



Clean Air and
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Hub

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Situational Analysis of current engagement practices with Indigenous communities within Australia and steps towards deepening engagement practices

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All Australian cities are located on unceded Indigenous land. We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of lands across Australia, their Elders, Ancestors, cultures and heritage. In particular we acknowledge and pay our respects to people of the Woiwarrung and Boowarung language groups of the eastern Kulin nation where RMIT University is located.

About the Clean Air and Urban Landscapes Hub

The Clean Air and Urban Landscapes Hub (CAUL) is a consortium of four universities: The University of Melbourne, RMIT University, the University of Western Australia and the University of Wollongong. The CAUL Hub is funded by the Australian Government's National Environmental Science Program. The task of the CAUL Hub is to undertake research to support environmental quality in our urban areas, especially in the areas of air quality, urban greening, liveability and biodiversity, and with a focus on applying research to develop practical solutions.

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Introduction

Planning, architectural and landscape design are professions that shape the nature and functioning of urban places. In the Australian context, all lands on which cities and urban environments are situated are the unceded lands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities (Ngurra et al. 2019). This research is examining how and in what ways the urban professions are responding to this fact. While the professions aspire to foster the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives in urban development, there is a gap in the materials and practices provided by professional accrediting bodies to support a shift towards engaging in respectful relationships with Indigenous communities, sovereignties and Country in the context of the urban environment. This situational analysis provides a snapshot of current practices within the Australian Institute of Architects (AIA), the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects (AILA) and the Planning Institute of Australia (PIA) in relation to engagement with Indigenous communities within Australia and current resources for supporting these professions in this space.

Settler Colonialism and Australian Cities

Australia was home to over 500 Indigenous nations prior to colonisation by the British in 1788 under the doctrine of *terra nullius*, a claim that was used by colonial governance to perpetuate the myth that Australia was not settled prior to colonisation (Watson 2014). This falsehood was used as the impetus for British expansion in Australia and brought with it the transplanting the systems, institutions and political-economic structures from an Anglo-European context into an environment where there had been governance systems, laws and traditions of knowledge that had been perpetuated for at least 65,000 years. Wolfe (2006) describes the process of importing structures and apparatuses of the colonising force as a process of erasure that systemically works to remove and silence Indigenous ways of living and connections to land and supplants them with settler-colonial logics and structures. This dispossession of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from their lands, enabled new forms of settlement to be constructed in their place (Porter 2018). The assumptions and practices of the urban professions are therefore caught up in these historical legacies of erasure and dispossession, and are prone to perpetuate these legacies through disciplinary norms, regulatory tools and urban development education (Wensing & Porter 2016).

In Australian cities planning, architectural and landscaping practices have traditionally drawn on *imported* conceptions of how urban environments are designed and should function. The influence of planning and urban development practices, transported from other countries and contexts, works to silence and ignore the presence and history of Indigenous people living in urban environments and the histories, living cultures and laws of the people on whose land Australian cities are built. This approach to urban development privileges settler-colonial ways of thinking about what a city is and has the capacity to be. When the education, practices and laws of the urban professions supplant the presence of Indigenous peoples' histories and connections with place, these practices further the erasure and dispossession of continuing Indigenous connection to urban places. Urban planning and design practices and education have *systematically ignored* the position of Indigenous peoples' in urban environments, or consideration of cities as *Country*.

Understanding Cities as Urban Country

Australian cities are located *on Country*, and because of this *are Country*. The locations that our contemporary cities stand on have a long and deep history as sites of human habitation. The construction of cities on these sites may visibly erase the sites and places that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities lived, but they do not erase the place, or Indigenous peoples' connections or laws. Often discussion of *being on* and *caring for Country* shift focus away from urban environments to more remote places and spaces that are deemed to be 'untouched', to some extent by settler-colonial influences and buildings (McGaw, Pieris & Potter 2011; Ngurra et al. 2019). The creation of this binary, of an Indigenous place located *elsewhere*, *away* from cities and urbanised centres and into the bush perpetuates a narrative of erasure and implies a belief in the object permanence of cities as structures that are indelible, and *other* to Indigenous places in Australia.

Much of the existing research demonstrates how the urban planning and design professions have contributed to the perpetuation of this narrative. Porter (2017, 2018) highlights the lack of meaningful engagement with Indigenous people and communities within Australia by planning professionals and educators and emphasises the need for epistemic and ontological change in the ways that the discipline perpetuate settler-colonial logics and norms. Urban planners and designers have an opportunity, and a responsibility, to make meaningful changes in the ways their disciplines interact and work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in ways that move beyond settler-colonial conceptions of cities and the lands on which they are situated. Understanding cities-as-Country is an important step towards this aim as it enables Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples to reinterpret what city spaces are and what they have the capacity to be.

Snapshot of Current Practices in the Urban Planning and Design Professional Associations

Urban planning and design professions in Australia have peak professional bodies that facilitate national standards for professional practice and accreditation. Currently urban planning and design professional disciplines and accreditation bodies recognise the need to include Indigenous voices and perspectives in their practice. However, there is a gap between the stated intention and the evidence present of this in action. A survey of three professional bodies: AIA, AILA and PIA was undertaken to identify current resources and publicly facing information in relation to how each group advises members to engage with Indigenous people and communities. The table below shows an overview of each organisation's engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities using the following measures: (i) an acknowledgement of Country being included on the website and easily searchable; (ii) an active Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP); an Indigenous

advisory board or similar; (iv) guidelines for engagement with Indigenous communities; and (v) professional development programs.

Table 1: AIA, AILA and PIA Indigenous Representation and Engagement, August 2020

	Acknowledgement of Country	Current RAP (Reconciliation Action Plan)	Advisory board	Engagement Guidelines	Professional Development*
AIA	x	x	✓	x	x
AILA	✓	x	✓	x	x
PIA	✓	x	x	x	x

*public facing information on website

Australian Institute of Architects (AIA) express the importance of Indigenous engagement on their website through highlighting Indigenous housing initiatives, participation in exhibitions and awards received in relation to Indigenous housing. In 2019 AIA put forward a call to establish a First Nations Advisory Group, with the aim of developing a *Statement of Commitment to First Nations People's*. On the 22nd July 2020 the statement was approved by AIA and sets forth a commitment to 'reciprocal partnership and relationships' with Aboriginal and Torres Strait people. AIA do not have a current RAP and do not provide engagement guidelines to members in best-practice on how to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait people and communities. No externally facing professional development materials are present on their website.

Australian Institute of Landscape Architects (AILA) established a RAP in 2018 and a *Connection to Country* position statement, outlining a commitment to work in respectful and reciprocal partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait people and communities. The position statement provides a unified position and recognises that all Landscape Architects are working on Country intrinsically through their professional practices. The RAP expired in June 2019 and currently there is no subsequent RAP, or planning towards one, listed on the website. AILA provides guidelines for members on when/how Welcome to Country and Acknowledgements of Country should be conducted. There is no supporting material available for practitioners in identifying, contacting and working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Planning Institute Australia (PIA) emphasises the importance of Indigenous engagement in its accreditation policy for planning professions. PIA do not have an active RAP in place, however did so from 2007-2011. PIA provides guidelines for members on when/how Welcome to Country and Acknowledgements of Country should be conducted. There is no supporting material available for practitioners in identifying, contacting and working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. PIA does not currently have an Indigenous advisory board, or explicit focus on their website showing how Indigenous perspectives, voices and advice is incorporated in PIA. The 2031 PIA Strategic Plan does not highlight any priorities or goals in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.

Establishing and Deepening the Relationship with Indigenous Communities, Sovereignties and Connections to Country

Indigenous identities, cultures and connections to land are erased through settler-colonial urban planning and design processes in Australia, which in practice operate to exclude Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and participation in planning and development processes. There is a need for urban planning and design professions to reframe the ways they work and engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on the basis of reciprocity and respect (Porter & Barry 2016; Hernández et al. 2020). Current actions by professional bodies in this space show an aspiration to be more inclusive and partner with Indigenous communities in ways that are respectful and meaningful, however there is more that needs to be and can be done in this space.

Outlined below are a series of steps that all planning and urban design professions are able to engage with in their day to day working practices, that begin the steps on the journey towards being in relationship with Indigenous people, communities, sovereignties, and connections to Country. The below steps provide a suggested approach that professional bodies and practitioners can follow and are a *starting point* for further action and engagement with Indigenous communities and people.

Reflection – non-Indigenous Australian planners and urban designers can reflect on how their lives, work and ways of living contribute to the silencing and erasure of Indigenous peoples, their cultures and their access to land/connections to Country. This is especially important in the context of urban environments where city developments have physically erased the histories and visibility of Indigenous people.

Recognition – planning and urban design practices in Australia occur on unceded lands. By recognising *whose* Country work is occurring on, it is possible to start engaging in the beginning of a dialogue with the people may be affected by a development or modification to a place.

Relationship building – through the combination of self-reflection and recognition, a relationship can begin to be developed between people working on a project and the people whose Country on which a project is situated.

Respect – for trust to be built and maintained respect of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their knowledge, culture, practices and connections to Country as sovereign people, communities and nations.

Remuneration – the skills, knowledge, culture and perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities are valuable, and if they are engaged to provide advice, insight or perspective on a project, remuneration or a reciprocal form of engagement is an essential component of respectful engagement.

Conclusion

This situational analysis has provided an overview of how urban planning and design accreditation bodies within Australia currently support engagement with Indigenous communities. The analysis highlights the limited level of resourcing and information available on the PIA, AIA and ALIA

websites, and the opportunity present for the professional bodies to take a stronger leading role in supporting their practitioners to build capacity in this space. While there is a stated commitment to developing respectful and reciprocal ways of working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities within Australia, in practice there are significantly more actions that could be taken by the professional accreditation bodies to lead and support members in the practice of being in relationship with Indigenous sovereignties and connections to Country. Recognising urban environments within Australia as intrinsically Indigenous places with long standing histories and continuing relationships, will shift the practice of the urban professions toward understanding cities as Country. By centring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities in planning and urban design practices, caring for Country and respecting Indigenous connections to a place become part of the fabric of urban living, rather than an afterthought or a tick-box exercise. In this analysis of practice across three professional bodies, there are several key opportunities identified for shifting the understanding, awareness of practitioners and enhancing practices of respectful engagement. The five steps outlined above provide a starting point for this at both the individual level of the practitioner/organisation and then more broadly by the professions and their accrediting bodies. Cities in Australia are located on unceded Indigenous lands. Urban planning and design professionals have a responsibility to recognise this in the ways they work, and opportunity to engage in actions that will increase respectful engagement through: relationship building; respecting Indigenous knowledge and voices; properly valuing skills, knowledge and culture of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; and ensuring meaningful inclusion of these perspectives at all stages of urban planning, design and development.

The first steps in this journey are reflection on the part of the practitioner and the professional bodies in recognising both the opportunity and the responsibility to meaningfully engage and build relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across Australia. Following this is a commitment to take meaningful action and develop ways of working that challenge traditional practices of urban planning and design to create a more inclusive projects that are co-designed at all stages with stakeholders from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and meaningfully incorporate their perspectives and feedback. Planning and urban professionals can start to reframe their practice and be supported in this work through the use of the Three-Category Approach developed through the CAUL Hub (<https://nespurban.edu.au/3-category-workbook/>). The next steps of this project are meeting with people in the professions and working towards a co-designed tool to help support and embed Indigenous engagement and inclusion in urban planning and design.

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