

# Raising Understanding of Indigenous Australian Culture through Creative Production in Interior Architecture

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**Abstract:** *The search of displaced peoples for ways to connect with their culture underlines the need to explore the role of Interior Architecture in cultural rebuilding and communication. This paper demonstrates a way of applying cross-cultural design processes to the built environment within a tertiary educational context. It will be of interest to Interior Design educators and researchers involved in teaching processes concerned with the conjunction of culture and meaning. The paper illustrates some of the processes currently being explored to engage students in culturally specific design enquiry and production. Examples of student outcomes are presented, and the broader impact of the initiatives on research and writing is discussed. These teaching/research initiatives are in a very early stage, there is much to learn, and there are very exciting possibilities. This paper is intended to present a tentative position for critique and feed back.*

**Keywords:** *culture and place; built environment; indigenous studies; Interior Architecture.*

## **Introduction: A small unit with growing impact**

This paper demonstrates how the conceptualisation of student learning around Indigenous Australian perspectives fosters student interest in exploring the topic further. Globally, the application of Eurocentric theories is being challenged as displaced peoples seek ways to connect with their culture through the built environment and through other avenues. 'However, design education is dominated by Eurocentric cultures' (Asojo, 2001, p. 46). This signals the need for new approaches to design. In North America, the Foundation for Interior Design Education Research requires interior design programs to provide 'learning experiences to develop consciousness of alternate points of view and appreciation of cultural diversity' (FIDER, 2000, p. 15).

With respect to Aboriginal Australia, there is limited literature on the meaning and application of culture and place in the built environment. Even less is written in the discipline of Interior Architecture. These issues underline the need for Interior Architecture education in Australia to explore its role in cross-cultural connectedness and communication. This paper illustrates some of the processes currently used to engage students in culturally specific design enquiry and production. Examples of how students have understood Aboriginal culture, what they learned about cross-cultural design, and the larger impact this has had on research and writing in the Department of Architecture and Interior Architecture are discussed. As these

teaching/research initiatives are in a very early stage, it is the hope of this researcher through discussion to foster further research through cross-institutional enquiry in the area.

### **Cultural communication and rebuilding through the built environment**

This project is set in a highly charged political climate, at a time when Aboriginal people are attempting to come to grips with their past and build a future. Self-governing organisations like the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Commission have initiated political actions, and assumed leadership positions using their experience with the dominant culture to develop strategies for the preservation of Indigenous life. From policies of self-determination the acknowledgement of a separate historical and cultural status has emerged. The strong association with the place and the land in Aboriginal cultural approaches to celebration and ritual is expressed in traditional cultural objects, ceremony and artwork. Issues of self-determination and reconciliation have raised the interest of Australians in the culture, history and spirituality of indigenous Australia.

Aboriginal people point out that they have been interacting with and intermarrying other indigenous tribes, and European and Asian immigrants for two hundred years. Therefore the various indigenous cultures have adapted in significant ways to patterns introduced to them or imposed on them. As Jim Morrison said in the *Ways of Working Workshop*, 'No Aboriginal today maintains an unaltered indigenous culture from European settlement time. No culture remains static, and Aboriginal culture is continuing, however altered from its pre-contact form. Aboriginals are similar to other non-Aboriginal Australians, wanting a good life for their families and themselves, with connections to, and pride in their roots' (2001).

The built environment can recognise as well as aid in the redefinition and development of indigenous self-determination. Atkin & Krinsky (1996) wrote, 'The apparent decline of universalising ideas in architecture...has brought forward the idea of cultural diversity and place identity as generating principles in architecture...The post-modern emphasis on specificity of design is now taken for granted.... Indigenous North American peoples are among those in recent decades who have commissioned culturally expressive museum buildings. ... Native Americans hope to foster 'group pride, intercultural understanding, and a positive self-image. These museums serve an important psychological need and provide stability and security (cited from Hansen, 1980, pp. 44-51). '...Tribal members expect the museum to examine their past and to present a modern identity for themselves and the non-Indian public' (p. 238). These views are reflected in Aboriginal Australia. Nancia Guivarra (Indigenous series producer ABC online) wrote, 'Aboriginal people live in urban places, yet those places contain no trace of us or the things we hold dear. So often we are alienated from our built environment' (Guivarra, 2002, p. 1).

In Australia there is an emergence of research groups, educational initiatives and built environment designers working in the area. For example the Merrima Aboriginal Design unit of NSW public works, headed by Aboriginal architect Dennis Kombumerri, provides consultation and design services for indigenous communities throughout Australia. 'Merrima is fully staffed by indigenous people and is committed to the struggle for self-determination through cultural expression in the built environment' (DPWS, 2003, p. 1). Projects using landscape architecture, interior design and architecture to create spaces supporting Aboriginal cultural expression include: The Googar Creative Work Centre for indigenous inmates at the Bathurst Correctional Centre and the Wilcannia Health Service, both in NSW. Of special note is indigenous team member Alison Page, an interior designer with a broad range of project experience. 'Alison's work explores links between cultural identity, art and the built environment' (PAHC, 2003, p. 3). In Western Australia Blacket Smith Architects, environmental scientist Dr. Martin Anda, and Landscape architect Grant Revell, all non-indigenous, have collaborated with Noongar communities in the development of culturally sensitive buildings, wetlands and infrastructure for the Wheatbelt Aboriginal Corporation.

The Faculty of the Built Environment at the University of New South Wales has recently introduced a Built Environment Preparatory Program (BEPP) for indigenous students. BEPP is an intensive seven-day Summer School program intended to introduce indigenous secondary students to career possibilities in the Built Environment. The program explores the importance of the built environment in indigenous life and aims to foster educational pathways. During BEPP students are introduced to indigenous practitioners and projects.

These projects and others like it form an important basis for further study of appropriate cross-cultural design. However, many of the projects are not documented, which is problematic; as Asojo (2001) has stated, 'Many educators have attributed noninclusion of cultural diversity in design education to a lack of precedents and nondocumentation' (p. 48). This lack of project description needs to be acknowledged, but it must not deter us from exploring new pathways in cross-cultural communication and design.

### **The furniture studio**

From this context the idea of exploring furniture as a cultural conveyor has emerged. Writings by Williams-Bohle, Kalviainen and Prown support the concept that '...[furniture] can be the provider of a multiplicity of meanings. It can be conceptual and embody abstract ideas, it can provide interaction and surprise that builds emotional and intellectual involvement...it offers possibilities for imagination and stories' (Kalviainen, 2000, p. 9). 'As material culture, furniture analysis is based on the assumption that culture is encoded in objects' (Prown,

1982 in Williams-Bohle & Caughey, 1996, p. 45). The development of designs expressing indigenous culture are limited in Australia, and as such, there is a need to find strategies in these areas and ways to expose young designers to these issues.

### **Intentions**

The fourteen week Furniture Studio begins with a careful study of an element of material culture, and concludes with the design and making of a full-scale prototype of a piece of furniture. This second year studio of primarily non-indigenous students introduces a vehicle to understand Aboriginal culture, helps the students develop a process for exploring cross-cultural perspectives, and then encourages the translation of chosen aspects of this research into pieces of furniture.

### **Presentations, visits and readings**

The 2002 Studio began with a narrative by Sandra Hill, Noongar woman, artist and Curtin Director of the Aboriginal Arts Program. Sandra told an intensely personal story of her family that covered the brutality of events resulting from the 1906 Act, which has led to two stolen generations. Most students had no knowledge of the Act and the resulting events. Her story had a profound effect on the students and made them appreciate the seriousness and significance of the design project. Discussion of the results of European inhabitation and policies of assimilation and segregation of Aboriginal people, leads to the exploration of various forms, material and uses of objects that may tell that story and/or offer hope for the future.

To give students an informed starting point, context and guidelines for working with Aboriginal culture, the design brief identifies appropriate problems for student research and cultural design application in the following ways:

- Presentations at the Western Australian Museum *Katta Djinoog Gallery (Aboriginal Gallery)* and the Noongar artefacts collection to explain meanings in art and artefacts relating to Aboriginal culture.
- Assigned reading and discussion of Indigenous perspectives.
- Examination, comparison and critical analysis of designed precedents in the representation of Indigenous perspectives in the built environment.
- Introduction to the resources at the Curtin Centre for Aboriginal Studies resource library.

### **Intensive workshops and collaborative feedback**

The first six weeks are devoted to intensive research, ideation and concept development through workshops and guest tutors. Through the students' own research, specific design exercises and the development of a cultural understanding the students create their design pieces. At the end of the six weeks the students build a half-scale model of their piece in the intended materials.

According to Williams-Bohle & Caughey (1996) '...models of artefact analysis...goes beyond exploring the artefact itself, establishing the cultural context as a basic motivator for the development, design, and use of the artefact. This model encourages students and professionals to integrate and explore the tacit and explicit cultural meanings of artefacts' (p. 49). The students are given the following brief: 'Select and illustrate an element of Aboriginal (preferably Noongar) culture that intrigues you. This can be an artefact, a piece of art, a dance or a ceremony. It can be traditional or contemporary. Instead of looking at the artifact itself investigate the processes that produced it. How did the Aboriginals come up with the vocabularies, forms and techniques? What processes did they use to abstract the landscape and social patterns of survival into their material culture and paintings? Through drawings, diagrams, keywords and text describe your analysis of your selected piece of culture'.

In the eight weeks following, the students produce design development drawings, finalise fixings and refine the piece before making the full-scale prototype. The project culminates with an exhibition of the furniture. The students' prototype is accompanied with a communication panel, describing the process, design meaning, function, material and construction.

### **Student processes and ideation**

The inclusion of a written panel, outlining the narrative of the piece has proved to be an essential tool, providing a link between the furniture and its cultural significance. This allows the viewer to understand the intent of the piece and the student to reflect on the process and meaning.

Kara developed her project through her analysis of artwork, writings and a narrative of the work of Aboriginal artist Peter Wood. Through the translation of form, colour and function the student designer created a piece of furniture that reflected the story, as she understood it. As this was a student exercise she did not have access to collaborate or consult with the artist, which would have been ideal.

'When two parts conglomerate in an Aboriginal painting by Peter Woods my personal understanding is grasped. Two creatures meet – they touch – against a backdrop of melded, flesh-like tones as if to describe the ever occurring cycle of rebirth and reproduction. The form of my piece is an expression of my reading (Figure 1). Two contrasting timbers melt into one another to form a new skeletal whole' (Pinakis, 2002, exhibition panel).



*Figure 1: Functional object with a cultural story interpreted by designer: Woods Meeting Stool (Project: Kara Pinakis, Photography: Chris Geoghegan)*

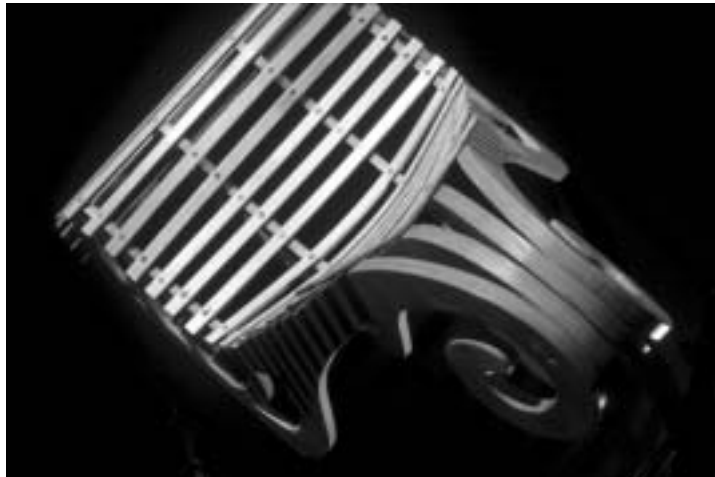
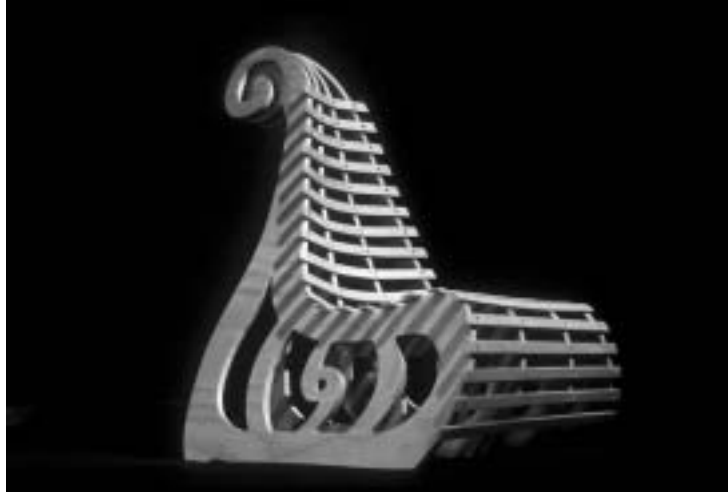
Melanie developed her project through her interpretations of the narratives of a community of weavers, their materials, processes and productions and the functional use of weaving in their lifestyle. This analysis was translated through her preliminary drawings and models into a design embodying these stories through form, material, detailing and use.

'Close-woven twilled baskets, *meriam epei*, were used by the Eastern Torres Strait Islanders for collection and storage. Weaving was commonly carried out in groups and was a time when stories and cultural knowledge was shared. Often mother and daughter would weave together and thus techniques were passed down the generations. The people were highly dependent on each other to acquire knowledge. The design of the *Epei Shelf* (Figure 2) reflects these concepts through its form and function. It is used for the storage of books – a contemporary source of knowledge, and each circular component is dependent on the next in order for it to stand. A weaving effect is achieved by the way in which the individual components interlock, and the use of round forms with square voids is similarly inspired by the basket. *Epei Shelf* also employs the idea of repeating simple elements to create a dynamic, functional object' (Masel, 2002, exhibition panel).



*Figure 2: Development of a functional object interpreting a cultural story: Epei Shelf  
(Project: Melany Masel, Photography: Chris Geoghegan)*

Examination of colonisation, cultural objects, ritual and initiation ceremonies has led some students to see the parallels in their own cultures. Victoria Tan, a young designer of Maori descent, researched and presented parallel stories of colonisation. Victoria wrote, 'I was surprised at the parallels between my people and the Aboriginal people, and wanted to build a piece of furniture that embodied hope for both our cultures. The value of having the opportunity to study Aboriginal culture then using my culture, Maori, to influence my design gave me an insight into myself' (Victoria Tan, 2002, cross-cultural entry). Her cross-cultural exploration (Figures 3 and 4) resulted in two awards.



*Figures 3 and 4: Functional object with a cultural story: Toi Ora Chair: Spiritual protector  
(Project: Victoria Tan, Photography: Chris Geoghegan)*

At the conclusion of the Furniture Workshop, we hold a public exhibition that is juried. This dissemination to a larger audience generates a greater interest in cross-cultural design and Indigenous perspectives. The jury includes indigenous members who provide invaluable feedback to staff and students. One Aboriginal jury-member commented 'I was surprised to find the distinct lack of obvious applied ornamentation. When you invited me I thought 'dot furniture' would abound and am pleasantly surprised to find not one piece in sight' (Jury comment, 2000). This illustrates the importance of exposing how the interior can foster a

meaningful cultural connection beyond 'such literal applications as dot painting on generic western objects' (Yabuka, 2001, p. 99).

### **Reflections**

After the 2000 workshop we used an interpretative approach to gauge the effectiveness of the program to meet the objectives of exposing students to indigenous cultural and appropriate processes of cross-cultural design. We recorded authors' reflections as teacher and learner, developed a questionnaire, and held a focus group session with a sample of students. The process and the outcomes of the studio were reflected on with Aboriginal educators and non-indigenous people experienced with working with Aboriginals and translating the culture into a built form. Their comments were insightful and changes were incorporated into the second workshop in 2002.

With 30 students in the studio, each exploring different aspects of the culture, it is problematic that students do not have direct access to indigenous persons to consult on their project. This was addressed in the second workshop in 2002, where I incorporated changes in response to reflections on the 2001 studio which were to narrow the investigation to a specific cultural group, region or artist and have a representative available to answer the students' questions as they arose. In consultation with Sandra Hill, I focused the second workshop on Noongar culture in the immediate vicinity of Perth. However, a series of events out of my control led to difficulties in accessing the materials and people for consultation i.e. the Noongar Museum collection unexpectedly closed, and as a result, several students directed their investigations beyond the Noongar culture.

There was a mixed reaction to the process of using cross-cultural study using indigenous issues as a starting point. Most of the students' experiences and attitudes were positive but largely uninformed, and some were negative. Initially many of the students were reluctant to delve into the culture for fear of offence, due to the charged political atmosphere and lack of clarity about boundaries.

Alternatively there were a small number of students who initially had no apprehension about undertaking Indigenous issues. One student writes 'Initially I was not worried about offending anyone. It wasn't till I started discussing my ideas and do more research that I started to modify my design, making sure it was appropriate' (Lommerse & McRobb, 2001).

Students learnt there are many groups of Aboriginal people, and each one has significant stories they are custodians of, and by individually researching a small component gained insight. Another student said, 'There is no textbook with all the answers on how to translate

culture to a material object, the process requires an eagerness to research, and a willingness to embrace' (Lommerse & McRobb, 2001).

In both years examination of the furniture pieces, and the descriptive panels, which accompany them, showed how much was learnt by the student. The depth of research undertaken appeared to be reflected in the built object. Those students who closely examined the cultural aspects of Aboriginal Australians appeared to get the most out of the unit. Their pieces showed underlying layers of meaning, considered and applied on many levels. On the other hand, those students who simply chose the environment as their key, or had a preconceived idea of what they intended to make, appeared to have a somewhat more literal design. There was a lack of depth to their narrative. This is not to say that the pieces themselves were not well-crafted interesting pieces of furniture, but for those who really pushed the boundaries, the level of research and consequent translation into built form, produced pieces which were rich in cultural context and narrative.

The reviewers' observation was that the student's bond with this project was very strong – there was a palatable synergy illustrated by the dedication to the projects and the meanings they were trying to communicate through their designs. For those that looked deeply into the background, there was utmost respect for the creators of the original cultural objects.

### **Emerging interests in cross-cultural research and creative production**

Following the initial furniture projects, interest emerged from Honours students. These research/creative projects span two semesters, allowing for appropriate and ongoing consultation with the indigenous people who are interested in the creative production. Oliver Davis wrote about his work in progress; work titled: *Culturally Specific Indigenous Australian Housing: Creating a Home for the Guṇḍharra family of The Yolṅu People*. He said, 'The Guṇḍharra family is a contemporary Yolṅu family in transition. Family holidays are spent on their tribal land in the Wessel Islands where they participate in traditional activities. The rest of their time is spent in Darwin where they lead a more Western lifestyle. However, their culture remains strongly evident in their daily activities. These issues will greatly influence the design process undertaken in creating a family home for the Guṇḍharras. The significance of this project for me will be in gaining a greater understanding of Yolṅu culture and how a design can be developed to meet its needs. I would also hope that the final design could be used as a helpful prototype for future dwellings for the community' (Davis, 2003, Research proposal).

Other research dissertations and creative projects investigating Australian Indigenous culture and the built environment are noted as follows:

Ward, Jacki. (2001). *Kwobadak Willgi (Pretty Colour): Appropriation of Nyoongar Colours into the Narrogin Townscape*.

Fego, Cristina. (2001). *Aboriginal Painting + Design + Environment = Cultural Education: the ideas behind two Aboriginal painters work was used to create interior space for an art education and gallery facility, located in a culturally sensitive site*.

Nguyen, Diana. (2001). *Rhythm and Beat: Deconstructing and reconstructing the music and dance of indigenous Australian culture: the design of a performance venue in an attempt to 'represent' Aboriginal performance in a way that can be appreciated by all cultures*.

Gunawardena, Dilini. (2002). *The construction of Aboriginality: the built environment and representation of Aboriginal culture*.

Genat, Asha. (2002). *Inside/outside: power, knowledge and the architectural hybrid. A review of the inclusion or marginalisation of the Indigenous groups of the Karajini Interpretive Centre*.

A second emerging interest is student/lecturer research and writing partnerships – stimulating confidence in independent writing and increasing exposure of the cultural awareness projects. McRobb, then a 3rd year student, reflected on being involved in the process, 'Being involved in critically reviewing our student work beyond its conception gave me a different perspective. I was able to see how cultural issues and political conflicts impacted on student design decisions' (2001). After initial guidance, the student team developed a professionally prepared article for publication (Figure 5).

## **Conclusions**

The value of education in dispelling myths and innuendo and providing a forum for active learning has been shown through the Furniture Design Workshop. Students confirm that by building and publicly presenting a manifestation of their research they gain a deeper understanding of the culture. Williams-Bohle & Caughey (1996) concluded that, 'The cultural perspective adds a dimension of complexity that professionals cannot only consider, but also incorporate, in the design of meaningful interior environments' (p. 49).

This is only a beginning, as cross-cultural communication goes both ways. I started from my access point within the institution of the university. Although this may not be ideal from a politically correct perspective, because of concerns of cultural pilfering, it is necessary to start somewhere as, 'Aboriginal Australia desires that all Australians have some understanding of where indigenous peoples' ancestral roots lie as well as their history since white settlement, in order to make sense of the present and move to the future' (Ways of Working Workshop, 2001).

**CROSS-CULTURAL  
EXPLORATION @ CURTIN**  
WORD: NARELLE THORNTON

Interior architecture students at Curtin University in Perth have taken a cultural leap that the majority of the nation is yet to do. As part of a furniture design program, the students explored cross-cultural interpretation, creating objects imbued with a level of understanding of Aboriginal culture. Workshops were carried out with Desert Designs, an Aboriginal art, clothing and textiles company. In a market "where dots have become the common currency for Aboriginal aesthetic expression", the company has recently seen itself entering a new phase portrayed by the theme Art, Culture, Environment". Curtin students were asked to design and make a full-scale prototype of a piece of furniture or a functional object to reflect this theme, and in doing so, attempt to marry an understanding of Aboriginal culture with contemporary lifestyles.

→ A survey of recent attempts at such a cultural marriage in the design field is disheartening. There are notable architectural exceptions, such as the buildings and spaces created by the Merrima Aboriginal Design Unit in Sydney. It seems, however, that many recent attempts to marry the two nations have been limited to such liberal applications as dot painting on generic (Western) objects, with tourists being the target group. Meaningful connection is often lacking. The program at Curtin was conceived by senior lecturer Marina Lommerse, with assistance from visiting fellow Mark Tolerton, who has been practicing industrial design in Sydney for over years. His Potted Plants were part of the SP Research feature in the 2008 special edition of Inside3. "My intent," said Marina Lommerse, "was that in the context of industrial design, students would explore links with the community and cross-cultural interpretation." Understanding the differences between indigenous and white Australian cultures was an integral part of the interpretive and design processes. So too was a creative understanding of the Australian domestic lifestyle.

→ Designers explored the form, function, materiality and colour of various aspects of Aboriginal art and culture, and the Australian environment. Some responses were essentially wit: Steve Davis transformed the traditional ground art of Aboriginal ceremonial gatherings into the jarrah top of his coffee table 'Weaving Place', boulders in the outback landscape became the hourglass rubber balls which give shape to Isabel Carham's 'Ludler's Lounger'. Other designers began with more abstract notions. The three rings of Geoffrey Broadbent's table lamp 'Fire Dreaming' represent the three children punished by fire in the story of the Aboriginal painting of the same name. → Desert Designs principal David Booth feels that the products are conducive to the new direction of the company, and are successful for giving both designer and consumer an introduction into cultural heritage. As functional objects, rather than art works (which are abstract by intent), the products demonstrate new possibilities for the widening of cultural understanding. They offer a vehicle for bringing cultural concepts into the home, beyond the stronghold of superficial tourist items.

L. O'Farrell, Michael, James Pike: Desert Designs 1981-1998, Art Gallery of WA, Perth, 1998, p.14



Figure 5: By invitation 'Weaver Screen' (illustrated) was on exhibition at the Australian Craft Council 'Object Gallery' in Sydney in 2001.

(Yabuka, 2001, p. 99)

Teaching non-Aboriginals about cross-cultural issues is, however, only half of the equation. The next steps are to create a pathway for work with Aboriginal designers to assist them to express their culture and stories, and to get non-indigenous and indigenous students working together to create a truly cross-cultural experience. The longer-term objective is to engage with the aims and aspirations of indigenous communities, to bring together indigenous

knowledge, and to bring professional design skills and research from the university to the communities.

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