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Architecture for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children

By Dr Elizabeth Grant

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are proud, living cultures. The survival and revival of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures relies on cultural identity being an integral part of their children's educational environment and providing environments that respects the ancestral ways, family, cultural and community traditions.



Family is at the core of Aboriginal society and well-being. Complex kinship systems are central to how the culture is passed on and society is organized with families having the primary responsibility for the upbringing, protection and development of their children. Providing a communal setting of loving, caring and safety with opportunities for children's growth, development and self empowerment not only has

dramatic impacts on the overall welfare of the child but is also pivotal in the survival of the culture and addressing the disadvantages experienced by the Aboriginal children. It is crucial to the success of Aboriginal children's centres that they be designed as a place for welcoming and engaging with the Aboriginal families and community.

Creating a 'place' with a uniquely Indigenous identity is

essential to this process. This may include designing environments for the behavioural and cultural norms and health requirements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people so that spaces are easy to use. Place making may also involve providing new readings and layering Indigenous meanings to projects through the use of appropriate signs, symbols and representations. Building centres that provide a physical focus for the community and the family and a place of strong cultural identity along with family support, good health, positive self-identity and engaging in shared activities may lead to resilience and higher self esteem of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

In the last five years, there has been a focus on the design and provision of early childhood environments specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. This has been orchestrated under the 'Closing the Gap' strategies with specific Aboriginal Family and Children's Centres being constructed across Australia. These centres are generally designed as 'one-stop shops' for services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 0 to 8 years and their families. This chapter examines three centres, Taikkurendi Children's and

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Family Centre, Kununurra Children and Family Centre and TAC Risdon Cove and the manner in which each Centre was designed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Taikkurendi Children's and Family Centre, Christies Beach, South Australia

The Taikkurendi Children's and Family Centre is located at Christies Beach, a socio-economically disadvantaged southern suburb of Adelaide, approximately 30 kilometres from the CBD. The centre was built on the grounds of the Christies Beach Primary School where 10% of the students identify as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent. The students come from families identifying with a number of Indigenous language groups including Kurna, Ngarrindjeri, Narungga, Adnyamathanha and language groups from intra and interstate. The number of Indigenous people residing in the region is growing.

The Taikkurendi Children's and Family Centre (meaning 'mixed together') was planned to be able to deliver preschool, childcare and playgroup programs, health services, family support, self development and parenting courses and community activities.

Consultation was conducted with potential users and the Aboriginal community prior to the design process and a brief on Indigenous design considerations prepared for the architects. The consultation process defined a

community vision which saw the centre as being a beautiful exemplar design which was culturally welcoming, a showcase for Aboriginal cultures, values, traditional and contemporary customs, child friendly and focused, an Aboriginal community meeting place imbued with legend, a place of healing, wellbeing and relationship building with culturally appropriate design that was closely connected to country (Grant 2011).

The centre consists of two buildings. Reception, common space and the director offices are sited centrally in the main building with service offices, health services on one side and the preschool and childcare on the other. A separate building houses the family centre which looks onto a cultural area which has various features including a fire pit. (The buildings are separated due to an easement running through the land.) This physical constraint required allowed areas to be separated and the separation of different functions had the benefit of providing a greater level of privacy for different areas which may diffuse potential conflict between users. At the same time, visual connections were made between certain areas. For example, the children's play area looks on the entrance and the community family area to allow children to observe family. At the heart of the design is the circular room which is the children's preschool main indoor activity area. Sensitively designed

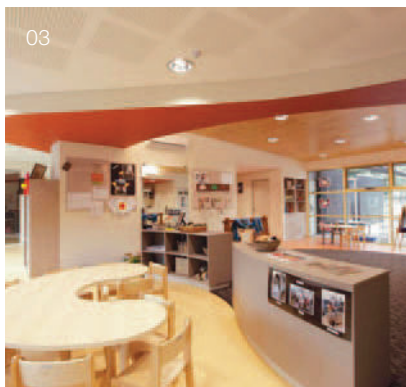
with state of the art facilities such as a teaching kitchen, dedicated spaces of staff, storage and quiet areas and toilets is designed to take consideration of gender sensitivities, the preschool is designed to be equipped to cater for the health and cultural needs of Aboriginal children (e.g. hearing loss) with acoustically treated features throughout the preschool.

Across Taikkurendi, there are visual references to the Kurna and Ramindjeri Dreaming story, Kondoli the Whale and other significant cultural symbols and representations. Waves lap across the paving outside the entrance. The user follows the path of the whale is followed inside the building with artworks located strategically and floor coverings designed also to function as way finding tools. The intent of the landscape design is to provide a range of outdoor play spaces that offer cultural learning experiences. A central element of the children's play area is a mosaic water play sculpture of Kondoli located in the sandpit. Kurna names are cast in metal and set on various features across the play area and there are references and representations of animals indigenous to the region incorporated throughout the design. Common language and meaning is developed through the integration of architectural elements, landscape, play and art using culturally appropriate signs, symbols, representations, materials and colours.

The Isis Group Pty Ltd won the 'SA 2013 MBA Excellence in the Commercial or Industrial Building \$2m–5m' award for their work on the Taikkurendi Centre.

Outerspace won a 'Highly Commended' award in the 'Education and Care Services' category of the '2014 Kidsafe Playspace' awards for their work on the three Aboriginal Children and Family Centres.

Architect: Concept Phase: Denis Harison, Department for Transport, Energy and Infrastructure



*Architects: Design Construct Phase:
JPE Design Studio
Landscape Architects: Outerspace, in
collaboration with Viesturs Cielens
Design
Builder: ISIS*

Kununurra Children and Family Centre

Kununurra is located in the East Kimberley region of Western Australia with a population of approximately 6000 people with almost half the population identifying as being of Aboriginal descent. The wet season sees a large influx of Indigenous persons into Kununurra from outlying communities such as Kalumburu, Oombulgurri, Warmun, Port Keats and other communities which can result in a doubling of the population. The Aboriginal population consists of a number of language groups; with the traditional owners, the Miriwung and Gajerrong people, remaining dominant. The population is young with over 800 children between 0 to 5 years residing in the area.

Aboriginal people in Kununurra face significant social and health issues. Around 80 per cent of the Aboriginal population is welfare dependent. The town has 'night culture' where many children roam the street to either amuse themselves, get away from violence, or unsafe home environments. This in turn, impacts on school attendance, academic achievement and low employment opportunities later in life often serving to introduce people to the criminal justice system. The area has the highest rate of teenage pregnancy in Western Australia and children suffer from high rates of hearing loss, foetal alcohol spectrum disorders and other physical and cognitive impairments. Around 47 per cent of school aged children do not attend school regularly.

The Kununurra Children and Family Centre opened in 2013 with the aim to engage children



0 to 8 years in education as a mechanism to increase future school attendance and the benefits that flow from education.

The Kununurra building was designed in consultation with the community. Its location at the northern end of the school was chosen to accommodate families living in the garden and ranch areas, and for the site's close proximity to the Aboriginal Health Service. The Centre has a licensed childcare facility and family areas, which will offer facilities for training, programs for parents and early learning, healthy living programs run in the Centre kitchen. The Centre also has two health-consulting rooms, one to pediatric standards and one for mental health counselling. The 1800 square metre facility was constructed with a slab on ground, engineered steel superstructure with light gauge steel framing and a variety of external claddings.

The design approach was to physically distinguish the building's functional spaces and to allow each to develop its unique identity. A singular covering roof creates a sense of identity for the whole facility, with the identity of the Child Care Centre and the Family Centre are expressed by changes in the roof form over the entry areas of these portions of the facility.

The internal layout of enclosed functional spaces and covered external spaces provides environmentally and culturally appropriate spaces to develop a

positive learning environment, and welcomes the local community to share in the creation of positive parent and childhood development. The Centre is designed to take into account Aboriginal avoidance practices, gender separations and privacy needs with clinics are designed with private entrances and toilets gender separated. The design takes into account the cultural significance of the views to Kelly's Knob and direction towards Mirima (Hidden Valley) National Park.

*Architects: Iredale Pederson Hook
Builders: Ricon Constructions Pty Ltd*

TAC Risdon Cove

The Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre was formed in the early 1970s and people have worked to protect heritage places, regain land, strengthen cultural connections and revive traditional language. Through integrating Aboriginal customs and practices into daily lives, Tasmanian Aboriginal people are recreating a significant and highly valued landscape of Aboriginal knowledge and being.

The first Aboriginal Children's Centre was first established in 1989 in West Moonah on the western side of the Derwent River. After the Centre outgrew facilities there, the Aboriginal community decided that the Risdon Cove site (handed back to the Aboriginal community in 1995) would provide a suitable setting. The Risdon Cove site is significant as the land of the Mumurimina people. It was the first place in Tasmania to be



Photos:

- 01 + 04 Kunurra children and family centre
Photos: Peter Bennetts
- 02–05 TAC Risdon Cove
Photos: Simon Birch
- 06 Taikkurendi Children's and Family Centre, Christies Beach
Photo: David Sievers

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colonised by Europeans and was the site of the first massacre of Aboriginal peoples.

The development of the Children's Centre was underpinned by a desire to ensure our children grow up strong in culture, surrounded by a significant cultural landscape, promoting a strong sense of Aboriginal identity and community. The design approach focused on developing a residential scale pavilion which sits peacefully in the landscape. Internal spaces accommodating children from birth to aged 12, administration and community facilities are arranged around a landscaped representation of Country.

The Centre has been developed holistically as a place for family and community rather than a centre only for children. The concept that the child needs to observe and be part of family and community activities is essential to the notion of Indigenous well-being. As such, the Centre has been designed to operate a range of services such as long day care, an out of school hours program, child health, speech therapy, family support, transition to school, physical activity, and nutrition programs and other community activities. The kitchen was located centrally to provide Elders with visual connections across the centre. Similarly, children have line of sight to various areas so that they not visually separated from family. Children can view their cousin over in the next area or see their aunt or Nan in the community room.

Children's connections with the natural environment are fostered. The building is

designed to have a seamless transition between inside and outside spaces. Large windows and no window treatments allow children to have unencumbered views to country. All internal environments utilise natural materials, natural experiences and natural environments. Materials used for the construction consist of timber, cane, natural materials and fibres. Staff report seeing the benefits in terms of children's expanded imaginations, problem solving skills and creativity. They note that the use of natural materials has created a learning environment that challenges children to explore what something could be, instead of 'what it is' and provides opportunities for children use all their senses. In the external areas, boulders have been strategically placed rather than using seating so that it appears that the children are sitting in a natural setting.

The Centre attempts to recreate a landscape of Aboriginal history, our knowledge and identity. The building is constructed of native Tasmanian timbers reminiscent of the buildings on Cape Barren Island. The external play scape area embodies a deeper layer of storytelling and meaning and was designed using aerial photographs of the Furneaux Islands. Three rockeries representing Flinders and Cape Barren Islands and lungtalanana (Clark Island) feature. Mounds in the play area replicate the mutton bird mounds of the islands, a mutton bird shed sits in the play area, barrels that were used to store the mutton bird catch and a dinghy replicating those used by the skilled boats-people of the islands help children know and understand their family and community history. Cubby shelters based on whale bones further reinforce the connection of Tasmanian Aboriginal people to the sea. Native plants inside the playground reflect those found

in the surrounding environment and frequent walks by the children into the adjoining bush further familiarises them with the natural environment: the plants, animals and land and waterways. Observing the changes in nature, seeing when the native cherries ripen and when the wattles blossom introduces them to Aboriginal ways of knowing and being on country.

The vibrant and active Centre is highly valued by the Tasmanian Aboriginal community. It is a source of ongoing pride and intergenerational engagement with their country, with five generations of some families enjoying being together at the Centre for important community events. The strong cultural and community connections that the Centre promotes, allows children to feel that they belong there and fosters their sense of belonging within the Aboriginal community and having a future that values them, their culture and community.

Architects: Tim Penny Architecture + Interiors
Builders: Macquarie Builders
Playscape Designer: Benton Van Dorsellar

Conclusion

Dispossession, colonisation and the cumulative acts of federal and state governments have left a distinct and enduring legacy of economic, social, cultural and political disadvantage for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Engaging with education is one method of breaking through the barriers of disadvantage. For every year of education an Indigenous person receives, one year is added to their life expectancy.

The nature and quality of children's transactions and experiences within the physical environment can promote or restrain social, cognitive, affective and motor development and there is a capacity to enrich children's educational experiences and increase learning outcomes. **P**

