Plans to set up more Aboriginal ‘visitors camps’ in South Australia modeled on the Lakeside Visitors Centre outside Port Augusta beg the question: are these a solution to Aboriginal mobility or a return to the days of segregation? This report examines the visitors’ centre as a response to Aboriginal transient populations and alcohol consumption, and the appropriateness of the model to its target market.

The ‘Blackster’ solution

by Elizabeth Grant

LAST DECEMBER, STAGE 1 of the Lakeview Visitors Centre at Port Augusta opened to accommodate transient Aboriginal peoples. It is located 6km from the city centre adjacent to Davenport Community, a self-governing Aboriginal community outside Port Augusta City Council jurisdiction. It is an interesting and controversial project - commonly dubbed ‘Blackster’ after the nearby Baxter Detention Centre - which demonstrates a design and planning response for the Aboriginal transient population as the result of the implementation of highly debated legislation.

Port Augusta is known as the ‘gateway to the outback’, with a reputation as a hard-drinking town. Aboriginal peoples comprise 15 per cent of the total population; consisting of Aboriginal people who live within the city limits, and those residing on the outskirts of Port Augusta at Davenport Community. There are also fluctuating populations of Aboriginal peoples originating from outside the city. The Visitors Centre was the response to a declaration made by the State Government, at the behest of the Port Augusta City Council in December 2005, whereby all public areas in Port Augusta were declared as dry zones (where the possession or consumption of alcohol is prohibited). The centre is intended to serve the short-term accommodation needs of Aboriginal peoples who live within the city limits, and those residing on the outskirts of Port Augusta at Davenport Community. There are also fluctuating populations of Aboriginal peoples originating from outside the city.

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Historically, there has always been a movement of Aboriginal peoples to Port Augusta from the north and west of the state and beyond, according to a number of ‘lines’ or ‘paths’. The annual migrations generally occurred with the heat of the summer and are protected by the 1836 Letters Patent guaranteeing the rights of indigenous peoples in the state (and their descendants) by continuing access to the lands, which they occupied at the time, including Port Augusta.

Today, Aboriginal peoples migrate to Port Augusta for a variety of reasons. Mobility along the ‘lines’ or ‘paths’ continue, reflecting attachments to place by birth, kinship ties, and traditional ownership of country by the individual, their partner, children and siblings. Mobility also continues for a multitude of other reasons. Service delivery in the health, education, employment, and criminal justice sectors promotes mobility, and Aboriginal peoples travel to Port Augusta to access a multitude of services not available in remote areas. Across South Australia, there are more than 2000 hospital separations annually where the inpatient has originated from a remote Aboriginal community. Families move to Port Augusta to support relations, especially those admitted to Port Augusta Hospital, reliant on health services or incarcerated in the Port Augusta Prison. These people may have chronic and complex health issues, limited financial capacity and be present in the community for extended periods of time.

Kin and community form the core of Aboriginal life, with the importance of attending family and community events paramount. Port Augusta is the locus of many cultural and community events, with attendance at these events frequent and culturally important. The scattering of Aboriginal peoples across South Australia as a result of past
government policies has dispersed individual, families and cultures. There are also a myriad of social reasons to movement to Port Augusta. Life in remote communities, on the north and west is tough. Domestic violence, paternity establishment and poverty are endemic realities. Whilst there is a cultural necessity to be close to country, there are important social and survival reasons to travel periodically. The origins and reasons for transient Aboriginal populations have not been fully documented. It is known that more than 25 different language groups, with many more, and diverse dialects are represented. The delivery of services to the user group and the housing type or location have lead to harsh environmental conditions and a lack of 'fit' between the delivery of other services. Periodically, housing has impacts on family and community resources, housing and communities. Port Augusta has also moved people into the area and in the adjacent sand hills. The migrations, with people often staying with family, camping and other communities, have also impacted on the Davenport Community. The result that disorderly conduct became highly visible at the vehicle, whilst many regional centres may not permit the purchase of alcohol to Aboriginal drinkers. It has been an outside public space. Port Augusta hotels have serviced Aboriginal peoples for the north and the northwest of the state prohibit the opportunities to consume alcohol. The Aboriginal lands and other government services located nearby. While the gathering of Aboriginal peoples in Port Augusta's public spaces has resulted in cultural clashes and the criminalisation of Aboriginal peoples due to their visible presence, the issues of gathering have been compounded with alcohol consumption. For some Aboriginal peoples, Port Augusta provided opportunities to consume alcohol. The Aboriginal lands to the north and the northeast of the state prohibits the import or consumption of alcohol, and travelling to regional centres provides opportunities for alcohol consumption. Historically, Aboriginal peoples were denied access to, and restricted or discouraged from, gathering in hotels, they moved their consumption of alcohol into public spaces. Due to a myriad of reasons, it is often probable to consume alcohol while gathering with a social group in an outside public space. Port Augusta hotels have serviced the purchase of alcohol to Aboriginal drinkers. It has been possible to buy four liters of rum unrestricted during hold opening periods, and Port Augusta is the one of the only regional centres where 'Monkey Blood' (fortified port) can be purchased. Port Augusta hotels have allowed the purchase of alcohol from duty-free outlets without a vehicle, whilst many regional centres may not permit this. Easy access to prohibited alcoholic products has compounded the issues of gathering in public spaces, with the result that allegedly conduct have become highly visible within the city centre. The issues of migrating populations and disorderly conduct have also been impacted on the Dartmouth Community. Fluctuations in the community population are related to mobility and alcohol consumption. People with often stay with family communities, in the area and in the adjacent sand hills. The concentrations of Aboriginal people in the public areas of Port Augusta has also moved people into the community and adjacent area. The fluctuations in the community population has impacts on family and community resources, housing and the delivery of other services. Periodically, housing has been built to cater for the transient groups. Irregularly, the harsh environmental conditions and a lack of 'fit' between the user group and the housing type or location have led to short housing life spans. The inquisition of the Lakeside Visitors Centre: Source was seen as a way of enabling the complex issues of Aboriginal mobility and alcohol consumption, the concept was drawn from an initiative instigated in Cooinda in the late 1990s. Lakeside consists of two prefabricated buildings housing a kichen, dining area and other administrative functions. From the administration block, visitors are provided with two meals daily, building, access to transport and health services. Adjoins is an open space with a playground, two refurbished ablution/laundry blocks and individual accommodation. A three-metre-high fence topped with barbed wire, secured and floodlit at night, surrounds the site. Twenty or so 'spider' tents are provided as accommodation. Originally designed for short-term housing for communities awaiting permanent housing, the safari tents are now commonly provided in South Australian Aboriginal communities as ‘home’ housing to residential chronic housing. The safari tents of gingham and flannelette sheets fit into a central living plate and covered with a heavy-duty canvas cover with two zip openings. They were designed to be mobile, to allow movement to take account of prevailing winds and climatic conditions, and to be periodically moved to a new site when the ground is frozen. Within the visitor centre they are fixed, hampers are provided as floor covering. Each safari tent has a double bed. The temporary style of accommodation at the centre has caused concern for some observers. The chronic and complex family issues facing Aboriginal peoples may be aggravated by the potentially crowded, confined, unventilated accommodation. The style of accommodation may increase the risk of contagious diseases and exacerbate respiratory and pre-existing health problems. The permanent siting of the safari tents within the confined site is also a concern: climate conditions are unable to maintain and there is likely to be a building of insects and other matter leading to potentialillness. The reduction of dust is of particular concern: visitors sleep on foam mattresses on the ground in the safari tents and there has been little landscaping to control the movement of dust around the site and beyond. Similarly, reducing negative contact between people and animals, vermin and insects are difficult under such living conditions. Controlling the temperature of the living environment has also not been addressed. With temperatures of 38°C upwards in summer the safari tents provide little relief. Safety issues are also of concern - the open fences provides adjacent to the safari tents a cultural response that at the same time substantially increases fire risk. The sensory of the compound at night presents unique at critical times and may delay the attendance of emergency vehicles. Emergency alarm and fire fighting equipment accessible to all will. The availability of the accommodation for туристes persons has also been questioned. The issues of accessing the buildings, using the safari tent and moving around the site may be difficult for the mobility impaired. Similarly, no suitable building or sleeping areas have been provided for the young very young. Young children are likely to be in continual contact with dirt and other environmental hazards. Security offered by this style of accommodation may not be adequate for the touristers and their possessions. While all visitors undertake not to be involved in aggressive behaviour at the centre, levels of violence are high in many Aboriginal communities and the unknown mix of languages groups and clans accommodated at the centre has the potential for conflict to arise. The temporary structures provide little physical security for the tourists or their possessions. To provide culturally appropriate housing for Aboriginal peoples, architects often employ the cultural design paradigms of working with end-users to increase knowledge of culturally distinct behaviour that will inform design. No end-user consultation occurred for the project and it is difficult to say whether the housing meets the end-users cultural needs. The flexibility of the structures may enable socio-spatial arrangements to be adapted as long as the management recognises the importance of allowing the movement of safari tents around the site to meet the social, cultural and hygiene needs of the users. The safari tent blocks may need reconfiguration. The flexible blocks open to a full view of the main road and could be relocated to a more sensitive location. Objects have been raised by Port Augusta residents and others to the three-metre-high fence topped with barbed wire which has led to the centre being described locally as 'Blackten'. One resident noted that ‘this site you look 40 years old’. The development of the central site was not a planned event that was managed. The current fence appears to be at odds with the intent and purpose of the project and would look more at ease in a car park setting. More aesthetic perimeter barriers could be found. Other styles of fencing with the addition of landscape elements would enhance the aesthetic appeal provide greater privacy for residents whilst creating shaded areas on the hot site and reduce the movement of dust around the site. The site of the Lakeside Visitors Centre is multifaceted and complex, situated between a significant male cultural site to the west and a female site to the east. It overlooks the Lake Umewarra, a significant site for Aboriginal peoples from the area and inland groups. Dreaming tracks lead to the lake and the importance is so great that one tradition has Lake Umewarra as an integral link between the northern and southern oceans. The site is enclosed from the west by sand hills that have been intermittently used for camping and gathering by Aboriginal peoples for generations. It was also the site of the ill-fated Bungala Housing Estate that opened in 1976. The housing estate did not resolve the full support of Dartmouth townspeople at the time on the basis that it was a traditional sacred site (home supported a burial ground, others a sacred ground). A suburb of a man by firearm, followed by a lancing and the use of the area. The site is also the result of the first indications to Aboriginal peoples of the intent use of a sacred site. Finally, in 1994, the phasing of petrol over a freeway by a teenager resulted in a house fire and the deaths of seven people. Within two days the fire was extinguished and a number of industrial buildings have been the only continuously used at the site. Campers have been not used for its short periods of time, noting anonymously among the sand hills. Interestingly, as previously mentioned, transient housing and aboriginals have been constructed to attract the needs of campers. In more recent times, novel style of housing has been constructed in Dartport to allow greater access to services. There is an argument in regard to the siting of the dry camp as it relates to the implementation of the dry zone legislation. It was perhaps an inevitable consequence of placing the camp away from...
The implications of the Visitors Centre … need to be critically evaluated and discussed with Aboriginal groups as the impact on a vulnerable sector of the population may be far-reaching.