



Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy

OGA Comments

The Office of the Government Architect (OGA) welcomes the opportunity to provide comments regarding the Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy Discussion Paper. It is encouraging that the discussion paper's 'strategic elements' are suitably broad to enable consideration of how the 'built environment' can be a factor in Aboriginal empowerment. Our comments below align most strongly with the strategic element of 'Building cultural understanding and respect'.

Aboriginal engagement within major projects

The OGA's interest in good design applies not just to the quality of outcomes but the quality of processes. In recent years there appears to have been significant improvement in the way Aboriginal stakeholders have been engaged in major capital works and land development projects, leading to timely engagement of Aboriginal knowledge and good outcomes in culturally sensitive design. Yagan Square and Perth Stadium are perhaps the two most notable examples and the METRONET team is also making this a priority. There is an opportunity still to improve knowledge transfer from successful works projects by using them as case studies to inform future projects undertaken by government.

In addition, government should be encouraging a shift from 'consultation' to *co-design* and project-specific/generative design processes involving Aboriginal stakeholders. Key factors in enabling this transition include:

- Ensuring that project timeframes are appropriate to enable more thorough engagement
- Ensuring Aboriginal engagement is sought early in the project planning phase
- Ensuring project teams have appropriate skills and capacity to advocate for, and support, Aboriginal engagement.

Opportunity for program to invest in Culturally Sensitive Design

Culturally sensitive design enables cultural expression and exchange, and achieves long-term value for money in the way government delivers critical services and manages its landscapes and environmental resources. Recently, there have been excellent examples of culturally sensitive design in major State Government facilities and significant places, including the West Derby Regional Prison and the Kununurra Courthouse by Iredale Pederson Hook Architects; and the work of Landscape Architects UDLA on the Yawuru Birragun Conservation Park Cultural Management Plan and Wadjemup Burial Ground. Both practices are examples of highly-skilled design specialists in Western Australia who are actively seeking Aboriginal knowledge to guide the design and better management of places.

Culturally sensitive design is also an important way for people – visitors and local Western Australians – to engage with Aboriginal culture and knowledge. There are excellent



examples of places and cities around the world utilising sensitively designed spaces and interpretive facilities to explore first-nation cultures, difficult histories and trauma. In many places (e.g. Wellington, Vancouver, Berlin) these types of projects have enriched the local culture and are seen as valuable, high-priority projects by the respective communities. A formalised program to invest in culturally sensitive design projects would be a worthy aspiration for the State Government, and one that the Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy could champion.

Opportunities for incorporating Aboriginal land planning values into extant land use planning instruments

Government should consider supporting the consolidation of Aboriginal knowledge as a discernible 'layer' which could be used by planners, place/project managers and designers to guide planning frameworks, development and planning decisions. There are several examples of separate Aboriginal knowledge mapping projects currently underway in Western Australia, for example by METRONET, City of Perth and Department of Local Government, Sports and Cultural Industries.

The Draft Sydney Ochre Grid, led by the Government Architect of New South Wales is a potential case study for how existing Aboriginal cultural mapping exercises in Western Australia could be deepened and consolidated into a single resource which would improve how we plan, design and manage our environment.

Integration of Aboriginal knowledge systems in the training of built environment professions

There have been several studies in recent years highlighting that Aboriginal knowledge systems are not well-integrated within the tertiary curricula responsible for training built environment professions. While Landscape Architecture studies in Western Australia typically include training in Aboriginal knowledge systems within their curriculum, Architectural studies generally only provide incidental exposure, while the OGA understands there is no formal exposure of Town Planners to Aboriginal knowledge systems. This impacts the skill and capacity of built environment professions in decision making that affects Aboriginal people, culture and Country.

Pathways for Aboriginal people to enter built environment professions

Further to the comments immediately above, studies show that Aboriginal people have low levels of representation in the built environment professions. In a recent example, the Australian Institute of Architects found that there are only five practising architects identifying as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in Australia. We would encourage the Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy to include engagement with the tertiary sector and relevant professional institutes to address this gap as well as seek integration of Aboriginal knowledge systems in the training of built environment professions.