



Resource

First Nations Terminology

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Kangaroo Grass (Themeda triandra). Photograph by Carlos Porras.



Words are powerful, so using the right language is always important. It becomes critical when working with those whose voices have been suppressed and their ways of expressing denigrated. For First Nations Peoples, whose languages were forcibly removed, using the right words, language, phrases and terminology is essential.

This list has been collated to support architects to use language correctly when it comes to First Nations Peoples, and to Country. These terms and definitions are not specific to architecture or the built environment, however they support the industry's cultural education.



ABORIGINAL AND/OR
TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER

A person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies themselves as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and is accepted as such by the community in which they live.

Aboriginal refers to mainland First Nations Peoples. **Torres Strait Islander** refers to people Indigenous to the Torres Strait Islands.

As is the case with all other proper nouns—such as English or Australian—all references to Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander People (or whichever term is used) should be capitalised.

When using the terms Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, it must be followed by a word such as “person”, “peoples”, “groups”, “nation”.

ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT
ISLANDER LANGUAGES

Across the continent and islands now known as Australia there are at least 250 distinct languages, and each language may have several dialects. Before invasion, First Nations Peoples could often speak several languages of neighbouring groups as well as their own.

Like many First Nations words, there are many ways of spelling words including the names for communities and places. **First Nations languages** are oral languages so there is often no one accepted way of spelling words. Likewise, some individuals have preferences for specific terms, words or spellings.

It is always best practice to ask someone how they prefer to identify and their preferences for terms or spellings.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT
OF COUNTRY

An Acknowledgement of Country refers to the practice of showing respect to the Traditional Custodians of place and their ongoing connection and sovereignty over land. It differs from a **Welcome to Country** (see definition below), which is given by Traditional Custodians to welcome others to Country.

ANANGU
GOORI
KOORI
KOORIE
MER ISLAND PEOPLES
MURRAY ISLAND PEOPLES
MURRI
NGARRINDJERI
NYOONGAH
NUNGA
PALAWA
TORRES STRAIT ISLAND PEOPLES
YOLNGU

These are terms from different First Nations languages used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to refer to themselves and identify their regions.

- Anangu— Central Australia
- Goori— north coast NSW
- Koori— NSW
- Koorie— Victoria
- Mer Island Peoples— Mer Island
- Murray Island Peoples— Murray Island
- Murri— Queensland, north-west NSW
- Ngarrindjeri— South Australia, River Murray, Lakes, Coorong People
- Nyoongah— Western Australia
- Nunga— Adelaide, South Australia
- Palawa— Tasmania
- Torres Strait Island Peoples— Torres Strait
- Yolngu— Arnhem Land

It is a name adopted in relation to geography, identity and heritage, and is often their preferred identifying name. It is always best practice to ask how someone prefers to be identified.

ANCESTOR

Ancestors are those with familial heritage who Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples descend from.

ASSIMILATION

Assimilation involves the colonised being forced to conform to the cultures and traditions of the colonisers.

CARE FOR COUNTRY
CARING FOR COUNTRY

1—National Standard of Competency for Architects – Explanatory Notes and Definitions. 2021. p.11.

Caring for Country refers to the reciprocal obligations Indigenous People have to cultural landscapes to ensure balance and continuity. Based on traditional practices, it includes landscape management techniques such as ceremony, knowledge sharing, periodic burning practices (often known as cultural fire or cultural burning), management of water, bush regeneration, bush harvesting or hunting, invasive species control, biodiversity management, and art making, management and maintenance of art sites. Given cultural practices adapt to new technologies and contemporary limitations, caring for Country has many contemporary iterations where Traditional Custodians continue to express and perform their cultural obligations to care. To care for Country is to recognise that the different ecosystems across the continent require different practices to enable sustainable living.

Indigenous Peoples’ aspirations to care for Country respond to the knowledge and responsibility entrusted to them, which provides a deep sense of belonging, purpose, and identity.¹

COLONISATION

The process of colonisation involves one nation or territory taking control over another either through force or acquisition. Colonisation is an ongoing experience for Indigenous Peoples.

COMMUNITY

A community relates to a geographically located group of people, it may involve both Traditional Owners and those who now live in an area due to colonial movements. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People might belong to a number of communities, for instance, the community of their traditional Country groupings, as well as the community in which they now live.

COUNTRY

2—National Standard of Competency for Architects – Explanatory Notes and Definitions. 2021. p.11.

Country is broadly understood as a holistic worldview that incorporates humans, non-human and all the complex systems that connect them. Country relates to Indigenous Peoples’ cultural groups and the places to which they belong. It is understood in cultural, spiritual, and tangible ways. An understanding of Country includes intangible ideas about place, Law, lore, language, customs, spirit, cultural practice, identity, and kin. It is very important to recognise that Indigenous Peoples understanding of Country differs between groups, individuals, and contexts.²

CULTURE
HERITAGE
CULTURAL HERITAGE

3—UNESCO Institute for Statistics.
2009. UNESCO Framework for Cultural
Statistics.

Culture refers to the complete ways of living built up, practised, and refined by people and communicated from generation to the next.

Heritage is that which comes or belongs to one by reason of birth.

Cultural heritage is the legacy of tangible physical artefacts and intangible aspects of a group or society. These are inherited from past generations, maintained in the present and bestowed for the benefit of future generations. **Tangible heritage** includes buildings and historic places, monuments, artefacts, etc, which are considered worthy of preservation for the future. Tangible cultural heritage has a physical presence. **Intangible heritage** includes traditions or living expressions inherited from ancestors and passed on to descendants, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts, food and medicine heritage, designs and digital heritage. Intangible cultural heritage is commonly defined as not having a physical presence.³

CULTURAL AUTHORITY

First Nations groups with origins from a particular tract of Country may hold **cultural authority** for their Country, and receive recognition and respect for their knowledge. Those who hold cultural authority are not necessarily Elders, rather it is related to those who hold Law and know lore. They may hold knowledge about particular topics, places, histories, events, etc, and as such they are responsible for decision making relating to those topics, places, events, etc. Only those with cultural authority can speak for Country.

CULTURAL COMPETENCE

Cultural competence is the values, practices, and behavioural skills that enable participation in an ethical and effective way across cultures. Cultural competence ensures cultural safety for all involved.

CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE

The shared values, norms, worldviews, symbols, and understandings of reality that a group of people believe and think. These differ from culture to culture and are an aspect of the shared knowledge within the culture. Indigenous Peoples’ cultural knowledge has accumulated via long and sustained contact with specific areas, ecosystems, and resources. This is reflected in narratives, languages, values, beliefs, customs, Laws, and social organisation. Unlike cultures that use written word, Indigenous Peoples’ cultural knowledge is often oral. As such, Indigenous cultural knowledge responds to change, absorbing new information and adapting, and therefore is not static.

CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

4—Mommott,P. 2025. The Philosophy of Designing on Country. Paper prepared for the Ngarrngga Project of the University of Melbourne led by Prof M. Langton. Aboriginal Environments Research Collaborative, University of Queensland, St Lucia. pp.10-11.

A **cultural landscape** is defined as:

Sacred sites are not the only types of places to be found in estates and on Country. Most of the continent displayed the following categories of places:- campsites, freshwater sources, public dancing grounds, ceremonial grounds (often gender restricted), body disposal sites, resource places with plants or animal sought for food or materials, healing places, birthing places (gender restricted), pathways, dispute resolution grounds, signalling sites. Together the dispersal of these types of places made up a ‘cultural landscape’ with a particular character shaped by the ecosystems, belief systems and economic functions.⁴

Each state and territory have their own Cultural Heritage legislation which provides terms and definitions for Country, places and heritage.

Cultural landscapes are not restricted to traditional landscapes; urban places and city environments can have contemporary cultural landscapes.

CULTURAL LOAD

A **cultural load** is the additional, often invisible, unrecognised, and unremunerated workload carried by First Nations Peoples in workplaces.

CULTURAL PRACTICE

Any practice that Indigenous Peoples carry out that connects them to their culture, Country and Dreaming is a **cultural practice**. This may be weaving, carving, cultural burning or fishing, and cultural practitioners might be storytellers or musicians or artists. A cultural practice is not restricted to ‘traditional’ practices.

CULTURAL PROTOCOLS

Cultural protocols are ethical principles and codes of behaviour of a specific cultural group. Each First Nations group have their own cultural protocols that must be understood independently.

CULTURAL SAFETY

Cultural safety creates an environment that is safe for all people, in which there are no challenges or denial of others’ identities. Actions that create culturally unsafe environments include demeaning or disempowering others, and can originate from individual positions or systemic policies, procedures, or practices. Cultural safety requires self-awareness of one’s own values, beliefs, perspectives, and attitudes that may intentionally or unintentionally harm others.⁵

5—Williams, R. 1999. Cultural safety - what does it mean for our work practice? Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health 23, no. 2.

DECOLONISATION
UNCOLONISATION

6—Rosa, T. 2020. Decolonization, A Guidebook For Settlers Living On Stolen Land. 27 December. <https://tresrosa.medium.com/decolonization-a-guidebook-for-settlers-living-on-stolen-land-57d4e4c04bbb>.

Decolonisation is the unsettling process of repatriation of Indigenous Peoples’ lands, lives, and rights in which the colonised are freed from colonial control and the colonisers return to their own lands. As this has not occurred in the continent now known as Australia we are still being colonised and are not in a post-colonial state. As such, decolonisation in the continent now called Australia is the restoration of cultural practices, thinking, beliefs and values that were taken away or abandoned (during the period since colonisation) but are relevant and/or necessary for survival and wellbeing. It is the birth and use of new ideas, thinking, technologies and lifestyles that contribute to the advancement and empowerment of Indigenous Peoples.

Uncolonisation is the work non-Indigenous people can do to distance and detach from colonial ways of thinking, relating and being on Country. Uncolonising reduces the resistance of non-Indigenous people to decolonisation but does not change the circumstances of Indigenous Peoples or the land. Uncolonising gives space to the decolonisation efforts being led by Indigenous Peoples.⁶

DREAMING

The **Dreaming** refers the continuous actions of creation. An adopted English word to describe the formation of the world and human beings, it is often referred to in relation to landscapes, spiritual matters and creation stories, and refers to both past and present as a dynamic transmission that occurs between physical, sacred and human worlds. With the Dreaming being understood as both past and present, it is the source of Indigenous Peoples’ capacity to maintain adaptivity, innovation and resourcefulness in relation to their culture. The Dreaming is relevant for all places and for all times, and has different meanings for the different Indigenous groups across the continent.

ELDER

Elders are the custodians of knowledge who have been chosen communities for their services and role to community in the perpetuation of Indigenous cultures and knowledges. They are highly respected individuals who play a large role in the health and leadership of community.

Elders may be referred to as Aunty or Uncle as a mark of respect. It is appropriate to ask an Elder how they preferred to be addressed.

ENGAGEMENT
MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT

7—National Standard of Competency for Architects – Explanatory Notes and Definitions. 2021. p.12.

FIRST NATIONS
FIRST PEOPLES
FIRST NATIONS PEOPLES

Engagement processes are the processes of working in a collaborative way with groups of people affected by or affiliated to a project or place. Engagement seeks to work with stakeholders to achieve equitable decision-making, sustainable outcomes, and enduring relationships. Engagement is an ongoing undertaking and assumes that key stakeholders are included in a project from inception to completion.

A **meaningful engagement process** is one that includes active listening, taking account of stakeholders’ perspectives, and embedding those in outcomes.⁷

First Nations Peoples includes both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples while also associating with global First Nations Peoples. First Peoples relates to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples’ relationships with the land as the first inhabitants of the land.

INDIGENOUS

Indigenous refers to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. There are some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples who do not like the word Indigenous as historically it associated people with flora and fauna and there have been numerous definitions for who is Indigenous, however in contemporary contexts it is used more frequently.

Indigenous, when used to describe peoples, should always be capitalised. Indigenous must be followed by a word such as “person”, “peoples”, “groups”, “nation”.

INVASION

It is important to emphatically reject the softening of language when referring to British **invasion** and forcible occupation of land, and ongoing processes of colonisation. The propensity for these processes to be referred to as ‘arrived’ and ‘settled’ denies Indigenous histories and perpetuates violent myths of *terra nullius* and the trauma this continues to inflict on our communities.

KIN
KINSHIP

Kinship is a complex system of organising society that defines relationships, identity and responsibility to Country. Kinship is a way of being, it provides belonging and is a way of structuring a community. Kinship is not only blood relatives; it includes everyone in the community and even non-humans.

KNOWLEDGE HOLDERS

Knowledge Holders are respected people in their community who have learned and are learning traditional cultural knowledge, including performing and teaching dance, art, and ceremony. They may also hold knowledge about place, the environment, heritage, flora and fauna, and how to care for it, and may include contemporary technical topics.

LAND RIGHTS
NATIVE TITLE

The Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act⁸ was passed by the federal parliament in 1976. It was the first legislation that enabled First Nations Peoples to claim land rights for Country where traditional ownership could be proven. **Land rights** schemes now exist in the Northern Territory, New South Wales, Queensland including the Torres Strait Islands, Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania. The contents of the legislation will vary across different states and territories.

Native Title is the official recognition under federal Australian law of the rights and interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in relation to land and water. Passed in 1993, Native Title laws legally reverse the notion of *terra nullius*.

8—Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act. 1976. Commonwealth Government.

LATERAL VIOLENCE

Refers to when a minority group turns against members within their own group. **Lateral violence** occurs when people who are powerless overtly or covertly turn against others in the same community. **Lateral violence** results from historical, social, and cultural dynamics that occasions behaviours such as gossip, bullying, shaming, exclusion, deidentification of Indigeneity, jealousy, and fighting. **Lateral violence** creates a culturally unsafe environment.

LAW, LAW AND LORE

There are differences between ‘Law’ (capital L), ‘law’ (small l) and ‘lore’. **Law** (with a capital) refers to the laws, customs and protocols of the land set out in the Dreaming as a set of rules or guidelines for every entity of/entity inhabiting that Country to follow. Laws vary from community to community, and cannot be changed by people as Law has been passed through the land and ancestors from the time Country came into being, and is related to Indigenous peoples’ identities and spiritualities, as well as being principles by which they live. The (small l) **laws** are those laws imposed on the land and the First Peoples by those who came from Europe; these laws can be changed by the stroke of a pen. **Lore** is used when referring to knowledge or tradition passed from generation to generation through story, song and other performative expressions.

MOB

Mob is used by First Nations Peoples to identify the clan, language or nations groups with whom they identify.

NATIONS, LANGUAGE GROUPS, CLANS, AND TRIBES

These are terms that have been adopted to describe the social organisation of Aboriginal groups. **Nations** generally refers to a group of people connected by lands and language. **Language groups** are a group of people who all speak the same language. **Clans** or **tribes** describe the smaller sub-groups within a nation or language group. For example, the Budawang clan of the Dhurga language group of the Yuin nation.

ON COUNTRY
WITHIN COUNTRY

We are always on Country or within Country because wherever we are is Country that has belonging for a group of people who care, maintain and design that land. Whenever “on Country” or “within Country” there are protocols for behaviour which are determined by the Laws of that land.

PLACE

Place is an area on land or waters that is significant to the cultural heritage of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Peoples from a particular group or community.

9—The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act. 1984. Commonwealth Government.

Federal, state and territory laws enable the protection and preservation of places, areas and objects of particular significance.⁹

PROTOCOLS

Protocols are guidelines of appropriate behaviour assigned by each community to be used when interacting with Indigenous knowledges, peoples, lands or communities. There are no set protocols or processes for all Indigenous Peoples or communities. They also may change or be fluid, so it is important to maintain genuine relationships to ensure correct responsiveness to protocols and ensure open communications with relevant peoples.

RACISM

Racism refers to the process by which systems and policies, actions and attitudes create inequitable opportunities and outcomes for people based on race. This originates with the belief that a particular race or ethnicity is inferior or superior to others. Racism may take the form of prejudice, discrimination, oppression, limitation of rights, or antagonism from an individual or institution.

RECIPROCITY
RECIPROCAL OBLIGATIONS

Reciprocity involves giving and receiving in equal measures. Reciprocity is part of the kinship system of caring for each other in a community.

Reciprocal obligations are held by First Nations Peoples in relation to Country to care for Country and places on Country. Just as people care for the land, so too does the land care for people.

Reciprocity in built environment projects requires placing equal value on Indigenous cultures, cultural heritage and knowledges to shape built environments and shared futures.

SELF DETERMINATION

10—The Mabo decision. 1992. Parliament of Australia. https://www.aph.gov.au/Visit_Parliament/Art/Stories_and_Histories/The_Mabo_decision.

Self-determination refers to Indigenous Peoples being able to make their own choices in relation to their social, cultural, and economic needs, and to live according to their own values and beliefs. Self-determination recognises that Indigenous Peoples are the first peoples as recognised by law in the Mabo judgement¹⁰, and the loss of self-determination through invasion is at the heart of current disadvantage. It is widely accepted that without self-determination it is not possible for Indigenous Peoples to fully overcome the legacy of colonisation and dispossession.

SONGLINES
MAPLINES
STORYLINES

Songlines are songs and stories in routes through the landscape as laid out by ancestral beings during the Dreaming as well as often being migratory routes of animals. The stories describe the landscape and events that happened during the Dreaming, can be songs as pneumatic devices. They are passed from Elder to Elder over thousands of years. Many of today's roads and highways are built over ancient songlines. Songlines have other names, such as **storylines** and **maplines**.

SOVEREIGNTY

Sovereignty refers to the authority of a state to govern itself or another state. Indigenous sovereignty has varied meanings that range from formulation of rights, to reverse continuing experiences of colonialism, as well as to carry local efforts at the redemption of ancestral lands, resources, self-governance and preservation of cultural knowledge and practices.

TOTEMS

Objects, plants or animals prescribed to people and the landscape as spiritual connection. **Totems** transfer obligations, roles and characteristics to each other.

TRADITIONAL CUSTODIANS
AND TRADITIONAL OWNERS

Country has always been shared and ownership of land has never been understood in the western sense of a single person or group owning areas of land; there may be a number of groups who have connections with, belonging to and cultural responsibilities towards a place.

A **Traditional Owner** is a First Nations person who is a member of a local descent group who have certain rights and responsibilities in relation to a tract of land or area of sea. Groups of Traditional Owners can bring a native title claim in court to have their interests and rights recognised.

A Traditional Custodian is defined under legal precedent following the Native Title Act 1993¹¹ means those relatives recognised as 'traditional' under section 223 of the Act being the child other than the parents, who, by force of the traditions, customs, and common law of the Tribe have the rights, duties, and responsibilities of assisting the parents in rearing the child and providing for its support. It should be noted that under the Native Title Act 1993 no definition of Traditional Custodian has been given, or in its interpretations. A Traditional Custodian may not have ownership rights, or conversely, their rights of custodianship may not apply to land but rather tangible items on the land.

Nowadays, the term **Traditional Custodians** is used to mean those custodians who are recognised as having connections with and knowledges of particular areas of land.

Traditional Custodians and Traditional Owners are the only people who can perform a Welcome to Country, everyone else should do an Acknowledgement of Country.

11— Native Title Act 1993. Commonwealth Government.

TRUTHTELLING

A process of retelling the true and full history as experienced by First Peoples since colonisation. **Truth-telling** is understood in the context of building a shared understanding of history and the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples with the objective of moving forward together.

VOUCHING

Vouching is using cultural guides or translators who are integrated in the community and can introduce in a culturally appropriate way. Vouching can help both ways—in confirming someone is who they say they are, and that they are of good character.

WELCOME TO COUNTRY

A **Welcome to Country** is a ceremony performed by Traditional Custodians or Traditional Owners in which they welcome visitors to the lands of their ancestors. A Welcome to Country can only be done by Traditional Custodians of the land you are currently on. A Welcome to Country is usually undertaken at the beginning of an event. It can take many forms and depends on the culture of the Traditional Custodians.

If no Traditional Custodian is available, the most senior cultural person in attendance may do an **Acknowledgement of Country** (see definition above) instead.

WORLDVIEWS

A **worldview** refers to the underlying philosophy of life or understanding of the world, cultural experiences and assumptions that position an individual or group. Indigenous People have an Indigenous worldview, whereas English speaking people are considered to have a Western worldview.

YARN
YARNING
YARNING CIRCLE

Yarning is a conversational process, a way of communicating and connecting and sharing through storytelling or narratives. It can be a way of making mutual communal decisions that includes a whole group. Yarning is less structured and less formal and is a means of providing a culturally safe environment for communications.

There are different types of **yarns** and each community and family may have their own protocols for yarning. It is important to ask if this is an appropriate methodology of communication for each circumstance.

Yarns may happen in a **Yarning Circle** format. A Yarning Circle provides equal footing for all involved, thereby reducing hierarchical methods of communication.

Yarning is a recognised research methodology in academic contexts.



Beach Birds Eye (*Alectryon coriaceus*). Photograph by Danièle Hromek.

