

# **Aboriginal Architecture**

## **Merging Concepts from Architecture and Aboriginal Studies**

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### **Abstract**

This paper adopts a cross-disciplinary research approach which merges concepts and knowledge from architecture and from Aboriginal studies to explore how the process of design can support the future social and cultural needs of Indigenous building users. Through case study analysis, the paper presents observations that assist in creating new practices, processes and knowledge in architecture. In addition, an important component of the paper is its conceptual or theoretical framing. In this paper, literature on Aboriginal architecture is critically interpreted from the point of view of the Indigenous Research Methodology; an approach which sets a strategic agenda for planning and implementing research in a clear and conscious attempt to reclaim control over Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Accordingly, this textual research uses, for the first time in the discipline of architecture, a “decolonising methodology” that acknowledges the research project’s post-colonial framework while actively considering the racial identities of Indigenous designers and building users.

***Key Words: Australian Aboriginal cultures, contemporary architectural productions***

## Introduction

While in the architecture discipline, new models for representing Aboriginal identity in the form of a building are being constantly developed, they are typically only tested or critiqued from an architectural perspective. Mathilde Lochert (1997, p. 8) argues that such works are examples of colonial discourse which creates and entrenches specific and constraining concepts of Aboriginal peoples, identities and cultures. Architectural and design discourse, and especially as it is represented in the media, tends to function from within such existing colonial frameworks; the same frameworks which shape contemporary community perceptions of Aboriginal peoples in Australian society.

This practice is problematic because mainstream media is responsible for perpetuating the colonial conceptual framework wherein representations have a tendency to simplify and romanticise ideas of “Aboriginality” and “authenticity” that are framed within readings of the historic past, the Dreaming or a connection to country. From the point of view of this colonial framework, Aboriginal cultures are fixed in an unchanging past and delineated by a singular set of values. Architectural design strategies that work within this fixed perspective attempt to recover the past through incorporating traditional Aboriginal attitudes, customs and beliefs that are presented through unchanged historical descriptions. In recent years this practice has resulted in a growing number of buildings that evoke or resemble abstract representations of Dreaming Ancestors and animal totems. From a colonial or fixed theoretical perspective this may be seen to be reasonable, but, through a case study of such a design, the present paper identifies a range of problems with the approach and suggests alternative strategies.

The case study at the centre of the present paper is the Karijini National Park Visitors Centre (2001) designed by John Nicholas from the Perth architectural office of Woodhead International BDH. The Karijini National Park Visitors Centre in Western Australia supports an interpretative experience of the surrounding environment. In addition, the plan of the Visitors Centre abstractly refers to a significant cultural symbol for the local Aboriginal peoples. The Visitors Centre contains Aboriginal cultural references and symbols in an attempt to represent the identities of the local Banyjima, Kurrama and Yinhawangka Aboriginal peoples. The purpose of the paper is to question the use of Aboriginal animal totems as a design strategy. At the heart of this endeavor is a critical shift in theoretical framing away from the colonial or *fixed* perspective and to an alternative, “decolonising” or *fluid* perspective.

The shift in theoretical framework this research adopts is an important first step in addressing one component of the problematic history of cultural mis-representation that exists between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. The project relies on an interdisciplinary approach that combines concepts and knowledge drawn from architecture and from Aboriginal studies. This approach contrasts with the majority of architectural scholarship on Indigenous peoples that tends to focus on the significance of the architectural design or on the way in which Aboriginal peoples use and perceive

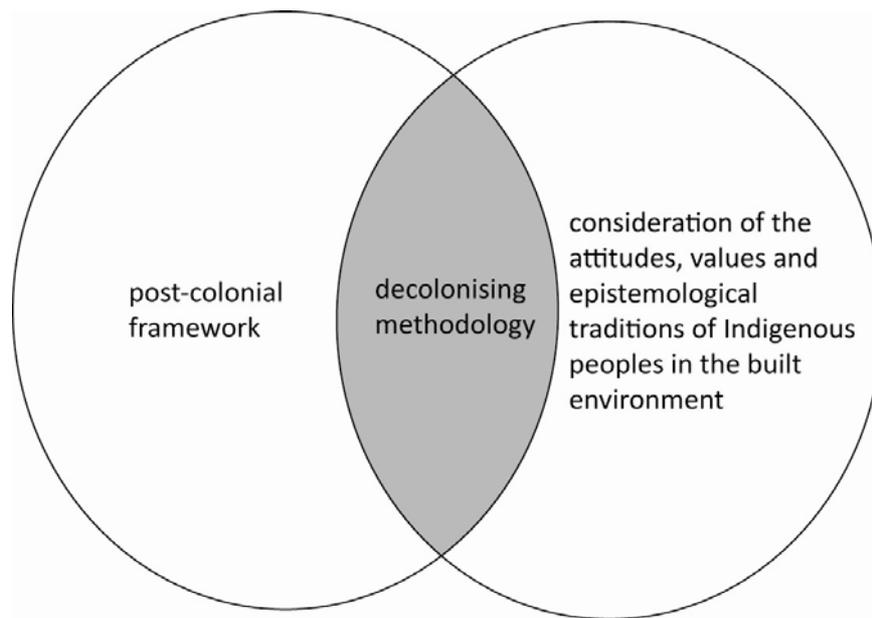


Figure 1: **Decolonising Methodology in Architecture.** *Source:* Based on Smith (1999).

space (for example see Rapoport, 1975). In contrast, this research uses a decolonising methodology or Indigenous Research Methodology (Battiste, 1996; Rigney, 1997; Nakata, 1998; and Smith, 1999). This implies that the research acknowledges its post-colonial framework while actively considering the racial identities of Indigenous designers and building users. This conceptual framework relies on consideration of the attitudes, values and epistemological traditions of Indigenous peoples (Fig. 1). The decolonising methodology explicitly “reframes” actions and events from Indigenous perspectives. Thus, architecture is not investigated from a singular, architectural perspective. Instead, the proposed method critiques examples of Aboriginal architecture from an understanding of the practices, needs and beliefs of Indigenous peoples in an attempt to transcend current boundaries and thinking. The ultimate aim of this endeavour is to explore how design practices, processes and knowledge can support the future social and cultural needs of Indigenous building users.

The decolonising methodology acts through a process of “reframing” that seeks to correct false claims, to interpret or re-interpret actions and events from Indigenous perspectives and to re-think current definitions of Aboriginality in architecture. Thus, “reframing” takes greater control over the methods used to discuss and position Indigenous issues (Smith, 1999, pp. 153-154). This conceptual framework centres the Indigenous voice of the researcher within the architectural discipline and engages with the emerging field of Indigenous architecture.

In summary, this paper is an examination of key concepts and issues associated with the way in which Australian Indigenous cultures have been portrayed within contemporary architecture and the wider built environment. The “built environment” in this context incorporates urban design, landscape architecture, interior design, and some industrial design in addition to architecture. This investigation

will occur through an analysis of existing literature, primarily drawn from the field of architecture. This review is supplemented with literature from the fields of Aboriginal studies, art, sociology and anthropology to consider Aboriginal peoples' identities and their connection to Dreaming Ancestors, animal totems, country and the environment. Furthermore, the discussion and analysis is informed by first hand observations and recordings of the case study building and by an analysis of primary and secondary texts and materials (architectural plans, design sketches and models). This information is then synthesised into a critical textual analysis. Importantly, the present paper does not attempt to define what an "authentic" Aboriginal architecture might be, and it is not concerned with the relative success of this building from a financial or social perspective. It is also impossible in a short paper to explain the full complexity of the Aboriginal peoples of Australia and the Torres Strait Islands.

### **Karijini National Park Visitors Centre**

The Karijini National Park Visitors Centre is surrounded by the semi-desert landscape of the Karijini National Park (formerly Hamersley Range National Park) in the remote, iron-ore rich Pilbara region of Western Australia. The Karijini National Park is at least 1400 kilometres drive north from the city of Perth. Alternatively, it is 120 kilometres north-east of the town of Tom Price (Fig. 2). The Karijini National Park is the second-largest national park in Western Australia. It is a flat, arid terrain that is dissected by a contrasting, network of ancient geological formations, tree-lined gorges and plunging waterfalls. The purpose of the Karijini National Park Visitors Centre is to provide an introduction to the natural and cultural history of the region. The stated goal of the centre is to support an interpretative experience of the surrounding National Park, its geology, flora and fauna, in addition to the local Aboriginal peoples and their culture (Anon. "Karijini Visitor Centre").

According to the architects, Woodhead International, the Karijini National Park Visitors Centre represents "an endeavour to interpret its setting and give expression to Aboriginal culture through modern architecture" (Anon. "Karijini Visitor Centre"). This suggests that the Visitors Centre was shaped by two main themes or approaches. First, the local Aboriginal community's relationship with the landscape was used as a source of design inspiration. For this reason, the striking weathered, deep red-brown, curved steel walls that emerge from the landscape represent the "rocky escarpments created by geological forces and weathering over time" (Department of Environment and Conservation). Whereby, the shape of the twisting and turning walls conjures up images and memories of the impressive, geological formations of the National Park gorges (Fig. 3). Second, the building's design was intended to conceptually represent the local Aboriginal community through the metaphoric application of Aboriginal totems. Furthermore, it is reasoned that this image of a culturally significant symbol "was abstracted and extruded into a series of simple curved walls that symbolize the footprint of European settlers on the Australian landscape" (Muir, 2004, p. 20). The later design intention will be further considered in the remainder of the paper.



Figure 2: **Location of the Karijini National Park Visitors Centre.**

It is commonly stated that the local Aboriginal community chose the *Kurrumanthu* or goanna as a culturally-significant symbol to be represented in the design of the building (Muir, 2004, p. 20). Maitland Parker, the National Park's chief ranger and member of the Banyjima tribe, comments that the *Kurrumanthu* was chosen because it "symbolises us in coming from our beliefs, our country and earth" (cited in Susskind, 2001, p. 45). In an attempt to make the use of the goanna reference more acceptable, and to move away from "kitsch" theme park representations of Aboriginal animal totems, the architects at Woodhead International generated organic, curving walls to create an abstract, goanna-shape in the plan of the building. Anne Susskind (2001, p. 45) claims that the goanna is present in three parts. First, the tail represents and accommodates information on the local Aboriginal peoples' history. Second, the head contains the shop that symbolises the future business direction of the traditional Aboriginal custodians. Lastly, information about Aboriginal law is located in the centre of the Visitors Centre, or stomach of the goanna, which emphasises its importance in guiding all aspects of Aboriginal cultures.

In order to understand the significance of animal totems, it is necessary to briefly consider the Dreaming. There is no single or holistic definition of the Dreaming; different Australian Aboriginal peoples possess variations on their understanding of the concept. During the Dreaming, Ancestral



Figure 3: **The twisting and turning walls evoke the geological formations of the National Park gorges.**  
Karijini National Park Visitors Centre (photo), Pilbara region, 2001, Architect - John Nicholas.  
*Source:* Author.

Beings travelled across the world shaping the landscape. The topography and geography of a place are thus significant and sacred features; indicators of the Ancestral Beings' creation journeys. To Aboriginal peoples, the landscape is a literal record of "who were here, and did what" and "who are here now" (Strehlow, 1947, pp. 30-31). The Ancestral Beings also specified and outlined systems of beliefs and values, rights and obligations, relationships and the lore for everyday living. Information about the Dreaming and Ancestral Beings has been passed on from generation to generation through Dreaming stories, songs, dances and art works. Consequently, all aspects of Aboriginal peoples' lives and knowledge are intertwined with the Dreaming. The Dreaming is the basis of all aspects of life in traditional Aboriginal societies (Edwards, 1988, p. 13). In addition, in the Dreaming, Ancestral Beings established Aboriginal peoples' relationships with their totems. Totems are important in traditional Aboriginal communities because they provide "a way of ordering the entire universe and all the species who inhabit it" (Voigt and Drury, 1998, p. 117). They define who a person is and organise their rights, relationships and responsibilities to each other, Ancestral Beings, plant and animal species, and particular places or sites in the landscape. For this reason, in a spiritual sense, there is no division between the individual, Ancestral Beings, totems and the landscape. The Dreaming transcends time in the way in which it connects the land and the people to the past and the present, while also shaping the future.

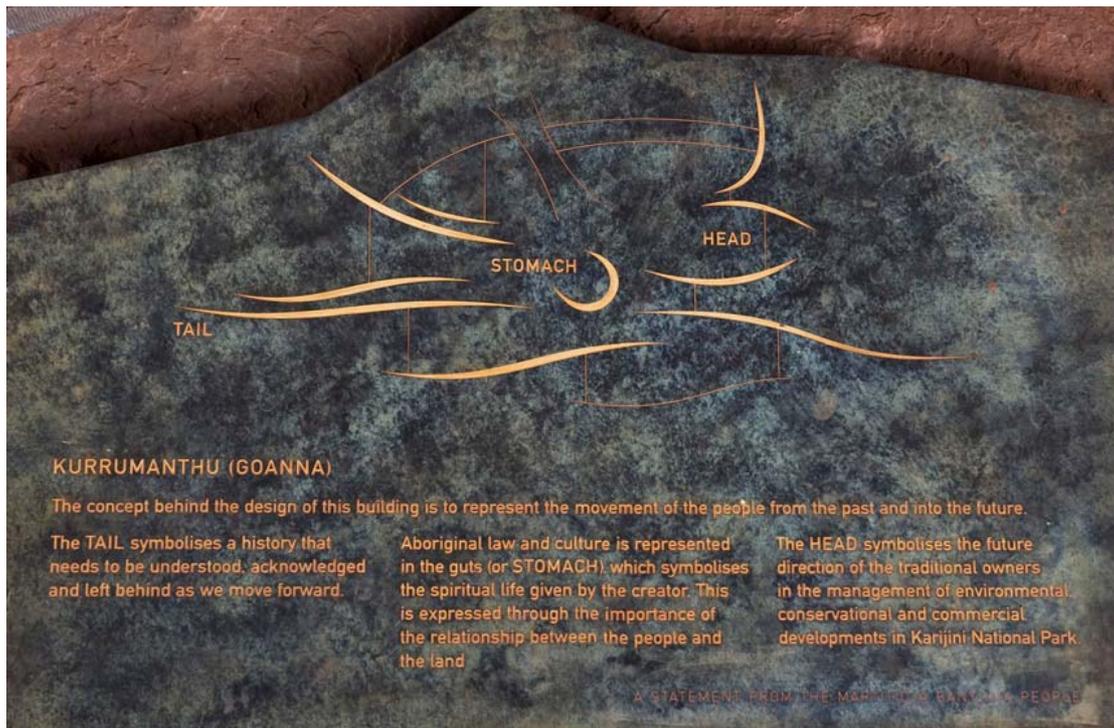


Figure 4: **Building floor plan imprinted on a bronze plate.** Karijini National Park Visitors Centre (photo), Pilbara region, 2001, Architect - John Nicholas. *Source:* Author.

However, the building's association with the goanna is only obvious through a close inspection of the floor plan. In order to make this connection more apparent, in the external display area a life-like sculpture of a goanna is positioned alongside a floor plan of the building that is imprinted on a bronze plate (Fig. 4 and Fig. 5). Although, when entering the building, the display of the life-like sculpture of a goanna and the building floor plan is almost overlooked, because the brightness of the exterior contrasts with the dark, covered interior area. Also, the meandering walls direct the visitor to enter and explore the building, rather than stop to contemplate the meaning and significance of the floor plan. Without this explanation of the architect's source of design inspiration, the reference to the goanna would be overlooked (Toland, 2003, p. 53). Susskind (2001, p. 45) argues the Visitors Centre is based on an abstracted goanna, which is "in line with the [A]boriginal tradition of expressing connectedness to the land through the depiction of animals." Although the question necessarily arises: from whose perspective does this make the Visitors Centre "Aboriginal"?

From the project's initiation, it took six years of community consultation, where "the architects and exhibition designers followed strict [A]boriginal protocol, often travelling for days to listen to the thoughts of tribal elders" (Susskind, 2001, p. 45). The local Aboriginal peoples were consulted on the site selection, design concepts and the interpretative displays (Toland, 2003, p. 54). Aboriginal peoples in the Pilbara want employment and training prospects in the resource and tourism industries (Olive, 1997, p. 12). However, no employment opportunities were provided for the local Aboriginal peoples



Figure 5: **Life-like sculpture of a goanna in the external display area.** Karijini National Park Visitors Centre (photo), Pilbara region, 2001, Architect - John Nicholas. *Source:* Author.

throughout the construction of the building or the installation of the exhibits (Toland, 2003, p. 54). The Visitors Centre also only provides employment for a small number of local Aboriginal people in the retail shop. As a result, Aboriginal peoples from nearby communities consider the Karijini National Park Visitors Centre to be “a White Man’s building” that is designed by “the White Man”, for the use of “the White Man” (cited in Toland, 2003, p. 54). This is also due to the fact that the huge imported steel panels from Perth were used in preference to local labour and materials. Thus, regardless of the inclusive design process which engaged with the local Aboriginal peoples, and the suggestions from the local people that the building might be inspired by the shape or form of the goanna, the building has somehow failed to become Aboriginal Architecture and has become instead its antithesis: “white fella” architecture. Here the tension between the colonial conceptual framework (which positions the building as “authentic”) and the Indigenous, recolonising perspective, (which sees it as touristic and potentially degrading) begins to become apparent.

In their search for “genuine” sources of Aboriginal design, the architects of Karijini Visitors Centre have used the abstract image of an Aboriginal animal totem and the local Aboriginal community’s relationship with the landscape as sources of inspiration. These representations of Aboriginal culture are literal; they propagate the mis-representation of Australian Aboriginal peoples as “primitive”. As



Figure 6: **Graffiti imprinted onto the exterior curved walls.** Karijini National Park Visitors Centre (photo), Pilbara region, 2001, Architect - John Nicholas. *Source:* Author.

such, this “fixed” design approach endeavours to salvage traditional Aboriginal beliefs that are unchanged from pre-contact times. For instance, the architect Nicholas likens the graffiti imprinted onto the exterior curved walls of the Visitors Centre to contemporary rock art (Susskind, 2001, p. 47) (Fig. 6), in a dubious attempt to further “Aboriginalise” the building through the media. It is problematic for the Karijini National Park Visitors Centre to be considered a “white fella” building by the local Aboriginal people while tourists view it as a reasonable representation of local Aboriginal culture. An appropriate cultural centre should express aspects of Aboriginal culture from a range of perspectives, and include contemporary as well as past practices and beliefs.

While the fixed, colonial nature of the formal strategy employed in the building is potentially problematic, there are aspects of the building which appear to reflect a more sensitive and appropriate, decolonising or fluid framework. For example, the Karijini National Park Visitors Information Centre’s large frameless glass windows assist to reveal to the visitors in the interior of the building the incredible external surrounding environment (Fig. 7). The Visitors Centre also has the ability to adapt and adjust to future periods and continuously shifting needs of building occupants. Both of these strategies support the “fluid” understanding of changing cultural values and forms of representation. However, in adapting the Visitors Centre in plan, the building form, function and meaning would lose its original significance because the metamorphic shape of the Aboriginal animal totem would be compromised. Whereas, in elevation, the Visitors Centre can maintain its original association with the



Figure 7: **Windows frame and reveal the surrounding landscape.** Karijini National Park Visitors Centre (photo), Pilbara region, 2001, Architect - John Nicholas. *Source:* Author.

initial source of inspiration, even as it develops. Consequently, in regards to possible future alterations and additions, the Karijini National Park Visitors Centre is: from a cultural perspective, partially fixed and rigid (in plan, in the building's siting and in its capacity to represent the goanna); as well as being fluid and flexible (in elevation, in its formal ability to evoke the landscape). It was anticipated that the building "will become the focal point for the establishment of Aboriginal cultural tourism [in the Pilbara] while tourists will have the opportunity to learn about the park's natural, cultural and historical values" (Department of Environment and Conservation ). The RAI Awards Jury argues that, architecturally, the Visitors Centre "is a spectacular contribution to the Karijini National Park and to Australian architecture" (Jury Comment, 2001). However, the Karijini National Park Visitors Centre's cultural expression is debatable, due to the attempts to "Aboriginalise" the building through the abstract but literal use of Aboriginal animal totems and the local Aboriginal peoples' relationship with the landscape as sources of design inspiration. Furthermore, the design of the building did not provide the anticipated employment opportunities for the local Aboriginal peoples, either during construction, or after the completion of the Karijini National Park Visitors Centre.

### **Merging Concepts**

The current paper explores the way in which certain discourses about Aboriginal peoples and cultures are maintained through architectural form, expression, materiality and program. Ultimately, the

simplification, mystification and appropriation of Aboriginality denies the possibility of an architecture that thoroughly addresses local Aboriginal peoples' needs (spatially and symbolically), in addition to respecting their natural environments. As researcher Ian McNiven (1998, p. 47) argues, the "problem is more than a clash of belief systems – it is a clash of powers to control constructions of identity." As a consequence, "[w]ho controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past" (Orwell cited in Russell, 2001, p. 93). For example, the use of totemic representations appeals to the "authentic" and "primitive" concepts of traditional Aboriginal cultures and continues the flawed colonial tradition while reinforcing contemporary touristic expectations. This is not a reasonable representational strategy. Therefore, there is a need to eliminate the classification and categorisation of Aboriginality in architecture, to create a new language that is focused on the future, rather than continually looking at the past. Furthermore, the concepts of "authenticity" and "primitive" must become redundant in order to create a "decolonised", culturally appropriate Indigenous architecture.

Finally, representations of Aboriginality in architecture are a relatively recent addition to the discipline. Consequently, a great deal of critical evaluation still needs to occur in architecture, while simultaneously taking into consideration concepts from Aboriginal studies. Such future research to assist in creating new practices, processes and knowledge in regards to Aboriginal architecture may include:

- investigating alternative spatial and symbolic design strategies to appropriately address the variety of Aboriginal cultures;
- creating a new language for Aboriginality in architecture that is focused on the future;
- processes to increase the principles of a "decolonised", culturally appropriate Indigenous architecture;
- restructuring the architectural syllabus to consider and understand the history of Aboriginal cultures and their implications for contemporary Indigenous peoples and their built environments; and
- further architectural representations of Aboriginality, so as to assess their consequences and to verify how future discourses about Aboriginal peoples and cultures are being preserved.

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