

## From Bus Driver Dreaming to Tjukurpa – the Uluru-Kata Tjuta Cultural Centre

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**Abstract:** *Separated from the surrounding landscape by walls, wiltjas and fences, with strategically framed views back to the rock, the Uluru-Kata Tjuta Cultural Centre offers opportunities for tourists to learn about Anangu understandings of place. Historically, this information has been conveyed through interpretations located in situ within the landscape of the national park or through the narrative of the organised tour. What then is the role of a museum space in a national park? Why go inside to understand what is outside?*

*To investigate these questions, this paper looks outside the discourses of museology and architecture, the orthodox methods for analysing the 'typology' of the cultural centre, and instead traces the development of the Centre within the spatial history of Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park. This analysis offers an alternative reading, revealing the Centre as a place of mediation and control, strategically located between landscape and tourist and Anangu and tourist. Further while the Centre fulfills a role in promoting Aboriginal culture, Anangu voices remain filtered through the display techniques of the museum. It is only through the introduction of Anangu tours that the museological driven interior is linked with the Tjurkapa of the exterior.*

**Keywords:** *Aboriginal, national park, interpretation,*

### **Spatial transformations**

Opening in 1995, the Uluru-Kata Tjuta Cultural Centre differs significantly from other national park interpretative centres, foregrounding Anangu understandings of place as Tjurkapa, a major change from the 'unpeopled nature' promoted by national parks since their inception. This paper traces this shift as part of a complex history of spatial transformations, reconfiguring the land from Aboriginal reserve, to national park and national icon and finally to a jointly managed national park, worthy of world heritage listing. Reflective of changing ideologies of tourism, Aboriginality, environmentalism and nationalism, this transformative history established agendas for what and who is considered 'inside' and 'outside' the park.

For the traditional owners<sup>1</sup>, this history has been one of extreme cultural and physical disruption, beginning with their isolation in 1920 within a vast Aboriginal 'sanctuary' in the south west corner of the Northern Territory, conceived as a zone of protection from

detrimental effects of white contact (Layton, 1986, p. 73). Despite this isolation, tourism encroached on the reserve as early as 1936, when Kurt Johannsen drove the first group of tourists to Ayers Rock (Parks Australia, 2000, p. 19). Initiated by Alice Springs tour operators, a successful campaign for white access to the land led to the 1958 decision to excise the area now known as the park, to form the Ayers-Rock Mt Olga National Park.

The National Park, to be managed by the Northern Territory Reserve Board (NTRB) was conceived with limited Aboriginal presence. Justification for their removal to surrounding outstations and missions stemmed from a policy of assimilation, supported by prominent Territorians arguing that the landscape was of declining significance to Aboriginal people. Additionally, Euro-Australian ideals for national parks asserted that 'people should not live in protected areas or consume their resources' (Haines, 1992, p. 14). 'Aboriginalism', comments Katherine Haines 'provided the legitimating discourse which enabled the park to be constructed in such a way as to be an instrument of dispossession as much as any other type of European land use' (1992, p. 13).

#### **Local to national space**

Prior to the 1940s, Ayers Rock contributed little to a national imagining of central Australia. By 1941, references in publications such as *Walkabout* magazine promoted Ayers Rock as the 'Red Heart of the Continent'.<sup>2</sup> Although claiming Ayers Rock as a white man's symbol, these descriptions relied on a construction of 'deep Aboriginality', emphasising the rock as a sanctuary for ancient Aboriginal tribes and their Dreaming (Cathcart, 2002, p. 216). Together with growth in domestic air travel and the promotion of Ayers Rock as a tour destination, these factors led to significant increases in tourism, rising from 4,000 in 1961 to over 30,000 in 1971 (Cathcart, 2002, p. 218). Paradoxically, this identification of Ayers Rock as a national aboriginal place occurred when most of the Aboriginal population was living outside the park, on the outstations and missions of Docker River, Ernabella and Areyonga.

Increases in tourism, together with poor management, led to a collection of ad hoc tourist infrastructure constructed close to the rock, including a ring road and airstrip (1958), camping areas (1967) and various hotels and motels. Commonwealth investigations questioned the ecological damage associated with this development, indicative of the emergence of conservation within the national parks movement (Alexander, 1987, p. 46). In 1973 a Parliamentary report recommended the re-siting of all visitor accommodation and airstrip outside the Park and the preparation of a management plan (Parks Australia, 2000, p. 22). Consistent with these early reports, was the 'reconciliation of tourist amenity with

environmental integrity', with expectations of the traditional owners to hunt, travel and conduct ceremony within the Park given little consideration (Alexander, 1987, p. 46).

By 1976, an area north of the Park was allocated for Yulara, a new tourist village. Despite a Federal government initiative, Yulara was developed by the Northern Territory Government who used the opportunity to further discourage Aboriginal presence in the park, arguing that 'once Yulara was built, there was no longer any commercial reason for Anangu to live and trade in the Park' (Rowse, 1987, p. 43). Included in the plans was an Anangu village which, besides providing accommodation, allowed tourists to view authentic Aborigines outside the park. Yulara was conceived therefore as a means for not only emptying Ayers Rock of tourist infrastructure, but also for ensuring no permanent Aboriginal presence – no-one would occupy this reinvented Northern Territory frontier.

### **National park to joint management**

As part of their commitment to the nation's cultural and natural heritage, the Whitlam government proposed Commonwealth management of all territory parks and reserves, establishing the Commonwealth Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service (ANPWS) in 1975 (Gibson, 1996, p. 42). The title of Ayers Rock was vested in the Director of the ANPWS, creating the Uluru (Ayers Rock-Mount Olga) National Park, repositioning the Park from a Northern Territory to a Commonwealth controlled place. While the ANPWS assumed strategic management for the Park, day-to-day responsibilities remained with the Territory Parks and Wildlife Service.<sup>3</sup> ANPWS management plans were the source of much conflict, with TPWS considering them overly responsive to Anangu, while Anangu rejected the 1981 draft plan, despite a proposal for an Aboriginal advisory committee (Snowden 1987, p. 61). To Anangu, the proposal continued to marginalise them as an external interest group, with their position clear: 'Aboriginal title with lease back [would] be the only basis of any management scheme' (Rowse, 1987, p. 42). After years of neglect Anangu, represented by Pitjantjatjara Council and Central Land Council, were now a powerful lobby group.

The election of the Hawke Government in 1983, together with legislative amendments,<sup>4</sup> created the possibility of joint management of the park between the ANPWS and Anangu. The NT Country Liberal Party mounted a heated campaign based on the rhetoric of patriotism and heritage, arguing that hand back 'places in the hands of just a few a major piece of Australia's material heritage' (Snowdon, 1987, p. 61). Central to the campaign was the argument that Aboriginal ownership would limit access to 'Australia's best known, best loved, cultural and spiritual symbol to a small group of the community' (Snowdon, 1987, p. 61).

This campaign, seeking to erase traditional owners from their land by adopting a construction of heritage exclusive of Aborigines failed, fueling animosity between the Territory and Commonwealth. In October 1985, title was granted to the Uluru -Kata Tjuṯa Aboriginal Land Trust, with the land leased back to the ANPWS for 99 years. Under this arrangement the park is managed jointly between a Board of Management with an Anangu majority, and the Director. The lease conditions protect Anangu rights to enter, use and reside in the Park, and promote Aboriginal administration and management of the Park.

The lease politically redefined Uluru as a site of co-existence, reinforced by the name change to Uluru-Kata Tjuṯa National Park in 1993. Aboriginal interests no longer lay outside of the National Park, at best in an 'advisory' capacity. Anangu were now physically located inside the National Park, while with the completion of Yulara, the major tourist infrastructure was repositioned outside of the Park. The landscape itself however remains open to a range of appropriations, leading Jacobs and Gelder to describe Uluru as a 'promiscuous sacred site', performing as a national icon, a pan Aboriginal place, as of 1987 a world heritage site and increasingly the focus of a global spiritual pilgrimage (1998, p. 115). As one recent tourist study concluded 'visitors prefer to see Uluru as a blank canvas' with Anangu understandings undermining 'their desires to project their meanings on the rock' (Baker, 2004).

While Anangu can control aspects of site management, this pre-knowledge or imagining of the landscape is beyond control, as is the power to limit tourism. Hand back however provided the first opportunity for Anangu to define their relationship with tourism. In the remainder of this paper I examine how Anangu have used their legislative and cultural repositioning to mediate their relationship with tourism through a cultural centre controlled by Aboriginal people.

### **From bus driver dreaming to Tjurkapa**

In 1985–86, the study *Sharing the Park, Anangu initiatives in Ayers Rock tourism* concluded Anangu were 'culturally confident while resolutely self-protective... [and] keen to derive financial benefit from a tourism accepted as a *fait accompli*' (Rowse, 1992, p. 249). Prior to hand back, Park interpretation was limited, with coach captain commentary a significant influence given that 50% of tourists arrived on bus tours (U-KT BoM, 1986, p. 52). Anangu were troubled by the many false stories or 'bus driver dreaming' in circulation, with the study concluding that coach captain's 'anecdotal commentaries are a poor medium in which to convey the contemporary state of Aboriginal traditions and their reactions to Europeans' (Dunlop & Snowdon, 1987, pp. 74–75).

While Anangu were concerned about increasing tourist numbers, they generally viewed tourism as positive, believing tourists should learn about their culture. As a means of ensuring a better cultural appreciation, it was decided to construct an Aboriginally controlled cultural centre. Conceived as 'a blend of the needs of Anangu culture and the demands of over 400,000 visitors a year' (Parks Australia, 2002), the Cultural Centre represents the first constructed place to consciously engage with Anangu perspectives of Uluru.

In September 1990, architect Greg Burgess was commissioned to prepare the design concept. Consultation with Anangu revealed that while they supported a symbolic 'bringing together' of themselves and tourists, this interaction needed to allow Anangu control over the level of contact, while not restricting the income earning potential for Anangu tourist enterprises (Burgess, 1990, pp. 13–14). The Centre would be 'an Anangu place where they invite visitors, not a tourist place which tolerates Anangu' (Burgess, 1990, p. 4), representing a significant change from historical relationships which 'not only denied Anangu's basic human right to assert ownership and control over their home country, but positioned them so deep within it, as to be part of its overall value as a commodity to be exploited within the entrepreneurial discourse of tourism'(Haines, 1994, p. 15).

### **Landscape to country**

Central to the Centre was the representation of Anangu understandings of the park, not as landscape or environment but instead as Tjurkapa. Unlike landscape which 'signals a distance between the place, feature or monument and the person which considers its existence' (Rose, 1996, p. 10), Tjurkapa 'embodies the principles of religion, philosophy and human behaviour that are observed in order to live harmoniously, with one another and with the natural landscape'(U-KT BoM, 2000, p. 17).

The designers<sup>5</sup> spent almost a month living in Mutitjulu, consulting with the community and commissioning paintings to explain major Tjukurpa stories. These paintings strengthened Anangu ownership of the project, as well as the designers' appreciation of Anangu's intentions, given that neither spoke the other's language (Burgess, 1990, p. 4). Further talks, together with consideration of the fragile environment, led to the siting of the centre in a scattering of desert oaks, two kilometres from the base of the rock. This placed the centre on the same side of Uluru as the fierce battle between Tjurkapa ancestors Kuniya, the female python and Liru, the male brown snake (Burgess, 1990, p. 4).

The building evolved into two separate structures, broken into a series of public and private spaces, clustered around a central courtyard. With walls of mud brick from local soil and

the low undulating roof clad in both copper and blood wood shingles, the centre sits in the foreground of Uluru, mimicking the form and dimpling of the rock surface. Since opening in 1995, the spatial and symbolic complexities of the design have been the subject of detailed critique. I am interested in how the Centre functions in the broader context of the national park and establishes relationships between tourists and Anangu.



*Figure 1: Exterior of cultural centre.  
(Photography: Jillian Walliss)*

A major design agenda was to alter the interaction of the visitor with the landscape, with the car park for instance strategically set back 50 metres from the building, part of a strategy to encourage tourists to look at the desert oak surrounds as they walk towards the Centre. On arrival, visitors are welcomed with the text 'We custodians of this place are really happy for you to come and look around our country' but are warned not to take photos anywhere in the complex. This welcoming clearly establishes the tourist as invited guest, however I argue that the restriction on photography, one of the most dominant tourist interactions with the park, represents a more powerful assertion of ownership.



*Figure 2: Approaching the centre from car park.  
(Photography: Jillian Walliss)*

Beginning with a combination of map-like paintings and text translations, Tjurkapa is introduced through the stories of Mala, the hare wallaby; Liru, the male poisonous snake; Kuniya, the female python and Lungkata, the blue tongue lizard. A small audio visual theatre

showing dances and songs is set back from the main area, while exhibits detail the role of women and men in Anangu culture. Text explains the rock's symbolic importance, aiming to discourage climbing, stating 'That rock is a really important sacred thing. You shouldn't climb it! Climbing is not a proper part of this place'.

These opening representations differ significantly from many national park interpretative displays highlighting scientific perspectives of unique flora and fauna. The rejection of the diorama for instance, in favour of Aboriginal understandings of landscape is striking. Instead, the Centre features what Western eyes would consider 'art' practices to represent Tjurkapa, a form not easily 'read' by visitors and rarely adopted in the National Park. Although meanings of paintings are explained by accompanying text, this approach raises questions of whether the visitor gains primarily an aesthetic appreciation of Anangu culture. For example, Lancashire concludes, in her study of Kakadu National Park, that representations of Aboriginality often 'provoke an aesthetic response, whether the representations take the form of paintings, dances and dramatic plays or "informative" brochures, national parks and cultural centres' (1999, p. 318).

Moving from these displays, visitors enter the Nintiringkupai room where more orthodox text and photos explain the European history of the land and political events leading up to hand back, as well as information on Aboriginal habitats of the Park. Smaller exhibits include a collection of sorry rocks, accompanied by apologetic letters, sent back from around the world. Centrally located within the room is the National Park information desk. This foregrounding of Anangu culture, with the relegation of the National Park as secondary, differs from other jointly managed national parks such as Kakadu, which features two visitor centres – Bowali offering a more standard national park perspective, although incorporating Indigenous views and Warradjan Aboriginal Cultural Centre presenting more detailed representations of Aboriginal culture in Kakadu.

The remainder of the Centre is filled by three commercial enterprises clustered around the central courtyard; namely Ininti Souvenirs and Café; Maruka Arts and Walkatjara Art.<sup>6</sup>

In 1987 Tim Rowse concluded that in order for Anangu to gain control over mass tourism – the 'hosts' must interact more fully with the 'guests' ( Rowse, 1987, p. 76). Visitors to the Centre expecting interaction with Anangu would be disappointed, as they remain largely absent. Instead, the architecture and exhibition offer a representation of place and culture, mediating between Anangu and tourists and the landscape and tourists. While allowing Anangu respite from direct engagement with tourists, this filtering of perspectives through the display techniques of the museum means knowledge of Tjurkapa may remain abstract

or viewed primarily as an aesthetic. It is not surprising given the vast number of tourists that many Anangu do not want direct interaction with visitors. Nor is it surprising that many visitors to an Aboriginally owned national park expect to see 'authentic' Aborigines in the landscape, a position unchanged since the first tourists to the area in 1936.

The introduction of Anangu Tours into the Cultural Centre therefore provides an important insertion, connecting the museological constructed interior, with the Tjurkapa of the exterior, and allowing the guests personal interaction with the hosts.

### **From inside to outside**

An Aboriginally owned tourist company, formed in 1995<sup>7</sup>, Anangu Tours offers walks hosted by Anangu guides speaking in their own language, accompanied by a skilled interpreter. Beginning in the Cultural Centre, the guides adopt story telling to transform the 'paintings' from aesthetic 'pictures' to maps explaining Anangu knowledge. The tour then moves outside to selected sites around Uluru that are then 'read' as physical evidence of these stories.

Through this narrative, the guides introduce a temporal perspective linking 'history' with the contemporary. Unlike images, paintings and text, the guide's stories are not 'enduring forms,' but are instead performative; constantly transformed with each telling. The experience is both cross-cultural and instructive, with landscape presented as knowledge, with the visitor constantly reminded of their privileged position as receivers of this knowledge. While placing pressure on the traditional owners to interact with tourists, it is this cultural exchange within landscape, rather than a static representation within a museum space, that offers the best possibility of inscribing the tourist 'blank canvas' with a better appreciation of Tjurkapa.

### **Conclusion**

After a long history of exclusion, Anangu are now politically, culturally and physically positioned inside the Park, although it remains a place they must share. Despite the intentions of the Cultural Centre and Anangu Tours to foreground Anangu perspectives, the visitor's experience remains one of mixed messages, reflected in the Park's major infrastructure such as the ring road, climbing chains on the rock and sun rise and sun set viewing points, reinforcing the landscape as something to be photographed and climbed. Similarly, souvenirs and packaged tours are strategically positioned to cater for those who wish to be culturally sensitive and those who don't.

No longer privileging Euro-Australian national park ideals, the experience of Uluru-Kata Tjuta in 2005, instead presents a messy co-existence with interpretation, tours, souvenirs and infrastructure producing parallel yet conflicting messages and values.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Traditional owners are the Yankunytjatjara and Pitjantjatjara people
- <sup>2</sup> Publications included Frank Clune's 1941 *Walkabout* article, Bill Harney's book *To Ayers Rock and Beyond* published in 1963 (first government ranger to Ayers Rock national park) and C.P Mountford's book *Ayers Rock. Its People and their Beliefs and their Art*, published in 1965.
- <sup>3</sup> The Territory Parks and Wildlife Service (TPWS) was the successor of the Northern Territory Reserve Board (NTRB)
- <sup>4</sup> *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1975* and the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1975*
- <sup>5</sup> Design team included architect Greg Burgess, landscape architects Taylor and Cullity and Sonja Peters.
- <sup>6</sup> Maruka Arts has its origins in Maruku Arts and Crafts which was established at the Muṯitjulu community in 1984 to market art and craft for artists living in Pitjantjatjara/ Yankunytjatjara /Ngaanyatjara land. Walkatjara Art emerged from a group of artists from the Muṯitjulu Women's centre who were commissioned in 1995 to provide ceramic tiles and murals for the Cultural Centre.
- <sup>7</sup> Anḡangu Tours was established in 1995 by local Aboriginal people, without government funding. It is owned by the Nyangatatara Aboriginal Corporation and has won many national and international awards, most recently a 2004 World Legacy Award honouring environmental and social leaders in tourism. Anḡangu Tours is the largest private sector employer of Aboriginal people in the region.