Knowledge Holders in a manner in line with cultural protocols to gain a greater understanding of local Dreaming Stories.
- Include time for consultation in project timelines so cultural protocols around consultation can be followed.
- Be guided by Traditional Custodians and Owners on what stories are appropriate for interpretation at each campus.

The Dreaming informs many aspects of Aboriginal people's lives, including their relationships with others and the environment, cultural practices, values and beliefs. The Dreaming explains the beginning of everything, how the landscape and people were formed, and the spirits and ancestors that continue to live among us. Therefore, Dreaming Stories are another expression of deep knowledge of Country.

Dreaming Stories and their associated Songlines are a means through which connections between campus locations can be explored. Dreaming Stories are history and culture; they are part of the identity of Country that can be incorporated into designs on the campus. They are important to share with younger generations because of the lore held within them.

Dreaming stories must not be interpreted through design until Flinders University project teams re-engage with local Traditional Owners and Custodians and Knowledge Holders. Knowledge Holders needed to be engaged in line with the cultural protocols of their Country. Knowledge Holders are the authority on which stories can be shared, the level of story appropriate for public interpretation and how the stories are to be shared.

3. The importance of language

All workshop attendees acknowledged the importance of language integration at campus locations in both written and spoken forms. The use of language is a clear celebration of culture and the work of communities in its revitalisation. Language depicts a resilient and vibrant community, whilst infusing culture back into Country. By reflecting loss and revival integrating language is an act of truth-telling that deeply connects campuses to their Countries.

As an educational institution Flinders University is well positioned to support local language and its integration through research, education and its direct engagement with locally connected Aboriginal communities.



Language principles

Principles for action:

- Integrate language both written and spoken into all future projects.
- Only integrate language that is local to place.
- Seek authorisation from Traditional Owners and Custodians and local language groups for all instances of language groups.
- Acknowledge the work that local communities are doing to strengthen and revitalise their languages.
- Support local language education.
- Encourage staff to learn language to demonstrate respect for the local Aboriginal culture and improve cultural safety.

Language is a central tenet of culture. Participants discussed how language is more than just the words spoken, it is the meaning they hold. Speaking language is abiding by a cultural protocol and is important in representing an oral culture.

As expressed across the workshops, language that is local to place needs to be integrated into projects. By highlighting language and recognising the local Aboriginal languages as the first languages, you are showing respect to the local Aboriginal community. Language not only helps a campus be local to place, it is also an important aspect of truth-telling. Knowledge of language is available to be built upon by local communities because culture and people did not disappear, they worked and continue to work to maintain and strengthen culture.

There are a number of ways language can be incorporated, such as Welcome to Country, Acknowledgements of Country, dual signage and through communication with staff. Sharing language with young Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, like the students at Flinders University campuses, changes perceptions and fosters a shared understanding as learning language becomes part of their own narratives. Understanding the meaning of language and showing respect by using language with careful attention to how it is used moves its use beyond tokenism.

4. Healing Country

Country is in a state which needs to be healed and rehabilitated in site-specific ways. The effects of colonisation, industrial development and population growth means Country needs to be healed using traditional Aboriginal practices and philosophies. Ancient Aboriginal land management and bush regeneration practices, sustainability protocols and cultural lore are all underpinned by caring for Country principles that are key to resolving environmental issues prevalent today.

Country is connected by a continuous, everchanging web of ecosystems that all give life to one another. All people that live on Country have a responsibility to care for Country and heal Country. Healing Country must be a holistic approach, and inclusive of all Country and all people who are connected to the area.



Relationship with community principles

Principles for action:

- Create culturally safe places.
- Utilise procurement to support local Aboriginal businesses across the project's lifetime.
- Commence a project by critically considering its impact on the locally connected Aboriginal community.
- Provide resources to Aboriginal people on campus and the locally connected Aboriginal community to be supported in their interactions with Flinders University.

Attendees at workshops talked about the opportunity for collaboration between local communities and Flinders University in a broad sense. In discussing Flinders University, they recognised that there are many existing and potential touch points that people can have with it. As an institution in their local areas, it has the potential to support the locally connected Aboriginal community. One way they looked at this was through creating a culturally safe and welcoming space.

While the 'Local to Place' theme previously notes how cultural safety can be achieved in projects through art, architecture, language and landscaping, it is also important for those who work or study on campus to have ongoing support. For students, cultural safety can be achieved by having Aboriginal staff and an Elder on Campus they can easily speak to and who can provide ongoing support. This can be a significant source of support for them when they are away from their Country for an extended period for the first time. The locally connected Aboriginal community people can also liaise with Aboriginal staff members, knowing that they will be understood.

Another way of making campuses culturally safe is through cultural awareness training for all staff on an ongoing basis. Cultural awareness training should not be an isolated session but an ongoing process for staff to deepen their cultural understanding and be aware of new protocols put in place by community.

Flinders University's new Health and Medical Research Building is sited in the landscape with facades facing towards significant Kaura sites and uses a colour palette internally that reflects the Rainbow Sands narrative, generously shared by Uncle Lewis Yarlupurka O' Brien, Senior Kurna Elder on Campus.



Finally, when thinking about projects as long-term changes to a campus environment, stakeholders spoke about employing local Aboriginal businesses. The businesses can be involved in the initial phases of the project as service providers who work on design and implementation. There is also the opportunity for them to continue their involvement with the project through ongoing maintenance and land management.

5. Truth Telling

All communities spoke of the importance of truth-telling. Truth-telling is a process of reflecting the past in ways that foreground Aboriginal perspectives and experiences. It is acknowledging the trauma of dispossession and the strength and resilience of Aboriginal people in withstanding efforts to disconnect them from their Country and each other.

Truth-telling is showcasing the richness of Country when it is managed and cared for. It is also about pride for young people, deepening opportunities for people to connect and reconnect with culture, changing attitudes to move forward in reconciliation and celebrating that this will always be Aboriginal Country.



Truth telling principles

Principles for action:

- Engage in authentic truth-telling in all future projects.
- Work with Traditional Custodians to develop narratives of place that include their perspective of dispossession in addition to instances of resistance and resilience.

Truth-telling as a reflection upon and expression of a place's history was discussed at all workshops as a principle that needs to be embedded in all future projects. This involves examining existing narratives, looking at their bias and presenting a more accurate representation of the past. Project design should acknowledge the history of trauma and dispossession and the devastating impact of colonialism on Aboriginal people and their cultures. Dispossession from Country and forced removal of children has disconnected people from their identities and made Aboriginal people feel less than or unwilling to identify with their heritage. This history is a factor that helps to explain the current distributions of Aboriginal communities in South Australia.

Truth-telling that recognises this history and actively addresses its legacies is needed before people can heal. Trauma, however, should not define the history presented. The Aboriginal history of South Australia is one of strong cultures; survival and a tradition of resilience continues through the work of the community. Truth-telling does not need to be confined to the physical campuses. Stakeholders spoke about engaging in truth-telling initiatives on the Flinders University website.



Flinders University acknowledges the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the lands on which its campuses are located, these are the Traditional Lands of the Arrernte, Dagoman, First Nations of the Southeast, First Peoples of the River Murray and Mallee region, Jawoyn, Kurna, Larrakia, Ngadjuri, Ngarrindjeri, Ramindjeri, Warumungu, Wardaman and Yolngu people. We honour their Elders and Custodians past, present and emerging.

We also acknowledge and pay respect to the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander nations from which our students, staff and community are from.

Flinders University uses the term 'Indigenous' when referring to programs and strategies and 'Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander' when referring to peoples.

Contact us

Properties, Facilities and Development
pfd@flinders.edu.au
8201 2733

