

186-206 CANTERBURY ROAD  
DARUG COUNTRY  
MARCH 2022

wsp

## ABORIGINAL DESIGN PRINCIPLES





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Research by Sian Hromek (Yuin), WSP. Sian specialises in variety of fields relating to Aboriginal Country and landscape design, including Cultural Land Management Practices such as cultural burning, and how these practices might inform built outcomes and inform engagement strategies.

Please note:  
In order to highlight the use of Aboriginal Design Principles, this document may contain examples from other Aboriginal Countries.

Warning:  
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are warned that this document may contain reference to or images of deceased persons.

Front page image: Two Aboriginal people hunting emus, by Joseph Lycett.  
Source: National Library of Australia

*This document acknowledges the elders, past and present, of the **Darug People** as the traditional custodians of the land and its knowledge.*

*“This is Darug lands. It is the land of our ancestors. Their spirits still walk among us. Spirits that have been here since the dreaming. Darug language has been passed down from generation to generation. To continue an unbroken culture that has extended for thousands of years.  
In the language of the Darug people  
We welcome you to Darug lands”*

Aunty Edna Watson, Darug Elder

**“Warami wellamabamiyui,  
yura.”**

*It is good to see you all, people.*

# Aboriginal Design Principles

## Indigenous design statement

**Indigenous peoples and the built environment** have had a problematic relationship as settlements, roads, and railways often cut through and disrupt the connection between people and Country.

Our projects change the environment in significant, and often positive ways, yet Aboriginal people often ask the following question::

**“How are you going to leave my Country better than what it was before?”**

**How can we reconnect the relationship between Country and people?** Projects offer an opportunity to acknowledge and celebrate the Aboriginal Country, Culture and people of the land on where the project is located.

Through the project's design elements and our place-based landscape interventions (architecture, infrastructure, art and the like), **we can acknowledge Country** and reveal the site's latent Aboriginal history.

**This document describes the principles we use as a starting point** to engage with the Darug people and Country. While more consultation and permission must be sought from the local elders, the ideas set out in this document should be seen as an introduction to the engagement process.

## Aboriginal design principles

**Aboriginal led/** Aboriginal people (designers, elder and community members) should be leading or co-leading the Indigenous design elements.

**Community involvement/** The local Aboriginal communities to be engaged in this process; can we use their patterns? Can they design patterns for the project?

**Appropriate use of Aboriginal design/** All Aboriginal design elements must be approved by consulted Indigenous elders and community members. If approval is not given, the knowledge will not be used on the project.

## Design approach

**Image - Signage/surface treatment/ walls/art/** Signage tells the Country and its people's story. Surface treatments use local Aboriginal design knowledge, commissioned from artists, or urban designers who engage with community for approval.

**Space - Indigenous space/ landscaping/** Aboriginal Space. A space or landscape where Aboriginal culture can be celebrated, including cultural land-management practices, firestick farming, daisy yam propagation, and the like

**Language** - Using language in the built environment to use it and keep it alive.

## Country focused design

**Overall, Aboriginal Australia** has a simple but quite different hierarchy when it comes to their connection to nature. It is best contrasted against human-focused design, depicted below.

How might this shift or enhance current practices?

**Country, over  
Community, over  
Individual**



Country focused design

## A Country of beauty

Early settlers of Sydney 'found environments which reminded them of the manicured parks of England, with trees well spaced and a grassy understorey'. The country around Sydney was described in 1827 as

*'a fine-timbered country, perfectly clear of bush, through which you might, generally speaking, drive a gig in all directions, without any impediment in the shape of rocks, scrubs and close forest'.<sup>1</sup>*

Arthur Bowes Smyth from The First Fleet described the landscape around Sydney Harbour as

*'.. fresh terraced, lawns and grottos with distinct plantations of the tallest and most stately trees I ever saw in any nobleman's grounds in England, cannot excel in beauty those whose nature now presented to our view.'<sup>1</sup>*

An early painting of Nepean River displays a curated landscape through the use of fire, where large trees are controlled, and grass promoted to cater for animals.

Image: Joseph Lycett 'View upon the Nepean River, at the Cow Pastures New South Wales 1824-1825'  
Source: State Library of New South Wales





## A Country curated by fire

There is considerable evidence of sophisticated environmental management conducted over long periods of time by Aboriginal people — in particular, the intentional use of fire to manage landscapes.

The First Fleet officer John Hunter noted that Aboriginal people around Sydney 'set the country on fire for several miles extent'. He recognised that the purpose was 'to clear that part of the country through which they have frequent occasion to travel, of the brush or underwood', as well as enabling women to get at edible roots with digging sticks and for the men to hunt kangaroo and other animals.

The mosaic of landscapes in Sydney was 'maintained by Aboriginal burning, a carefully calibrated system which kept some areas open while others grew dense and dark'.<sup>2</sup>

Image: Joseph Lycett  
'Aboriginal people using fire to hunt kangaroos' 1817  
Source: State Library of New South Wales



# Sydney Basin Language Groups

## Language Groups

The Country of the Sydney basin is traditionally inhabited by people of several language groups, including Guringai (Kuring-gai, Darug (Dharug) and Dharawal (Tharawal). Within these three language groups there are at least 36 groups.<sup>3</sup>

Each group is distinguished from other groups by different designs and decorations on tools and weapons, unique body decorations – for example painted designs worn during ceremonies, also the cicatrices (scarification) formed during initiation rites. Some groups also had distinctive hairstyles.<sup>4</sup>

The original inhabitants of coastal Sydney suffered from the trauma of occupation and the severing of their spiritual bonds to Country. Within two years of settlement, kinship ties in the area were damaged, more than half the population died from smallpox.<sup>5</sup>





# Darug Country, People and Culture

## Darug Country

Darug Country has a 40,000-year history, it is a freshwater place on red silcrete foundations. The Darug live between Port Jackson and Botany Bay in the east, the Georges River to the south and south-west, the Hawkesbury River in the north-west, and west to the Blue Mountains. Their language differed between the coastal, the hinterland (Cumberland plains) and the mountains.<sup>6</sup>

The word 'Darug' means 'yam'. Yams were a commodity for the Darug as well as a food source, and are known to have been traded with neighbouring cultural groups. Yams were cultivated in specific growing areas which were destroyed when the land was cleared and fenced during colonisation.<sup>7</sup>

## Darug People

Traditionally, there was a cultural divide between the western Darug. The coastal Darug, katungal or "sea people" who built canoes and their diet was primarily seafood including fish and shellfish. The inland Darug were paiendra or "tomahawk people" who hunted kangaroos, emus and other land animals and used stone axes more extensively.<sup>8</sup>

**Alternative spelling:** Dharruk, Dharrook, Dhar'rook, Darrook, Dharug

**Warrawarry** is the name of the clan group from the Eastern Creek/ Blacktown area.

## Darug Way of Life

Historical accounts and oral stories passed down by the Darug elders, speak of the Blacktown and Eastern Creek areas as being continuously occupied by Darug people. They made open campsites on higher ground with access to water sources such as creeks, billabongs and wetlands, and moved with the seasons to take advantage of plentiful plants and animals.<sup>9</sup>

Aboriginal people feel a belonging to land rather than ownership of it. They respect it and refer to it as their mother. Land management skills are an important part of the Darug lifestyle.<sup>6</sup>

Seasonal land management was practiced, people collected resources and lived in an area before moving to another place of their Country, allowing the land to recover before returning. In Darug culture, individuals have an obligation to look after their Country, including plants and animal life.<sup>6</sup>

**Darug totems:** depending on their time and place of conception, children are allocated totem animals to respect and protect.<sup>6</sup> Totems of western Sydney include the goanna, lizards' cockatoo's black and white crested, the mighty eagle, grasshoppers, butterflies, spiders and their web, bees, honeycombs and even ants were considered moietyies.<sup>10</sup>



Aboriginal people hunting kangaroos by Joseph Lycett, 1817.  
National Library of Australia

# Features of Darug Country

## Waterways - Important Resource Areas

Wianamatta or South Creek is an Aboriginal word of the Dharug language, meaning 'mother place'. Evidence of early Aboriginal people has been found in several locations within the Blacktown Local government area.

The western Sydney region has many creek systems which have emerged as a key Aboriginal theme of the area. The creek systems provide a wealth of resources, ranging from food and medicine through to construction materials.

This area was a gathering place and an area where the Darug, Dharawal and Gandangara people would visit.<sup>7</sup>



Wianamatta Creek

**Shell middens** have been found near the sewage treatment plant on Breakfast Creek and South Creek in Western Sydney and along the other waterways of the area.



Shell Midden

## Pathways and Viewpoints

The first roads of the Sydney region follow traditional pathways used by Aboriginal people. These pathways link spiritual and ceremonial sites, as well as travel corridors throughout the landscape between the coast and mountains.

Spurs and ridgelines are important as routes for travel and campsites above to floodplain, with view points in all directions.

Artefact scatters often occur along these pathways, as well as scarred trees which may be located at junctions, ceremonial sites or other significant points in the pathways.<sup>7</sup>



Ridgelines create pathways for easy access across Country

## Cumberland Plain and Flora and Fauna

Fire provides a powerful tool in the management of the woodlands of the Cumberland Plain. Selective burning reduces undergrowth, improves access, generates fresh pick to encourages kangaroos and other macropods, synchronises the flowering and fruiting of plants foods such as burrawangs, and used to smoke arboreal fauna from their hollows.

Many plants and animals are significant to Aboriginal people and are often mentioned in context with spiritual importance and resource collection.<sup>7</sup>



Western Sydney Parkland



# Cultural Heritage of the region

## Middens

These are mounds of shell built up over hundreds or thousands of years as a result of countless meals. They primarily contain mature species of edible shellfish species. They might also contain bird and animal teeth and bones, campfire charcoal and stone tools.<sup>11</sup>

## Rock Shelters – “giba gunyahs”

These are places where people took shelter. This is a warm place to eat, sleep, repair or fashion tools and, we can imagine, talk of stories and exploits. Artefacts such as stone tools may be found in the rock shelters.<sup>11</sup>



Middens are remnants of feasts and gatherings, they are time capsules that show what types of food were collected and eaten

## Rock Art

Stencils are produced by mixing ochre in the mouth with other material into a wet paste and spraying it over the object to be stencilled. Often we find stencilled hands and tools represented in rock shelters. Other forms of artwork include ochre painting as well as charcoal drawings and etchings.<sup>11</sup>

## Grinding Grooves

These are grooves resulting from the production or sharpening and maintenance of an edge ground tool such as a stone axe. These sites are usually located near a water source, like a water hole.<sup>11</sup>



Grinding grooves beside a rock pool on sandstone rock-platform, Gosford

## Engravings

Engravings are made by drilling or pecking a series of holes in the rock which are then connected to form a line. An accepted understanding of these engravings is that they are the product of sacred ceremonies and are periodically re-engraved as part of ongoing ritual and to pass on knowledge and stories.

**Shields** are coated with white pipeclay and often painted with a red vertical line crossed by one or two horizontal lines.<sup>12</sup>



Engravings into sandstone show important cultural features and often have stories associated with them.

## Scar and Carved Trees

These trees are evidence of bark and wood being removed for shields, shelters, coolamons and canoes. They are rare in the Sydney region due to intense colonisation.

Three types of scar trees are:

- carved trees with patterns to identify burial sites of important people
- bark removal for use for. coolamons (water / grain containers) shields and canoes.
- wood removal for use to make boomerangs and digging sticks
- Evidence of climbing footholds when. hunting possum and 'sugar bag' (honey)

The tree is not killed by these methods and scarring is evident.<sup>13</sup>



Segments of carved trees which were associated with burials on the Greendale Estate, Vermont near Narellan

# Understanding Country

## Understanding Country

All the elements of the natural world, the earth, the sea and the sky are aspects of the unique relationship that all Aboriginal people have with the world. These parts all make up the idea of 'Country'.<sup>11</sup>

Aboriginal people believe that the Spirits that created the world as it is now, all descend from spirits who once lived in the sky. Every aspect of the world we see now was created in response to the needs of those spirits. All features of the natural earth represent parts of the spirit dreaming and are repeated in the dreamings of the people who now inhabit the earth.<sup>11</sup>

Just as rocks, trees, rivers, soil, the ocean have a connection to that dreaming so each also has a connection to the totems of the people. Each animal, snake, fish lizard or insect has its totem and they also have a direct connection to their ancestral origins in the sky. Those spirits live on in the 'Country' right now.<sup>11</sup>

## A Darug Dreaming Story

Mirriral, the creator, gathered his Dhulumarh (magic) and from the dust of Dhalingie (the stars) created a new place amid the darkness. He formed from Dhalingie a universe, and at its core he focused all his Dhulumarh and created a fire to light up the darkness and shine across his creation.<sup>12</sup>

Realising that this was marvellous, Mirriral once again summoned his Dhulumarh to create life. But this life was not what we know today; it was known as Murumbungutta, a transformable energy that took shape to form the heavens, animals, plants, rocks, waters and winds we know today.<sup>12</sup>

Mirriral saw that shadow cast darkness on many parts of his creations, so he spun all of his new creations and carved their songlines through the universe around the fire so that every part of his creation could benefit from the light.<sup>12</sup>

In our Galamban (home country), Murumbungutta (first spirits) formed in Narrawan (the sea), and then rose from Narrawan to live on the land. As time went on, these landscapes and seascapes became full of life. Each place and life form created a unique connection with people known as Moodgingal, and became our clan totems. Within Darug and Dharawal, many clans emerged. Trade, technology and economy flourished as Country was cared for harmoniously.<sup>12</sup>



'Native of S.E. Australia - method of ascending large trees - when hunting the Opossum' by Georgiana Lowe 1842-1850 Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales

## Features of Traditional Design

We know from the vast array of art that has been found within the Sydney area that there were four main techniques used over their 8500 years of occupation of this area; that is, after the last Ice Age.

They are– Paintings, Engravings, Drawings and Stencils. Along with songs and ceremonies, these techniques pass on important events or messages from one generation to another, just as Europeans use writing to pass on stories and ideas.

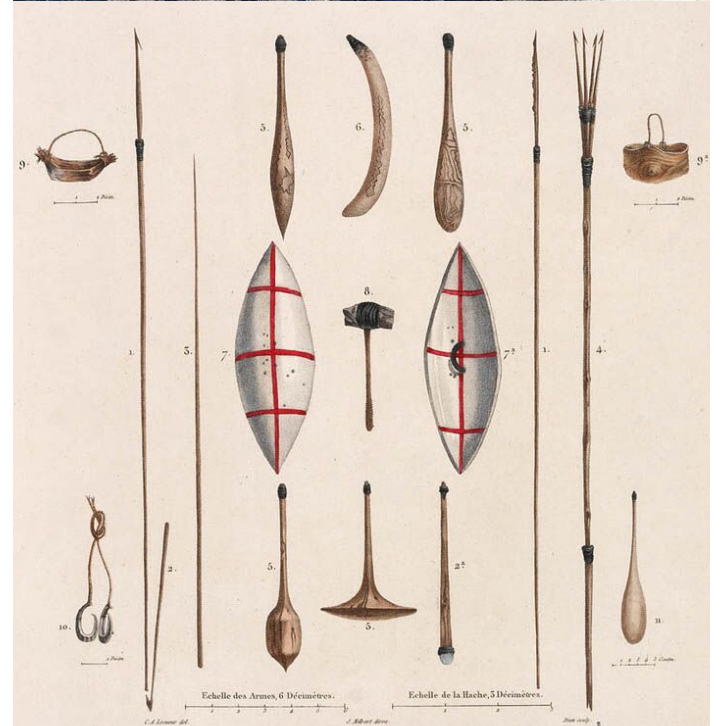
We can trace the movement of people by the paintings and engravings they left behind as each group had its own particular style. So for example we know that there were three styles of kangaroo, the oldest being stick ears, next came the pointy ears, and finally the round ears.<sup>13</sup>

**Paintings and Drawings** Outline and Infill This is when the outline of the subject matter was first drawn, usually in charcoal, and then filled in or as we would now say 'coloured or painted in'. Most of these can be found in rock shelters or overhangs protected from the weather. They could be bi-chrome (two colours) or multi-chrome (many colours).<sup>13</sup>

**Stencils**- are made by mixing clay and water together to make a slurry. They would put it in their mouth, then putting their hand on a rock surface they would purse their lips very tight and in a short, sharp spitting action spray the clay around their fingers, leaving an outline of their hand on the wall.

**Engraving** – Pecked and Abraded, used for rock carvings. The men would first choose the rock because of the significance of the location, for example a rock carving of an orca (killer whale) overlooks the perfect location to sight the orcas as they come into the entrance of the river. Using rocks sharpened into a point, the men would pick (peck) out holes to create the outline, then abrade or rub lines between the pecks to create a deep grooved outline about 25 mm deep. The concept is not dissimilar to our dot-to-dot drawing.

**Geometric Designs**- These are the most mysterious of all the graphic material found around Sydney. We know that designs of geometric type done as tree carvings were well known as individual and tribal markings, but there is a large body of circles, squares and elliptical shapes in stone carvings that remain unexplained.<sup>13</sup>



Top: Engraving in Dharawal state conservation area.

Bottom: Charles-Alexandre Lesueur, *Indigenous Weapons - Sydney Region (1802-04)*, Australian Museum

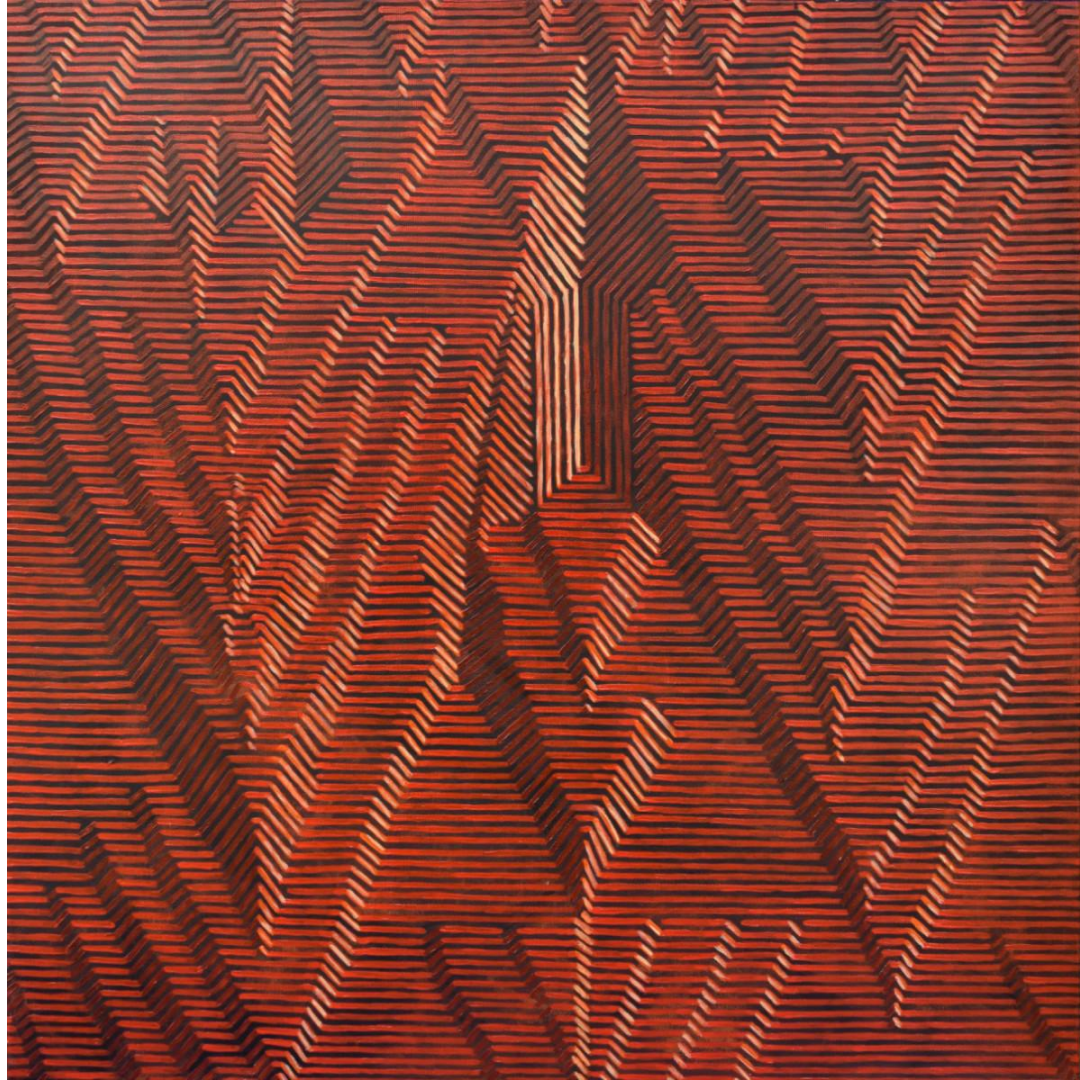


## Darug Design

**This painting by Dharug artist and academic Shane Smithers** employs the horizontal line representing Wiari, Mother Earth.

Along with Biari, Wiari is held in the highest respect—Together their generative power is the basis of Darug lore. Respect for Wiari is extended to our own mother's, to all women and their ability to create new life.

This painting represents Wiari extended and abstracted in a contemporary way to bring together the iconic elements of mother earth. The red lines twitch, rise and fall expressing eons of geological torment that gives the land its form.





# Key Issues

## Ground disturbance

For Darug people the ground plane is important and should not be disturbed too much or else you change the ecosystem.

**Any construction should have as minimal disturbance to the ground as possible.**



## Important viewpoints

Elevated spaces provide a good place to look at Country.

**How might the design cater for any important views points of Darug Country?**



## Celebrate Country

The project has the potential to celebrate Darug Country and culture.

**Can the project provide a space to celebrate this important Country?**



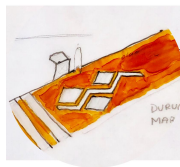
## Tell our stories.

**How might we tell the stories of this Country and it's first peoples?**



# Potential use of Darug designs

The Canterbury development has the potential to engage with Darug designs in the following (but not limited to) design interventions.



**Shared pathway**  
with patterns in  
coloured asphalt



**Resting place**  
treatment in  
pavement, seating,  
landscape art.



**Iconic sculpture** to  
mark important  
gateway or zone



**Undercroft art**  
  
Permanent or  
projected



**Wall treatment,**  
anti throw screens,  
abutments, noise  
walls etc



**Sculptures or  
murals,** message  
sticks, landscape  
communicating  
stories and design

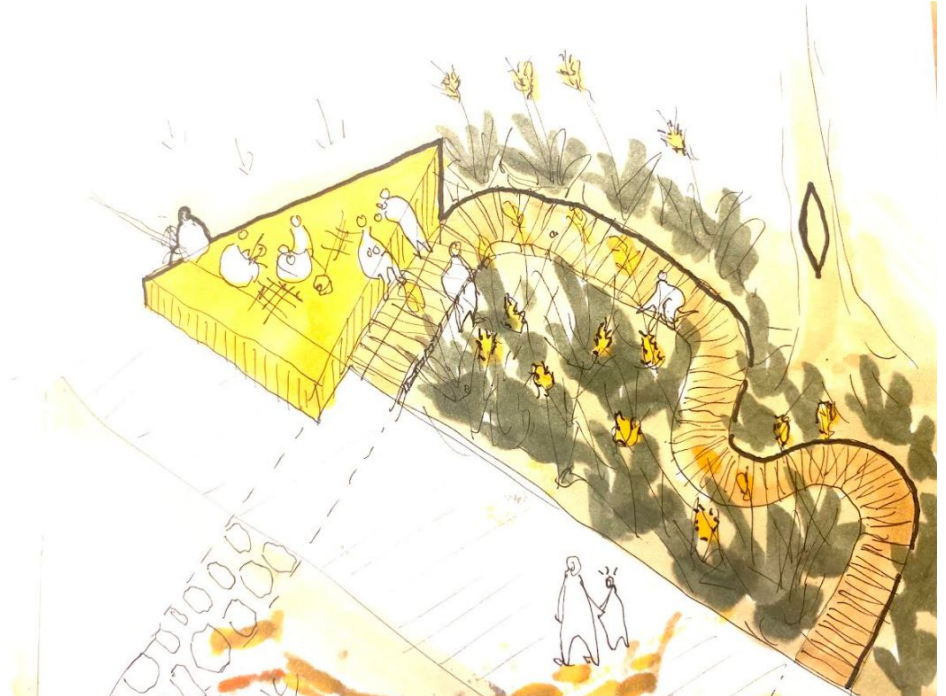
## Contemporary Aboriginal Art

Examples used in this  
photomontage art by  
Aboriginal artists  
Jonathan Jones and  
Daniel Boyd



## Connect site to Country

**This Country** wants to be a certain typology and species (sandy grasslands with water), lets not fight it but rather design for it and educate people about it. Slow people down, make a place that's inclusive of Aboriginal input.





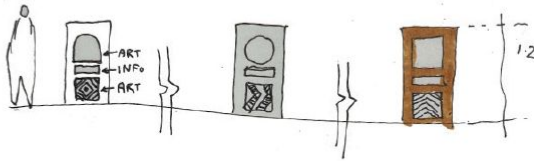
# Aboriginal Wayfinding

**Darug design vernacular** can be expressed through many elements of the projects including wayfinding, landscape design and art interventions.

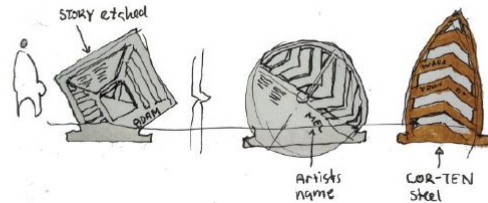
Traditional patterns abstracted and contemporary (example only) to represent Boonwurrung, Wirundjeri and Wathaurong



Simple signage / storytelling telling stories of the site, its significance, some language, art etc.



Iconic signage / storytelling telling stories of the site, its significance, some language, art etc.



**Bring Country back to the site** through traditional and contemporary landscape design elements such as sculpture (as seen below by Reko Rennie as an example) with hard and soft scaping.



## Precedents / material examples

**TCL Royal Victorian Gardens 2012** is a strong representation of Aboriginal Country through a bold material curation



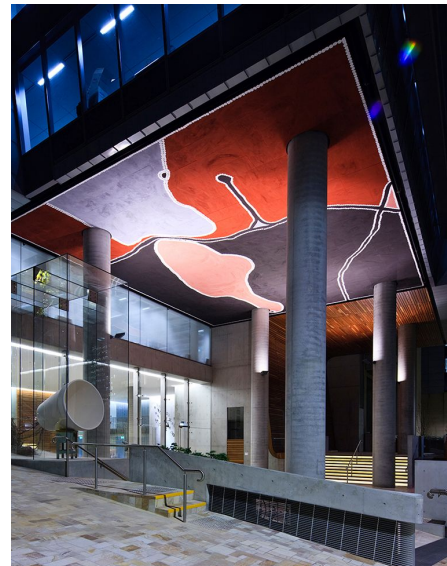
**TCL Royal Victorian Gardens 2012**



**Burwood Brickwoods** soffit art by Wurundjeri artist Mandy Nicholson



**Coca Cola Place, Nth Syd** has an amazing soffit art piece that, with the generous triple space height, provides an affective (in that it affects those who see it) example of a building and Aboriginal art integration.



# The Pedestrian Experience

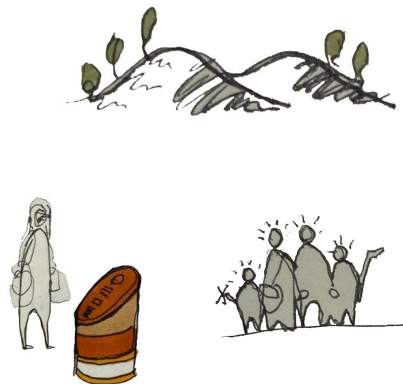
**Undercroft spaces, abutments and substructures can be activated with bright and meaningful Wurundjeri design** either through direct application, moulding / relief or light installation. This serves the benefit of beautifying otherwise dull features and providing engaging, fun, safe and accessible areas.



**Integrated street art with First Nation themes.** Example below is of Reid Highway WA upgrade with Noongar design translated by artist Drew Straker through a community led co-design process.



**Storytelling and wayfinding devices** help connect people and orientate them to Wurundjeri Country and the stories and history that came before.



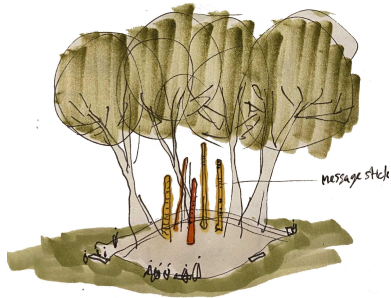
**A space to celebrate culture**, such as a viewing, yarning or sitting place with references to local design and stories allowing leaders to tell the story. Below example of the Kurrum Kurrum Bridge Yarning circle on Boon Wurrung / Bunurong Country.





# The Pedestrian Experience

**A space to celebrate culture**, such as a viewing, yarning or sitting place with references to local design and stories allowing leaders to tell the story.



**Integrated Art** High quality photo / print of local artist, or electronic or light display artwork. Example below is of Reid Highway WA upgrade with Noongar design translated by artist Drew Straker through a community led co-design process.

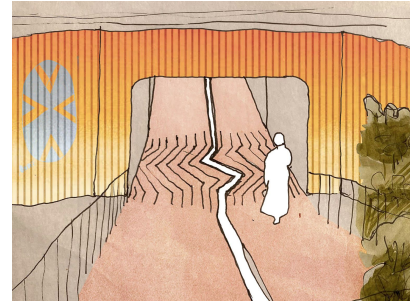
**Client:** Decmil / Main Roads WA



**Storytelling and wayfinding devices** help connect people and orientate them to Darug Country and the stories and history that came before. Signage, surface etching, sandblasting of language etc.



**Undercroft spaces, abutments and substructures can be activated with bright and meaningful Darug design** either through direct application, moulding / relief or light installation. This serves the benefit of beautifying otherwise dull features and providing engaging, fun, safe and accessible areas.





## Other examples of Aboriginal design on projects

In the Kulin nation (Melbourne) the Southern Program Alliance (SPA) Carum, Karrum Karrum Bridge Yarning circle and urban marker references Bunurong patterns and the story of Bunjil the creator who takes the form of an eagle.

Southern Program Alliance (SPA) project site office



Image courtesy of Level Crossing Removal Project

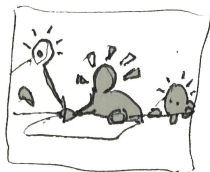


Image courtesy of Level Crossing Removal Project

# How to apply these themes

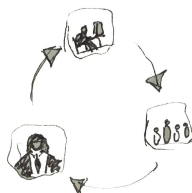
## 1. Engagement

The first step will be to engage with the relevant Aboriginal group (artist / elder, Lands Council etc), early and often, through a series of 'yarns' or conversations about the potential opportunities to incorporate the theming contained within the document (or other themes) into project outcomes.



## 2. Co Design

To kick of the co-design process design teams are given time to integrate the themes and ideas into the scope of the project



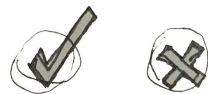
## 3. Co Design workshops

Engagement workshops with the relevant Aboriginal group will everyone gets in the room to co-design cultural solutions to project outcomes, yet Aboriginal voices should be given preference to ensure they are heard.



## 4. Endorsement:

All content that uses local Aboriginal theming will be endorsed by the Aboriginal group.



## 5. Other opportunities:

Should be highlighted and put forward to ensure the local Aboriginal community has opportunities, economic outcomes and better connections to their Country, through the project



## Further Indigenous participation

### 1. Consultation with Aboriginal Community. Elders, community, respected community members etc

The use of Aboriginal patterns and motifs must be done with approval - and hopefully involvement - from the elders and community. A document like this can begin these conversations between community.

We need to ask:

- Can we use your Countries patterns?
- Do you want to make patterns for the project?
- How would you like to be involved?

### 2. Engage Aboriginal artists and designers

Aboriginal artists should be engaged from the local community who acknowledge Country / culture in their designs

### 3. A Smoking Ceremony recommended on the site

Smoking Ceremonies are conducted by Aboriginal people with specialised cultural knowledge. The ceremony aims to cleanse the space in which the ceremony takes place (this site being of major significance). Given the significant nature of the ceremony, smoking ceremonies are usually only performed at major events.

### 4 Perform a Welcome to Country when site opens .

Generally, providers offer participants local Aboriginal history and cultural information and will go on to welcome the delegates to the Country.



'Two Aboriginal people spearing eels' by Joseph Lycett . National Gallery of Australia.

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