



WALK TOGETHER:
DESIGN GUIDED BY COUNTRY

Resource

Terms, Concepts and
Shared Understandings

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These architecture and built environment specific terms, concepts and terminologies have been collectively workshoped and authored by the First Nations Advisory Committee in combination with the cited references. They originate from built environment professionals who are First Nations and trusted allies.

*Smoking Ceremony, UNSW Alumni Park.
Guruwaal (2022).Photography by UNSW.*

COUNTRY

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

Country relates to First Nations Peoples’ cultural groups and the places to which they belong. It is understood in cultural, spiritual and tangible ways. Country is broadly understood as a holistic worldview that incorporates human, non-human and all the complex systems that connect them. 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 First Nations Peoples’ understanding of Country differs between groups, individuals and contexts.¹

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE

2—National Standard of Competency for Architects – Explanatory Notes and Definitions. 2021. Architects Accreditation Council of Australia. p.12.

Culturally responsive refers to being aware of one’s own cultural identity and worldview to enable respectful actions and thoughts towards others’ ideas, beliefs and values, irrespective of whether they differ from one’s own cultural position. Acting in a culturally responsive way requires a level of cultural competence and a recognition that there is no single way of being, acting and knowing. Cultural responsiveness moves towards enabling equity and inclusion.²

HEALTH AND WELLBEING OF COUNTRY

3—National Standard of Competency for Architects – Explanatory Notes and Definitions. 2021. Architects Accreditation Council of Australia. p.14.

The health and wellbeing of Country refers to the overall state of material and immaterial elements of Country being complete and stable. It is an absence of harm alongside continued care through stewardship of Country. It relies on not just one aspect of Country receiving considerations and repair, but all of Country holistically. Supporting health and wellbeing outcomes for Country involves enabling sustainable and ongoing care of Country activities and supporting and reinforcing First Nations Peoples’ relationships to environments through cultural, physical, spiritual, social and economic inclusion. Health and wellbeing outcomes are interdependent for First Nations Peoples and for Country.³

CONNECTING WITH COUNTRY / CONNECTION TO COUNTRY

4—Connecting with Country Framework. 2023. Government Architect NSW.

Country is at the heart of First Nations communities; a connection to Country provides a sense of belonging and identity for First Nations Peoples. Many First Nations Peoples say our connections to Country run far deeper and longer than our own lifetimes, and include cultural and ecological responses. The action of connecting with Country is a physical, sensorial, emotional, spiritual and psychological act that First Nations Peoples take as part of both their own health and wellbeing, but also their actions of caring for Country. NSW Government used the term ‘connecting with Country’ as the title of a framework—The *Connecting with Country Framework*.⁴ It is a document created by the NSW Government Architect as a guide to help architects respond to, protect and preserve First Nations communities, cultural Landscape and Country when planning, designing and delivering built environment projects. The Connecting with Country Framework is an invitation through design to local First Nations communities to understand what about Country is specific to this context that can be responded to in architectural outcomes.

COUNTRY CENTRED DESIGN

5—Harvard Business School. 2020. What is Human-centred Design? <https://online.hbs.edu/blog/post/what-is-human-centered-design>.
6—Interaction Design Foundation. n.d. What is Human-Centered Design (HCD)? <https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/topics/human-centered-design>.
7—Victorian Government. 2023. Introduction to human-centred design <https://www.vic.gov.au/introduction-human-centred-design>.

Country Centred Design is a design methodology of First Nations Peoples. Country Centred Design integrates relationships, as well as tangible and intangible aspects of Country, in design outcomes. Country Centred Design is a process that enables deep history understandings, care for Country, stewardship activities, kinship, culture and cultural practices, spiritual and Indigenous ways of knowing to be integrated into the design process. It is a means of ensuring that the design of the built environment happens with Country at the centre of the design, and in doing so, all decisions made in the design process are filtered through a consideration of Country. Country Centred Design stands as a counterpoint to human centred design. Human Centred Design is a design methodology that places humans at the centre of the design process. It focuses on humans first, involving them in all steps of the process. Human Centred Design works to solve problems for people, seeking to deeply understand the perspectives, needs, experiences and behaviours of humans and caters to their desires and challenges through design.^{5 6 7}

Designing with Country is integrating the process of design holistically with Country through genuine First Nations' design methodologies, processes and perspectives. To be able to Design with Country you must be of Country. Designing with Country must be First Nations led. It is an approach to design that centres Country informed by First Nations knowledge systems, cultures and ways of being. Designing with Country requires designs to originate and find inspiration from First Nations' design thinking and the connection to the story, spirit, Ancestral memory, ecology and energy of Country as understood by local communities.

While they may not have always used the term 'designing with Country', First Nations Peoples have always designed Country. Designing with Country does not prioritise non-Indigenous methods of design over thousands of generations of experience designing this continent. However, in this context and use of the term, it applies to contemporary built environment practices.

Designing with Country is more than just being a qualified First Nations designer. To ensure genuine Designing with Country, from before the brief has been written, First Nations leadership and design thinking must have been integrated—from authoring the brief, choosing a site, and developing a business case, all the way through the process of design and construction to the point of practical completion and beyond to consider ongoing relationships.

Designing with Country is a sensitive term that risks being commodified and colonised. FNAC recognises the Government Architect NSW 2020 discussion paper titled *Designing with Country*, and other organisations that use this term. The definition has been further developed to be a term specific to First Nations Peoples practising architecture and design with experience and capacity to influence the entirety of the design process and outcomes.

Non-Indigenous designers cannot Design with Country. They can be culturally responsive in design and undertake co-design, but they cannot fully connect with the foundational epistemological backgrounds, knowledges, or deep understandings of place. Designing with Country incorporates the cultural obligations First Nations designers have to Country and their communities. Non-Indigenous designers may be aware of these obligations, however they cannot be fully aware of the implications.

As such, non-Indigenous designers can design with *respect* for Country. Non-Indigenous architects and designers can use terms such as “Culturally Responsive” as noted in the National Standards of Competency, and “Connecting with Country” as required in NSW when responding to the Connecting with Country Framework.

CO-DESIGN

Co-design is an approach to design that uses participatory and creative methods to arrive at a design outcome. Co-design is a design principle or planning process. It is collaborative in development and in nature. Co-design is the active engagement of participants, end-users, and beneficiaries of intended programs. In First Nations contexts, co-design requires the close and ongoing involvement of communities in designing and carrying out design work that is both meaningful and engenders respect, empowerment, and ownership. With First Nations Peoples, co-design includes not only hearing the stories from Knowledge Holders, but also ensuring they are interpreted into the architectural response, preferably by a First Nations designer. Co-design in a First Nations sense brings Country into the conversation, as a core voice and force for the design.

Co-design requires time, patience, reciprocity, respect, listening, protocols, and ethics. It asks that the power in the design process is shifted to those whose voices are often unheard. This may require building everyone up so they belong, and time to reach common understanding, allowing iterations to occur over time. Co-design means mutual uncovering of story, lessons, sharing of ideas, emotions with design as the centrepiece of the conversation, but not always the driver. It is likely to require a non-linear process, reflection, and spiralling back on oneself so the story has time to unravel and reveal.^{8 9}

8—NSW Council of Social Service. 2017. Principles of co-design. <https://www.ncoss.org.au/sector-hub/sector-resources/principles-of-co-design/>.

9—Trischler, J., Dietrich, T. & Rundle-Thiele, S. 2019. Co-design: from expert-to user-driven ideas in public service design. Public Management Review. Issue 11.

Indigenous Design and Architecture are terms which were coined in the late 1990s to illustrate the emerging field of architects (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) working collaboratively with First Nations communities, clients and projects. In academic contexts Indigenous Design and Architecture was considered as created with and for Indigenous Peoples.^{10 11} The terminology is constantly evolving, and Indigenous Design and Architecture can be viewed as a collection of experiences, a creative practice and expression of First Nations cultures, rather than an accreditation or attribution. It is led by First Nations voices, and those with experience designing with First Nations Peoples. Indigenous Design and Architecture reflects the deep connection between First Nations communities and their Countries and cultures. Indigenous Design and Architecture acknowledges the cultural significance of designs created by First Nations Peoples, and recognises that design originates from their unique histories, cultures, places and environments. Indigenous Design and Architecture may include traditional materials, aesthetics, and methods of creation. As such it may integrate sustainability and innovation specific to caring for place.

10—Mommott, P et al 2022. Gunyah, Goondie + Wurley. The Aboriginal Architecture of Australia. Edition 2. Thames and Hudson. P304

11—Grant, E, Greenop, K, Refiti, A. Glenn, D. 2019. The Handbook of Contemporary Indigenous Architecture. Springer Publishing. P.1.

Design workshop with Elders for Guruwaal with Djinjama (2021). Photography by UNSW.





Advanced Manufacturing Readiness Facility (First Building in Bradfield).
Hassell (Architect), Djinjama (Cultural Design Lead), (2025).
Photography by Bradfield Development Authority.

