

# Aboriginal cosmotechnics:

## Alison Page and Paul Memmott, *Design: Building on Country*

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### Abstract

The unassuming title of the 2021 Australian book *Design: Building on Country* positions Aboriginal making as potentially cosmotechnical, since it restores the interdependence of what in the west would be categorised as nature, culture, technology. As the editor of the series to which the book belongs reminds us, 'in the Aboriginal worldview, everything starts and ends with Country. ... Everything is part of a continuum, and endless flow of life and ideas emanating from Country' which 'includes the built environment and objects, which reflects both a conceptual and a physical process with ancestral and cultural dimensions'.

And yet colonisation of the continent all but eradicated Country as it had evolved over 65 000 years. So having carefully pieced together the objects, spirituality, camps, shelters, materials and kinship of what Aboriginal design was (and is, in isolated ways), the

book posits something more synthetic – an 'offering', as its conclusion graciously puts it, in which 'this new Australian design will improve the wellbeing of people and create places that ultimately mean more to all of us. It will extend Country, not abrogate it, and it should be created with that in mind – because we are all connected to Country'.

### Keywords

Aboriginal, cosmotechnics, Country, indigenous design, decoloniality

The indigenous is one of the wells to which the modern disciplines of architecture and design periodically return, currently in response to demands for decoloniality in the face of inequality and climate change. Except we cannot return; so the exercise is always synthetic, always new, and abstracted, lest it become an exercise in pastiche or appropriation. Lately, the possibility of the 'cosmotechnic' has suggested a mode of criticality in design – an indigenous modernity, we might say. As Margo Neale – senior Indigenous curator at the National Museum of Australia, and the series editor of Thames & Hudson Australia's new seven-book *First Knowledges* puts it, 'Throughout the series, we acknowledge expertise from both Aboriginal and Western disciplines. This form of co-authorship is in the spirit of reconciliation, working well together interculturally'.<sup>1</sup>

*Design: Building on Country* is part of the *First Knowledges* series, alongside titles on Indigenous songlines, farming, astronomy, plants, law and innovation. Its two authors switch responsibility for authorship chapter to chapter so that it is co-written, Neale explains, from paired perspectives: 'Alison [Page] writes from an Indigenous perspective on her areas of expertise: design



and storytelling; while Paul [Memcott] writes from a Western perspective on his areas of expertise: anthropology and architecture'.<sup>2</sup> Page is a Walbanga and Wadi Wadi woman from the Tharawal and Yuin nations; an architect, mentored by Glenn Murcutt among others, and associate dean at the University of Technology in Sydney.<sup>3</sup> Memcott, a transdisciplinary researcher based at the University of Queensland, is of Scottish descent, and has worked since the 1990s on the reformation of institutional architecture in a culturally appropriate way for Aboriginal people.

### Aboriginal design and its cosmology

Some principles of Aboriginal design – functionality, sustainability, storytelling – emerge through the book's study of Aboriginal tools and Aboriginal relationships to land and to others. Tools include the iconic boomerang, fish traps (notably the development of fibre and the use of spinifex, a type of grass whose unusual properties are now being developed with industry collaborators – 'from the Dreaming to the market!')<sup>4</sup> and woomera (a multi-functional spear-throwing device that could also carry plants and seeds and cut food – 'it was the original Swiss Army knife').<sup>5</sup> Indigenous land designs – found in earthworks, camps, kinship and songlines – host the lightest of architectures: trenches, pitfalls, hunting hides, ground ovens, wells, storage platforms and posts, ceremonial stone arrangements, circular mounds, stone quarries, ochre pits and middens, foliage walls. Prior to colonisation, Aboriginal people moved around and camped on their own defined land estates, or Country, on a seasonal basis, the better to exploit available foods and resources, serviced by lightweight versatile tool kits. The range of travel was restricted by territorial rules and by the need to maintain religious obligations.<sup>6</sup> The mobile hunter-gatherer lifestyle needed relatively impermanent architecture, but for those in localities with plentiful food resources, more permanent camps could be established, which were often seasonally occupied, and sometimes located for the support of childbirth.<sup>7</sup> Most language groups employed a small repertoire of shelter types, such as the roughly circular domed shelters built throughout the western desert by curving bushy limbs inwards.<sup>8</sup> Camps would be laid out in clusters of shelters, socio-spatial patterns involving some principle of common social identity or relationship.<sup>9</sup>

Aboriginal spatial design prioritised kinship, land and belief over monumental architecture of the sort demanded in Eurocentric architectural history.<sup>10</sup> This means, though, that there are lessons for contemporary practitioners addressing inequality and ecology:<sup>11</sup> 'There was ... no social hierarchy or wealth accumulation in the

make-up of Aboriginal Australia that might have led to elaborate residences ... such as the chief's houses and men's houses to be found in New Guinea and elsewhere in Melanesia'.<sup>12</sup> Aboriginal design is moreover anti-imperialist in its relation to Country, since in pursuit of a perpetual sustainable relationship, the 'inviolable connections' of land, kinship and knowledge 'prevented the idea of conquering large tracts of country by any one group, for the conquerors would neither have the correct ritual knowledge nor be in the appropriate totemic relation to manifest in other foreign lands'.<sup>13</sup>

Any lesson for contemporary practitioners is a paradox, though, because the hyper-sustainability of Aboriginality is contra 'innovation'. In search of Aboriginal designers, Memcott wonders about a category of elders he refers to as 'creatives' or 'designers' insofar as they critically interrogated traditional knowledge and patched its gaps.<sup>14</sup> But this interrogation was only ever to strengthen the seven-hundred-century Aboriginal cosmology in which Aboriginal design occurs. That cosmology is constituted by the Dreaming, Country, and Songlines. Picking through the book gives a good sense of that cosmology, which is worth quoting at length for any reader unfamiliar with it:

The Dreaming refers to the ancestral past, at least some 70 000 years ago and most probably much longer, when Aboriginal people and plants and animals were adapting and evolving in a continent of changing environmental conditions. The Country is said to have been 'soft' in the Dreaming – able to be shaped. Aboriginal history is concerned with this time and contains accounts of the doings of Ancestral Beings, some of whom seem to have been animal, some human, but in most cases a combination of both ... The Ancestral Beings (sometimes called Dreaming Heroes) were said to 'jump up' from the ground or sea. Many of them travelled about the country, interacting with each other and with the environment, experiencing adventures, making places, leaving signs of their presence – even parts of their bodies – and eventually dying and/or going into the ground, sea or sky. ... They had power to change the landscape and even to change themselves into aspects of the landscape, such as rocks and trees, which then became and remained storehouses of sacred energies, also called 'spirits' or 'life cells' or Dreaming 'essence', associated with the particular ancestor. ... Generally speaking, every part of Country in Aboriginal Australia contains a set of travel paths crisscrossing the landscape, in which sacred places occur that were created by the ancestors. ... When there is a long travel route containing many sites of a Dreaming Hero, there will be a lengthy sequence of songs to be sung: hence the term 'Songlines'.<sup>15</sup>

Where it occurred, 'complex architectural symbolism was a result of the preoccupation with cosmology (Dreaming

beliefs) and cosmogony (the origin of the universe and our place within it).<sup>16</sup>

Thus the book allows readers to encounter an Aboriginal cosmotechnics, to borrow philosopher Yuk Hui's term – a unification of the cosmic and moral orders through technical activities.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps Aboriginal design is meaningful *only* within Aboriginal culture. Page writes, for example, that 'some aspects of the traditional cultural landscape are more difficult to translate into urban design, namely the highly organised social and kinship structures of camps ... The modern city has different gender associations that form more organically and are not prescribed by lore.'<sup>18</sup> Page's architect colleague Kevin O'Brien is most explicit when he says that 'a genuine Aboriginal architecture industry is one where the architect of the projects from beginning to end is an Aboriginal person'.<sup>19</sup> In an oblique reference to the 'nothing about us without us' demand of disability activism, Page quotes First Nations architect Douglas Cardinal: 'it is time that colonial nations acknowledged that it is no longer acceptable for design to be done without us or for us, but by us. This approach will ultimately determine the originality and authenticity of architecture.'<sup>20</sup> A problem with early designs paying homage to Indigenous architecture was that they were too literal, and aimed at tourists.<sup>21</sup> Indigenous design instead strives for the importance of cultural landscapes over property. 'I could never give you a blueprint for defining Aboriginal architecture', writes Page, 'because Aboriginal architecture is a verb, not a noun, and it is in the "doing" that you understand it.'<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, there is no necessary difference between an object and its maker or user, since in Aboriginal cosmology objects are animated by their makers, ancestry, use, ceremony; this is why the maker of an object might sing to it while they make it.<sup>23</sup> 'When you are told that your job is inseparable from your spirituality, it forces you to re-evaluate how you approach your decisions', Page notes. 'The human relationships to objects over their life-cycle and their interconnectedness with the environment is a critical lens through which to view Aboriginal spirituality: it is not a separate metaphysical philosophy but, rather, how these relational networks are bound together'.<sup>24</sup> The architecture of British colonists 'believed in the dominance of humans over nature', Page reminds us, whereas the density of relation in Indigenous cosmology implies a richer ecology; 'before 1500', as Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh explain in their deconstruction of the western model of nature included in *On Decoloniality* (2018), 'most known cultures and civilizations on the planet (perhaps with the exception of Greece) were built on the assumption of the coexistence or complementarity of the opposite'.<sup>25</sup>

*Design: Building on Country* hints at an emergent cosmology of cosmologies, in which study of one Indigenous

cosmology prompts scholars to draw comparisons with other Indigenous cosmologies. 'The philosophy that objects are containers of energy is shaped with other international Indigenous cultures', writes Page, finding affinities with North American Indigenous thought.<sup>26</sup> She quotes a 2014 talk by Dr Leroy Little Bear about the culture of the Blackfoot people of the north-eastern United States: 'In Western physics we talk about things in terms of matter ... Whereas in Blackfoot, everything is about waves and when we really examine those energy waves, they are all about what we would refer to and translate as spirit'.<sup>27</sup> While Walsh and Mignolo draw principally on Meso-American cosmology, they recognise comparisons with the cosmology of Ancient China, noting that 'In Taoist or Daoist philosophy, the diversity of living that Western epistemology reduced to *nature* does not exclude the spiritual and the social'.<sup>28</sup> Yuk Hui's cosmotechnical description of Dao butchery, in which 'one does not use the blade to cut through the bones and tendons, but rather to pass alongside them in order to enter into the gaps between them' brings to mind Page's description of the Aboriginal framing and cladding of buildings, where 'the tangible and the intangible were represented by exposing the bones of a structure, and how it was in the 'spaces in between' that the spirit lived'.<sup>29</sup>

In a late 1990s hospital redesign by Page and her colleagues, 'walls became skins and windows were the gills of the fish', and Aboriginal elders spoke about the eventual building as if it were a manifestation of their ancestral totem, Pardi the river cod.<sup>30</sup> It offered an opportunity to bring a holistic approach to health and well-being – stabilised-earth bricks, lightweight materials and breezeways allowed cross-ventilation in the treatment rooms; a campground allowed communities to stay for months on end to conduct 'sorry business'. The design process, too, was relational: 'You schedule in time for conversation in the building of trust between the architect and the community', while training and employment of Indigenous people in the design and construction process offered a path toward economic independence countering the free reign of developer capitalism.<sup>31</sup>

If the very term 'design' has evolved over the last half-millennium as a particular suite of techniques integral to the cosmology of modern Eurocentric 'development', the use of the word 'design' in an Aboriginal context implies a different suite of techniques appropriate to a Country cosmology. The very choice of the word 'design' in Page and Memmott's book title is really a convenience to draw readers into a way of being in the world unlike design as it is conventionally understood under western modernisation. Much as Mignolo and Walsh show that 'nature' and 'human' are words and meanings without

exact analogue in many non-western languages, a linguist suggested to Memmott and Page around four thousand Aboriginal words approximate to 'design', but 'the list certainly didn't contain the word "design": clearly it didn't translate, on a word-to-word basis, into any original Aboriginal language.'<sup>32</sup>

### A new Australian design

And yet most readers of this book are likely hoping to find out about an Aboriginal cosmotechnics not because they are Aboriginal themselves, nor because they are anthropologists, but because they see in Country cosmology a framework to make environmental design more relevant to the challenges of climate justice. *Design: Building on Country* is open to these readers, the First Knowledge of the series to which the book belongs engaging the 'second knowledge' of colonial modernity. Perhaps it is possible to translate between Indigenous and modern Australia; or perhaps it is possible to transition Australia through a critical synthesis of Indigenous and modern design.

Design functions here as something negotiating Jean-François Lyotard's *différend*, 'a case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be resolved for lack of a rule of judgement applicable to both of the arguments.'<sup>33</sup> To help with this, Wailwan/Kamilaroi architect Jefa Greenaway created the International Indigenous Design charter (IIDC), a set of best practice protocols for working with Indigenous knowledge in commercial design practice.<sup>34</sup> Memmott argues that

contemporary designers need to gain understanding when working in Australia so as to maximise the well-being and preferred expressions of sociospatial relations of Indigenous people ... Working for a client such as Anyinginyi or Myuma is relatively easy as they have clever Aboriginal staff who can translate these principles for a professional designer who engages in culturally in-depth consultation. However, the challenge is far more difficult in large-scale metropolitan public architecture and urban planning, where there are multiple clients from many walks of life.<sup>35</sup>

And so the book is mindful of limits on the prospects for a new cosmopolitanism. Still, that cosmopolitanism hangs in the text as a possibility for the transition of design; as Hui puts it in an essay on cosmotechnics, perhaps we can 'situate the "multi-naturalism" proposed by the "ontological turn" in anthropology as a different cosmopolitics, one which, in contrast to Kant's pursuit of the universal, suggests a certain relativism as the condition of possibility for coexistence.'<sup>36</sup> Along these lines, Page and Memmott cite Douglas Cardinal on the significance of Canada's installation by Indigenous architects and

designers at the 2018 Venice Biennale: 'I firmly believe that the Indigenous world view, which has always sought this balance between nature, and culture and technology, is the path that humanity must discover for our future. The teachings of the elders are not the teachings of the past. They are the teachings of the future'.<sup>37</sup>

Those teachings can take the form of critique. For instance, in a 2018 article 'On Country Learning' co-authored with Uncle Charles Moran and Uncle Greg Harrington, Norm Sheehan (director of the GNIBI College of Indigenous Australian Peoples, Southern Cross University) shared the thought-provoking questions he asks students:

What kind of being is your design? How does it move?  
 What colour is it?  
 Where does your design live? Where does it belong?  
 What does your design say?  
 What does it eat and what others does it sustain?  
 Where does your design fit with other designs? To whom and to what is it related?  
 How does your design grow and reproduce?  
 When your design dies what remains does it leave behind?  
 How are you related to the being of your design?<sup>38</sup>

And then this sort of critique begins to prepare the ground for something more cosmopolitan, more synthetic. For example, Kevin O'Brien devised the installation and performance art piece about the city of Brisbane at the 2012 Venice Biennale, *Finding Country*, as 'a pluralist contest between the traditions of Aboriginal space (Country) and European space (property) in Australia'.<sup>39</sup> It took the grid pattern of Brisbane and emptied it by 50 per cent, revealing new conditions by leaving only significant nodes and connections in the contemporary cultural landscape. Similarly the 2023 Australian pavilion at the Venice Biennale, *Unsettling Queenstown*, offered 'a ghostly fragment of colonial architecture, immersive sounds and imagery, and representations of the country "demapped" of its colonial patterns'.<sup>40</sup>

*Design: Building on Country* turns away from the loss of Indigenous culture toward its cosmotechnic revival within a flailing modernity. The book's attention to place-making revives William H. Whyte on the interaction of humans, trees, wind light, sun, shade and gathering as the basis for public space, fusing it with Indigenous camp design and ritual, all keyed in to environmental comfort in the prevailing climate.<sup>41</sup> Here, food is integral to placemaking:

What if a place offered people the opportunity to at least forage for seasonally available produce on the side, even if it

was a reduced experience? ... In 2019, Indigenous design firm Yerrabingin created a farm on the roof of a multistorey building in Redfern, Sydney ... This prototype is scalable and replicable not just across Sydney rooftops but in towns and cities all over Australia.<sup>42</sup>

Place, then, is an event rather than something rooted in geographic, primal authenticity. The colonisation of the Australian continent all but eradicated Country; Aboriginal social order founded in a tool culture of stone and wood was disrupted, for instance, by the sudden access to metal tools in the 1940s.<sup>43</sup> That catastrophic disruption now opens to the cosmotechnical potential for reappropriating and redirecting modern technology. 'When we are at the drawing board, making decisions to improve our society, we need to look back to look forward', Page writes. 'In traditional society, technology progressed only if it met the balance of improving efficiency, maintaining culture and protecting Country.'<sup>44</sup> Decoloniality is of the here and now, since there appears no practical restitution of the worlds it hails; it is now unusual to see examples of classical Aboriginal architecture that do not incorporate western materials and components, except at Aboriginal cultural centres, where old shelters are displayed as forms of cultural tourism.<sup>45</sup>

The sort of design described towards the back of the book, then, is really synthetic, and may be none the worse for it, as it strives for a cosmopolitan Australia, a cosmotechnics for already-modernised ground. Page describes the design of Victoria Square (Tartanyangga), for the 2002 Adelaide festival:

When you stand in the very centre of Adelaide, in the middle of Victoria Square, you see the horizon in all four directions. For the festival opening, we planned a dawn ceremony at each of the squares. Audiences are invited to come to the square that corresponded with the direction of their homeland ... It was an upscaling of the locational principle and the protocols that surround it.<sup>46</sup>

So having carefully pieced together the objects, spirituality, camps, shelters, materials and kinship of what, historically, Aboriginal design was (and is, in isolated ways), the book concludes with an 'offering' in which 'this New Australian Design will improve the wellbeing of people and create places that ultimately mean more to all of us. It will extend Country, not abrogate it, and it should be created with that in mind – because we are all connected to Country'.<sup>47</sup> Cosmotechnics cannot restore pre-colonial society, land and nature; in effect, the New Australian Design is a new design of *Australia*.

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### Notes

1. Margo Neale, 'First Knowledges', in Alison Page and Paul Memmott, *Design: Building on Country* (Melbourne: Thames & Hudson Australia, 2021), 3.
2. Ibid.
3. Page and Memmott, *Design: Building on Country*, 8.
4. Ibid., 68.
5. Ibid., 157.
6. Ibid., 40; 41.
7. Ibid., 130.
8. Ibid., 46; 50.
9. Ibid., 107.
10. Ibid., 51.
11. Ibid., 52.
12. Ibid., 70.
13. Ibid., 93.
14. Ibid., 94–95.
15. Ibid., 34–36.
16. Ibid., 71–72.
17. On cosmotechnics, see Yuk Hui, *Art and Cosmotechnics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021). On the decoloniality contextualising cosmotechnics, see particularly Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).
18. Page and Memmott, *Design: Building on Country*, 142.
19. Ibid., 165.
20. Ibid., 169.
21. Ibid., 162.
22. Ibid., 168.
23. Ibid., 20–21.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid., 16; Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 154.
26. Ibid., 22.
27. Ibid., 23.
28. Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 167.
29. Yuk Hui, 'Cosmotechnics as Cosmopolitics', *e-flux Journal* 86 (November 2017), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/86/161887/cosmotechnics-as-cosmopolitics/>; Page and Memmott, *Design: Building on Country*, 161.
30. Ibid., 153.
31. Ibid., 177, 154.

32. Ibid., 11–12.
33. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), xi.
34. Page and Memmott, *Design: Building on Country*, 166.
35. Ibid., 193.
36. Hui, *Art and Cosmotechnics*.
37. Page and Memmott, *Design: Building on Country*, 155.
38. Uncle Charles Moran, Uncle Greg Harrington and Norm Sheehan, 'On Country Learning, Design and Culture', *Design and Culture: The Journal of the Design Studies Forum* 10, no. 1: Decolonizing Design (2018): 71–79, 77, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17547075.2018.1430996>.
39. Page and Memmott, *Design: Building on Country*, 164.
40. Australian Institute of Architects, 'Unsettling Queenstown', leaflet distributed at the Australian Pavilion of the Venice Biennale, 2023.
41. Page and Memmott, *Design: Building on Country*, 136.
42. Ibid., 138–39.
43. Ibid., 78.
44. Ibid., 81–82.
45. Ibid., 50.
46. Ibid., 142.
47. Ibid., 197.

### Biography

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