Australian urban environments are situated on unceded traditional lands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities. Urban planning and design professionals have an opportunity to include Indigenous voices and perspectives in their practice. Research by the Clean Air and Urban Landscapes Hub has reviewed both existing research on best-practice approaches to inclusion of Indigenous people and communities in urban development and planning projects, as well as current practices in the sector. In this fact sheet, we discuss settler-colonialism, how it shapes urban environments in Australia, and how urban-affiliated professions can begin to recognise and deepen their relationship with Indigenous communities, sovereignties and Country through their work.

What is Settler-Colonialism?

- Settler-colonialism is the practice of erasing Indigenous identities, peoples, communities, traditions, law and access to land through the imposition of laws and practices that have been developed in other places.
- In Australia, land was taken from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples under the doctrine of terra nullius, a claim that perpetuated the myth that Australia was not settled prior to colonisation.
- This enabled erasure and dispossession of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from their lands, enabling new forms of settlement to be constructed in their place.

What is Settler-Colonial Urbanism?

- Planning and urban design professions have traditionally drawn on imported conceptions of how cities are designed and how they should function. This can be seen in the transplanting of systems, institutions and political-economic structures from an Anglo-European context.
- This influence works to silence, ignore and erase the presence and history of Indigenous people living in urban environments and the histories of the people on whose land Australian cities are built.
- Urban planning and design practices and education have systematically ignored the position of Indigenous peoples in urban environments, or consideration of cities as Country.

Image: Birrarung Marr, Melbourne. ‘Birrarung Wilam’ – meaning river camp – is an environmental art project made up of several interrelated elements that celebrate the physical and spiritual connections between Indigenous people and place. Pictured are the five shields.
How can urban planning and design professions begin to understand and care for cities as ‘Urban Country’?

• Australian cities are located on Country, and because of this are Country.
• The locations on which our contemporary cities stand have a long and deep history as sites of human habitation.
• Cities on these sites may visibly erase the sites where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities lived, but they do not erase the place, or Indigenous peoples’ connections and laws.

"True urban justice in settler colonial societies must always have at its foundation a commitment to recognizing, supporting, and reestablishing Indigenous connections to urban land. Anything short of that means that our cities will continue to uphold settler colonial structures of domination."

– Tina Grandinetti 2019, Urban aloha 'aina: Kaka‘ako and a decolonized right to the city, p.243

How is connection to Country and Indigenous sovereignty reflected in your planning and design practices?

<<intentionally blank>>

What are urban planning and design professions doing to deepen engagement with Indigenous peoples and communities?

• Urban planning and design professions and accreditation bodies currently recognise the need to include Indigenous voices and perspectives in their practice.
• However, there is a gap between the stated intention and evidence of this in action.
• The Planning Institute of Australia, Architectural Institute of Australia and Australian Institute of Landscape Architects have expressed a commitment to further develop relationships with Indigenous people and communities.

About the Clean Air and Urban Landscapes Hub

The Clean Air and Urban Landscapes (CAUL) Hub is funded by the Australian Government’s National Environmental Science Program. The remit of the CAUL Hub is to undertake “Research to support environmental quality in our urban areas”. This includes research on air quality, urban greening, liveability and biodiversity, with a focus on practical implementation of research findings, public engagement and participation by Indigenous Australians. The CAUL Hub is a consortium of four universities: The University of Melbourne, RMIT University, the University of Western Australia and the University of Wollongong.

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More information

• Three-Category Approach: https://nespurban.edu.au/3-category-workbook/

References