



WALK TOGETHER:
DESIGN GUIDED BY COUNTRY

Guidance Note

Building Relationships

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ISSUE NO.1

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Ngad'jon-ji - Curtain Fig.
Photograph by Shaneen Fantin



Building genuine, trusting relationships with First Nations Traditional Owners, Custodians, Knowledge Holders and community members, who are key stakeholders who mediate access to Country, is central to any architectural or design project. When these relationships are co-led by First Nations Peoples, privileging cultural authority, knowledge and leadership, they create space for design processes guided by Country, custodians and community to advance steps toward reconciliation.

This guide explains why respectful and inclusive relationships are essential and offers practical advice for designers and students on collaborating with First Nations Peoples and organisations. It highlights how these relationships may differ from engagement within mainstream systems and contexts for responsive approaches.

Who is this for?



This Guidance Note is authored to support architects, industry colleagues, their clients, and students.



First Nations Peoples have diverse cultures and kinship systems that ground individuals and communities with Country, place and stories. Before colonisation, over 250 different language groups occupied and thrived on this continent, each with their own relationships to Country and kin. Many First Nations worldviews hold relational ways of being, which can differ from western practices, that can be more siloed and individually driven. These relational frameworks extend to non-human aspects of Country (plants, animals, earth, waters, skies) where obligations and responsibilities are understood equivalent to caring for family—defined as caring for Country. Western architectural approaches separated people, place, knowledge and events, into discrete categories, disciplines and processes. Whereas many First Nations Peoples have different ways of seeing, knowing and practising based on deep time lived experiences and relationships between people, place, knowledge, events and processes. More responsive architectural processes co-designed with First Nations Peoples are effective if grounded in their relational understandings of people, culture, place and Country.

“Country taught me a lesson about relationality; you cannot demand a relationship, nor give it a deadline.”
(Tynan 2021:599)



The ongoing impacts of colonisation continue to shape relationships between First Nations Peoples, governments, institutions, and businesses in Australia. Across states and territories, First Nations communities hold memories and experiences of land dispossession, frontier violence, forced child removal, and segregationist policies under legislation such as the Aborigines Protection Acts. These histories disrupted cultural, family and Country-based connections including for members of the Stolen and Hidden Generations.

As a result, building relationships with First Nations Peoples requires time, deep listening, sharing, truth-telling and recognition of intergenerational trauma and distrust created through these ongoing practices and policies. For the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP), Truth-telling is an important part of relationship building, enabling architectural and design processes to acknowledge historical and ongoing injustices while creating more respectful and accountable engagement with First Nations Peoples.



Weaving by Danièle Hromek.

WHY SHOULD WE BUILD MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS?

Building respectful and productive relationships with First Nations Peoples is essential to culturally responsive architectural practice. Governmental policies, design guides and frameworks and many publicly funded projects increasingly require meaningful engagement, participation and economic inclusion of First Nations Peoples throughout project delivery.

Through leadership, collaboration and partnership, practicing with Country can address injustices and empower First Nations Peoples. Culturally safe engagement, shared decision making, and trusting relationships support reconciliation, respectful design and alignments with innovative industry practices.

For architects, strong relationships support more informed decision-making, culturally appropriate co-design processes, and better project outcomes that elevate Indigenous knowledge systems. They also align with the *National Competency Standards for Architects* (2021), including competencies relating to culturally responsive engagement, embedding First Nations knowledges into design and maintaining respectful engagement throughout all stages of a project.

When relationships are poorly managed or treated as transactional, projects risk excluding First Nations perspectives, damaging trust and overlooking cultural responsibilities connected to people and place. In contrast respectful partnerships can strengthen project outcomes by bringing deeper understandings of community, Country, place, ecology, culture and long-term care for these in the built environment for better architectural practice.

Respectful, well-managed relationships create opportunities for Truth telling and sector-informing empowerment, strengthening Country, caring for significant places, community synergies and the wellbeing of all.



Building relationships with First Nations Peoples is an important part of contemporary architectural practice and creates opportunities for deeper learning, stronger partnerships and more meaningful design outcomes. For non-Indigenous architectural designers and students beginning this journey, relationships are built over time through humility, respect and patience.

Making a start can be a rewarding learning process to recalibrate worldviews around honesty and care to enact meaningful, culturally grounded engagement practices across different scales of built environment projects. Approaching engagement with openness, listening carefully, and showing genuine care for the communities you work with helps create trust and lays the foundation for respectful and collaborative relationships. What follows is a selection of topics to support those embarking on this journey to build relationships. Critical to meaningful engagement is the understanding that each community has different needs, challenges and aspirations. As such engagements need to be approached in relation to not only the needs of the project, but those of the different communities.



1

DEVELOPING
SELF-AWARENESS OF
YOUR OWN CULTURAL
POSITION AND HISTORY

Before working in any cross-cultural setting it is important to reflect on your own cultural background, experiences, family history and ways of understanding the world. For architects and designers this includes recognising how education, upbringing, professional training and social history shape design thinking, communication and decision-making. In Australia, this reflection is particularly important when working with First Nations Peoples because architectural practice operates within the ongoing historical and cultural impacts of historical and government acts and policies. Understanding your own cultural position can help build greater self-awareness, strengthen relationships and support more respectful and responsive engagement with First Nations communities and people.

2

BUILDING CULTURAL
COMPETENCY THROUGH
ONGOING LEARNING

Developing cultural competency is an ongoing part of professional architectural practice and should create capabilities to relieve First Nations Peoples or communities as the sole providers of education. Many First Nations individuals and organisations already carry significant cultural, community and consultation responsibilities, particularly in government, planning and development processes.

For architects and designers, building cultural competency includes understanding key histories, policies and events that continue to shape relationships with Country, communities and institutions in Australia. This may include learning about the Frontier Wars, Aboriginal protection and segregation policies, the Stolen Generations, the 1967 Referendum, land rights and Native Title and the histories of Traditional Custodians of places where you live and work. Understanding these histories supports preliminary understandings of contemporary engagement, cultural protocols and ongoing discussions about place attachments, Country, sovereignty and self-determination.

There are many resources available through books, documentaries, films, online platforms and professional guidance documents that can support ongoing learning. The Australian Wars (SBS on demand, 2022) is a useful starting point to contextualise architecture and design resources such as the Australian Institute of Architects *First Nations Resource Hub* (2025), the NSW Government *Connecting with Country Framework* (2023), and the *Victorian Indigenous Design Charter* (2018), provide important guidance and considerations for the application of culturally responsive practices.

HOW TO CREATE TRUSTING AND MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS?



3

PREPARING FOR INITIAL ENGAGEMENT

Building strong relationships with First Nations Peoples takes time, preparation and genuine engagement. While there is not a single approach that applies to every context, community or project, proactive, thoughtful preparation before a first meeting can help create respectful and productive relationships from the outset.

PREPARE BEFORE YOU ENGAGE

- Before meeting with a First Nations organisation, community or individual:
 - Learn about the Traditional Custodians of the place where you are working.
 - Understand the role, history and priorities of the organisation or people you are meeting with.
 - Identify whether there are cultural protocols or preferred modes of engagement.
 - Clarify the purpose of the engagement and who should be involved.
 - Create an engagement plan. An engagement plan usually describes the project, context, why, how, when and with whom, you plan to engage. It will also prompt planning around communication resources, materials, styles and managing change during the engagement process
 - Undertaking preparation helps avoid placing unnecessary pressure on First Nations People to provide introductory cultural education during project discussions.
- Understanding different modes of engagement, for instance, the difference between a meeting and a Yarn:
 - A meeting and a yarn have different purposes and expectations. Meetings are often agenda driven, structured and time bound.
 - Yarning is a relationship-based exchange grounded in listening, story-sharing and trust-building.
 - In practice, engagement processes may move between both approaches.

For architects and designers, it is important to allow time for relationships, context, connections and discussion, rather than focussing only on the project outcomes or information gathering.

CREATE COMFORTABLE SPACES THAT ARE CULTURALLY SAFE

- Where, how often and how engagement occurs matters:
 - Ask people where they would feel comfortable meeting rather than assuming an office or workplace is appropriate.
 - Some people may prefer community-controlled spaces, outdoor settings, on Country or removed from built environments.

It is also important to recognise that First Nations People may hold multiple cultural, professional and community responsibilities. Allow flexibility in scheduling, participation and discussion.

LISTEN CAREFULLY AND COMMUNICATE CLEARLY

Respectful engagement begins with listening. Allow time for pauses, reflection and broader discussions without rushing conversations or interrupting. Speak clearly and directly without jargon or overly formal language.

Communications styles vary between communities, regions and individuals. In some contexts, such as remote or very remote communities, English may be a second, third or fourth language, and different forms of body language, silence and non-verbal communication may be important parts of interaction and respect.

ALLOW RELATIONSHIPS TO DEVELOP OVER TIME

Expect trust to establish over multiple meetings. Strong relationships are built through ongoing communication, consistency and follow-through over the life of a project. Approaching engagement with patience, openness and flexibility creates stronger foundations for collaboration and co-design.

HOW TO CREATE TRUSTING AND MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS?

4

REDUCING ENGAGEMENT BURDEN AND BUILDING RESPECTFUL PROCESSES

Effective engagement with First Nations Peoples requires preparation, respect for community priorities, and an understanding that many individuals and organisations already carry significant cultural, professional and community responsibilities. Poorly planned engagement processes can unintentionally create additional pressure through excessive meetings, unrealistic timeframes, repeated requests for information, or consultation that lacks clear purpose or outcomes.

Respectful engagement processes means preparation and openness to co-designing objectives before meetings, valuing people's time and expertise, and ensuring engagement processes are purposeful and well-coordinated. This can include requests for cultural information that may be sensitive or not appropriate to share. It is also important to recognise that communities operate within their own cultural, governance and decision-making structures, which may require different timelines and approaches to those commonly used in industry and government projects. Architects and designers should ensure engagement processes are purposeful, coordinated and mindful of people's time, knowledge and responsibilities.

5

MANAGING SHORT-TERM ENGAGEMENT AND PROJECT TIMELINES

Short term projects often involve relationships that are necessarily brief, particularly where there is no existing connection between architects and designers and the First Nations communities, user groups or clients. In these contexts, there may be limited time to build trust, understand local priorities fully, or develop the depth of relationship that supports open, culturally grounded collaboration. As a result, engagement may focus on the immediate project needs, rather than the broader opportunities that can emerge through long-term partnership.

While short-term engagement is sometimes unavoidable, it should still be approached respectfully, transparently and with realistic expectations about what can be achieved within project timeframes. Not all knowledge, perspectives or cultural information may be appropriate or possible to share within a limited engagement process, particularly when trust and relationships are still developing.

Short-term projects are often more effective when supported by clear and culturally appropriate engagement structures. Establishing a paid First Nations reference group, advisory committee or working group can help provide guidance, support decision-making, and create agreed processes

for how cultural knowledge and feedback will be shared. Compensating participants for their time and expertise recognises the value of their contribution and helps support more equitable engagement practices.

Even where relationships are project specific rather than ongoing, well-prepared and culturally responsive engagement processes can help create respectful collaborations and stronger foundations for future relationships.

6

WORKING WITH FIRST NATIONS ARCHITECTS, DESIGNERS AND SPECIALISTS

Partnering with First Nations architects, designers, engagement specialists and cultural advisors can strengthen architectural processes by bringing cultural knowledge, local relationships and community perspectives into projects from the outset. These collaborations can help guide engagement processes, identify appropriate cultural protocols, support communication with communities, and contribute to more culturally responsive design outcomes. Existing relationships and trusted introductions can assist engagement processes and help establish respectful working relationships within communities.

These can become valuable opportunities for meaningful and respectful collaborations that elevates First Nations professional and community capacity building in the industry. Familiarities with local protocols and connections with place benefit from local knowledge and cultural familiarity to drive appropriate design and detailed responses. Seeking advice from local First Nations organisations or cultural guides can support understanding about local protocols ensures equity in participation and acknowledgement for expertise and knowledge that will live in the designed infrastructure after the completion of the project.

Where possible engage First Nations practitioners early in the project rather than after key decisions have already been made. Early collaboration creates greater opportunity for meaningful input into project visioning, briefing, engagement and design development. It also recognises the contributions of First Nations leadership and economic participation within the design industry.

It is important that First Nations practitioners and specialists are properly recognised and remunerated for their expertise, cultural knowledge and time. Their roles may extend beyond conventional consultancy services and can include responsibilities to community, values about Country and cultural governance processes.

HOW TO CREATE TRUSTING AND MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS?

7

RESPECTFUL ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES

Building relationships with First Nations Peoples is an ongoing learning process. Respectful engagement is strengthened through preparation, listening, cultural awareness and professional humility. The following practices can help support positive productive relationships:

- Check and collaborate with First Nations leaders and Knowledge Holders that the appropriate people are present before beginning meetings or discussions, and allow flexibility where cultural or community priorities require changes to timing or process.
- Approach Acknowledgements and Welcomes to Country respectfully and follow local guidance about who should provide them (reference the *Protocols for Welcomes to Country and Acknowledging Country* for further guidance).
- Prioritising listening and dialogue over directing conversations or presenting predetermined outcomes.
- Be mindful of different communication styles, including pauses, silence and group discussion processes.
- Consider whether discussions involving gender-specific cultural matters are more appropriate in smaller groups or separate conversations.
- Respect cultural authority and Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP). Cultural knowledge, stories, imagery, language and design information should only be shared, recorded or incorporated into projects with appropriate permissions and authority.
- Treat each project and community relationship as unique. Protocols, priorities and cultural permissions may differ between places, organisations and projects through managed processes that are free, prior and informed with consent.
- Seek clarification of permissions on how information from meeting, yarns and engagement activities can be shared, documented and used within project processes.
- Recognise that trust develops over time through consistency, accountability and respectful conduct.
- Recognise that mistakes can occur through cultural misunderstandings and can contribute to learning outcomes for a project when respectfully rectified or guidance is sought to appropriately respond to situations.
- Advocate for First Nations leadership and participation in projects, procurement processes and community engagement wherever possible.
- Continue building relationships beyond individual projects demonstrates ongoing respect, reciprocity and genuine interest in First Nations communities, events and initiatives.



Walking Country
Photograph by Djinjama.



ARCHITECT
People Oriented Design
with Indij Design

LANDSCAPE DESIGN
Abriculture with LA3

PHOTOGRAPHER
Michael Marzik

AWARD
Australian Institute of
Architects. 2019 Regional
Project of the Year,
Far North Queensland

Synapse Community Living Initiative

Synapse Community Living Initiative in Gimuy was developed with the client Synapse, in collaboration with People Oriented Design, Indij Design, Abriculture, LA3 and with guidance from the traditional owners of the region. The master planning, buildings and landscape design were created through extensive engagement, leadership and co-design with Traditional Owners and First Nations design specialists that spanned more than eight years. The buildings were specifically designed to be non-institutional, comforting and culturally appropriate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with complex disabilities. The form of the individual units has references to traditional rainforest dwellings and the roof of the main facility twists slightly like a palm frond base or water carrying vessel. The interior design offers four colour pallets palettes guided by different landscapes and the landscape design retained mature trees and reinstated endemic plants from the region to provide signal and resource plant opportunities for residents.

RELATED PAPERS ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS AND PROJECT PROCESS

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Images: Synapse Community Living Initiative.
Michael Marzik Photography.





Yidinji - Aristolochia acuminata with spider.
Photograph by Shaneen Fantin.

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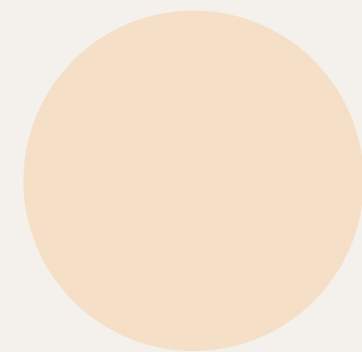
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FURTHER RESOURCES

<https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/white-australia-policy>

<https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/aborigines-protection-act>

<https://www.reconciliation.org.au/our-work/truth-telling/>



Footprints on Country.
Photograph by Djinjama.

