

# Narrative, Self and Engagement: An Immersive T(r)ropical Experience

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**We pay our respects to the traditional custodians of the Country<sup>1</sup> on which this paper was composed. This is the Country of the Gadigal People.**

**Architectural education is empowered with agency and a capacity to critique socially inequitable issues. It offers unique opportunities to make an impact with communities beset with challenges of infrastructural inequality. One such challenge is the right to adequate house, a basic human right stipulated by the United Nations.<sup>2</sup> Indigenous Australian community ways of being, knowing and doing are predicated through traditional, historical and contemporary narratives that coexist within a settler-colonising framework. Architectural engagement with housing is a challenging issue within communities that is both celebrated and commiserated with endless permutations in between. Immersive and experiential inquiries that activate understandings of this dialogue have little visibility in architectural education studio environments. This paper reflects on a participatory workshop that engages participants in these inquiries about self relative to a specific Indigenous Australian community issue.**

## INTRODUCTION

An architect once asserted that ‘the embodiment of architecture requires the difficult unity of inclusion rather than the easy unity of exclusion’.<sup>3</sup>

As an inclusive act, this paper is conscious that the rights of Indigenous peoples requires sustained and innovative approaches to architectural learning and teaching. Narrative through storytelling, as a method of investigating the self and engaging with interstitial spaces through the power of immersive environments provide the ‘how’ and the ‘now’ to substantiate this ‘Why’.

Demonstrating a participatory pedagogical approach, a hands-on workshop provided to participants a first-hand experience of coming to understand how architecture can draw upon people’s own experiences and a process of self-reflection to acknowledge the cultural needs of a specific Indigenous Australian community. The workshop provided an opportunity to draw, discuss and explore how self-reflective participant stories and narratives influences

and responds to the way designed environments are perceived and conceived around them. Stories of self and foregrounding that knowledge enables an engagement with and exploration of other stories, unpacking both the commonalities and differences between. This approach aims to embed cultural differences and acceptance into design studio thinking, creating active culturally responsive educational environments where the importance of Country, community and contextualised performative acts all have a presence.

Using the challenging lens of housing and notions of the home, this workshop offered participants a first-hand experience in understanding how architecture can engage as the interface between cultures and people, and the needs of specific communities within broader societies.

The following questions underpin this line of enquiry:

- How do architectural educators include narratives of cultural difference when teaching design methods?
- Why is it important to teach students to story tell their own narratives of self to understand others?
- What are outcomes of self-reflective engagement with culturally specific qualities in the application of good design for others?

## NARRATIVE & PLACE

Both of us live and work on the land of the Gadigal people. Acknowledged as the traditional custodians, Gadigal is a word that describes place with Gadi translating to Grass tree and Gal translating to People. The thriving metropolis of Sydney, Australia’s largest city now occupies this territory. This Country has never been legally ceded.

It is important to recognise that the Australian continent was invaded, colonised and settled through global British expeditions of territorialisation. After the events of the American Revolution, land was required to replenish this loss of North American continental territory.<sup>4</sup> The Independence-related narratives of new cultural differences in the American new world not only impacted land illegitimately obtained from First Nations peoples in that space, but also the Aboriginal societies of the Great Southern Land.<sup>5</sup>



Figure 1. Encouraging students to develop sensitivity to the specific cultural needs and values of this unique tropical Indigenous Australian community, image: Anna Ewald-Rice

An examination of the indigenous map of Australia demonstrates diversity, difference, multiplicity and many cultures existing upon the island continent. The boundaries are fluid yet distinct, blurred yet understood through learning and experience. In contrast to these soft non-cartesian edges, the current map of Australia outlines a federation of Colonial States, forming a Commonwealth Nation claimed by the British Crown. These binary boundary conditions could be described as smooth and striated.<sup>6</sup> Smooth as means of describing traditional methods of acknowledging, understanding and living with space. Striated as a method of overlaying cadastral information over space regardless of how it impacts the terrains of land and sea. It is important for students to consider that both conditions can coexist in all their multiplicity of forms.

The cultural differences that exist within the Indigenous map of Australian was and is reciprocated in the cultural diversity that exist within the invaders, colonisers and settlers. This is an over arching commonality that breaks down the binaries of black and white and facilitates self-reflective practices. Acts of engagement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous has occurred consistently across time to inform changes and allow new ontologies, epistemologies and axiologies to emerge. This workshop provides an opportunities to engage with new audiences to acknowledge and appreciate these new dialogues.

#### POSITIONING ONESELF

‘Storytelling must begin with the teller positioning themselves. Before re-telling narratives, we must start with our own.

— McGaw and Pieris<sup>7</sup> summarises Mueke<sup>8</sup>

In an architectural education context, stories of self are important to self-reflect on own histories and narratives to appreciate those of others. This occurs through storytelling, a humanistic action that is demonstrable through various methods. In architecture, all senses are engaged with some more prevalent than other. Storytelling makes truths and is based on participant actors positioning, not within one side of the binary or another, but within the possibilities between, within, across and below binaries.<sup>9</sup> It is important to acknowledge the continual states of becoming that we exist within to query the binaries of society, that it the black or the white, the left or the right.

I am Kuku Yalanji<sup>10</sup>, I was born and raised on Gimuy Walabara Yidinji land which is Cairns Australia. I finished my architecture degree in 2001, worked in practice for 15 years and engaged in projects with many Aboriginal communities. While I am a registered architect, I am now a lecturer and doctoral candidate at the University of Sydney School of Architecture, Design and Planning. I am Michael Mossman.



Figure 2: Students experiencing the realities of housing in Indigenous Australian communities

I am Anna Erica. I was born and raised on the back of North Head in Sydney Australia.<sup>11</sup> This is Cammeraygal Country.<sup>12</sup> I finished my architecture degree in 2017 and have worked for 6 years with internationally recognized artists and remote indigenous arts centers prior to my current position with Hayball Architects.

As co-authors, these stories and experiences inform our roles as both educators and professional practitioners in architecture that live and work on Gadigal country. The disparate nature of these two narratives and histories has led to the development and evolution of an architectural studio that explores the self-reflective qualities of students through a semester long iterative exercise. A self-reflecting exercise as a form of engagement with client is a critical quality of architectural practice. Privileging Indigenous ways of being, knowing and doing in architectural education and practice is important to influence, impact and transform emerging thought leaders in the profession. We see this as the power and responsibility of educational practice.

The conference workshop presented a learning experience we conduct with by second year architecture students in a studio titled 'Let Every Voice Be Heard' developed by lecturer Michael Muir. The studio is in its third iteration and collaborates with an Indigenous Australian community situated on Gungahyji country about the critical issue of housing. A workshop carried out in the first week of semester instructs students to tell

their stories and narratives through illustrative maps within the context of overcrowding and homelessness in Aboriginal communities. The maps are reflective and conducive to a variety of expressions based on the personal experiences of the author. This can then inform how the student further engages with the studio by indicating the depth of illustrated knowledge being shared.

### SHARING AND ENGAGEMENT

This narrative inquiry opens possibilities that stories of self are shared for others to appreciate, critique, understand and acknowledge commonalities and differences. This act of engagement endeavours to connect to their lives, stories, narratives and experiences through an illustrative format. It is process that is in turn reciprocated through exchange and a reminder of the humanity of storytelling and the campfire setting inherent in each of us. Storytelling through oral and illustrative traditions such as Aboriginal communities in Australia is a process that is based on up to 65,000 years of ancestral knowledge and experiences. While factors such as colonialism have deeply affected the narratives of Aboriginal communities prior to colonisation, the generosity and spirit of such evolving communities to share narratives with others is clear and present when engaging with them directly.

The interaction of worldviews exposes complexities and contradictions to creates spaces of engagement:

Not only recognize the commonalities and tensions involved with communities of difference, but extends a zone of continuous negotiation between binary positions, now to open to new emergent possibilities.<sup>13</sup>

—Michael Mossman, *Our Voices Indigeneity and Architecture*

This was the first time many students had explored the studio setting so all were exposed to new ways of being, knowing and doing based on, historical understandings, listening to expertise in community and appreciating specific environmental conditions of place. This experience combined with their own lived experience enacted a studio learning quality different to any previous curriculum tasks.

The architectural studio learning experience was critical for the students to explore and share their own narratives to acknowledge and connect with the narratives of the community. The outcomes of this workshop remain uncertain, however it is process-driven and enabled an innovative mode of learning. The Stanford Conference provided an opportunity to refine the tasks associated with the workshop and share the contents of the workshop to an architectural educator audience. The specifics of the workshop tasks are outlined below in their entirety as presented in the workshop.

EMERGING VALUES			INDIGENOUS VALUES		
IN-BETWEEN	THIRD SPACE	EMERGENT	CLAIMING	NEGOTIATING	DISCOVERING
INTERSTITIAL	LIMINAL	FLUX	TESTIMONIES	INTERVENING	ENVISIONING
HUMAN	PERMEABLE	EVENT	SHARING	REVITALISING	REFRAMING
PERFORMATIVE	UNFINISHED	RHIZOMATIC	CELEBRATING	CONNECTING	CREATING
FLUIDITY	EVERYDAY	LAYERED	REMEMBERING	NAMING	RETURNING
SELF	RESPONSIVE	POSSIBILITY			

Figure 3: Emerging Lexicon of terms.

**WORKSHOP OUTLINE**

**TASK 1: DRAWING US...**

Take a piece of paper and put it on your head. In the next 30 seconds, turn to the person next to you, and leaving the paper on your head, start drawing a little portrait of the person next to you in the middle of your page. Try to draw it without lifting the pen off the paper. Ok now you are going to give the portrait to that person.

This first task is designed to warm up the room, break the curse of the blank page and to break down any fear of good or bad drawing. It also demonstrates the power of assumptions and just how inaccurate and misleading they can be whilst placing the participant at the centre of the story, bringing them into direct relationship with the ideas that are about to be shared.

Figure 3 outlines the key pieces of scholarship to our architectural pedagogical approach. On the right, are values put forward by Maori academic Linda Tuhiwai Smith in her seminal book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*.<sup>14</sup> On the left are some emerging values that include themes and ideas from a range of sources. Some come from the 2018 Venice Biennale themed around ‘Freespace’<sup>15</sup> and the fundamental humanitarian role of architecture to support daily life. This list acts as a starting point as is constantly evolving through our practice. As an emerging lexicon together, these values focus on concepts and terms that borrow from fields describing continually changing complex systems. Architecture as evolving and changing with culture in opposition to memorialising a static system.

**TASK 2: DRAWING YOUR STORY...**

Now that your portrait has been done for you by your peer and you have been introduced to key values. Please spend the next 5 minutes drawing your story on the page in front of you. Something to accompany your portrait.

Rather than just described yourselves by your jobs or your status, we want you to step back and draw the people, events or places around you and how this influences where you are now and how you got to be in this room today. We would like you to try and identify your own key values in that story. Maybe they are in the list provided, maybe not. Please work these into your story map.

This understanding of your own story and how this influences your values and positioning of others is important. It’s what makes us feel safe and comfortable. These are qualities that make us human. This task acts as a self-reflection on the spaces of engagement that have impacted participants’ trajectories, and a questioning of certain crucial life events and how they have impacted their being.

Bhabha calls this third space, a liminal space where meaning where the negotiation of difference creates a tension peculiar to borderline existences.<sup>16</sup> Your being and ways of knowing are the outcomes of disruptions, to you, your ancestors, your neighbours, to your landscapes. Deleuze and Guattari describe an intermezzo<sup>17</sup> an in-between that is outside binaries, this is your truth. We are in constant flux, in movement through space and time, always discovering something about and reflecting on our own identities.

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**TASK 3: SHARING YOUR STORY..**

We now want you to turn to the person next to you and spend a minute each sharing your stories. Starting from



Figure 4: Walking down the street facilitates a unique exploration of the housing typology within community, image: Anna Ewald-Rice



Figure 5. Using drawing as a tool for exploring values, image: Anna Ewald-Rice

being in the room here today, try and find points where your stories diverge or overlap? The spaces of engagement may emerge as the zones in-between cultures.

As professional practitioners, it is critical to respectfully engage in this mutual two-way learning process at a basic human level, exclude the excessive jargon and technical understandings that can dominate and therefore take control of the information and the language.

We try to educate students on why it is important to acknowledge and understand the interface of cultures that exist within our society. The cultural interface describes:

Spaces constituted by points of intersecting trajectories and dynamic relations of time, place, distance, knowledge traditions and politics all composed of different people with different histories, experiences, languages, agendas, aspirations and responses.<sup>18</sup>

—Martin Nakata, *Disciplining the Savages, Savaging the Disciplines*

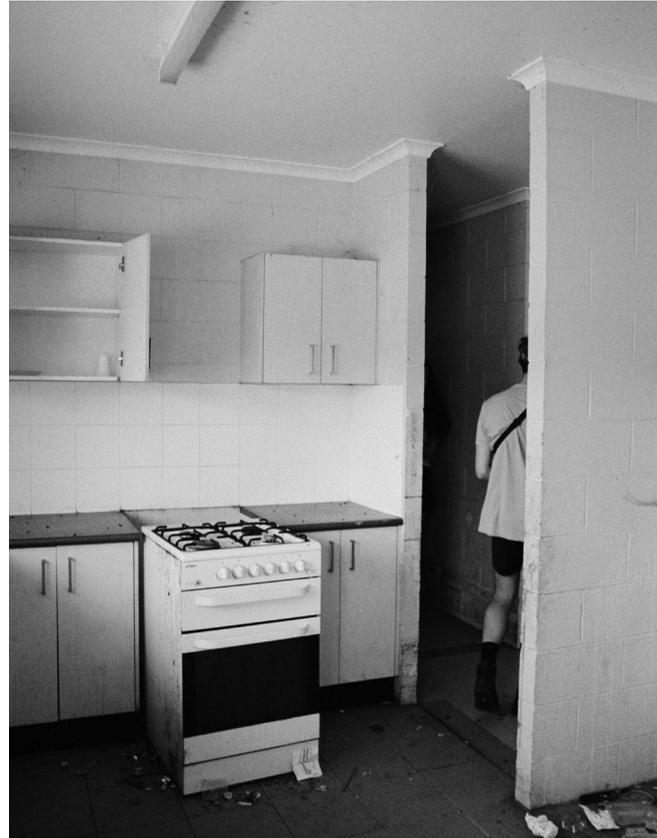


Figure 6. Students experiencing housing conditions first hand, image: Anna Ewald-Rice

From this understanding, the question arises, How do we facilitate immersive and experiential inquiries that centre this dialogue in the architectural studio environment?

Our method encourages students to engage the narratives of self within these interstitial spaces. In order to demonstrate this process of engagement with self and associated values, we explore immersive environments, centring our investigations around housing and notions of the home. A home is a basic humanitarian need and it links people across the world. All cultures unite for the need for shelter and refuge.

#### **TASK 4: DRAWING YOUR HOME...**

What you are each going to do is draw your home in your own community. This can be your home now, or a home that you had in the past. Maybe even a home of a family member you might have spent some time with recently. Think about that space? We want you to draw a quick sketch, can be plan, section, diagram at any scale illustrating the key components that make up your home, a dining room, kitchen, bedroom,



Figure 7. Students speaking with construction and housing providers in community about the delivery process, image: Anna Ewald-Rice

couch table. Focus on how your values identified in your story map, contribute to this space? How do they present in your home? Demonstrate these values in your drawing. Beyond shelter and refuge, what makes this home yours?

Please place your drawing on the table. You will now pick one that you like that isn't your own and tell the table what you think is a particular value present in the drawing. What does it say about their lifestyle and who they are? What are some ideas that you think are driving each drawing?

This experience of participants having someone else interpret values from their drawings in front of them, offers the opportunity for new unforeseen values to emerge beyond 'typical' requirements of a house. This method uses the clarity of insight generated from having distance from a situation and facilitates qualitative analysis between peers. Exploring the qualities that these intrinsic values gives the home translates this cultural understanding and awareness of the other' into built form.

"for me, big windows lets me see out to a far horizon because it gives me a sense of distance so valued in dense city living."

– Participants quote

The next layer of the workshop is about facilitating immersive and experiential inquiries that centre this dialogue in the design process that is relevant to the architectural studio brief.

#### **TASK 5: EXPANDING YOUR HOME...**

We now want you to adapt your home drawing to accommodate you and you nearest and dearest 15 family members. Brother sisters, parents, grandparents, children, nieces and nephews. The previous task instructed you to reflect on your own experiences. Now you are being asked to accommodate a new hypothetical experience, the lives of 15 of your family with divergent needs, into a single home.

This kind of living is the reality of the 'home' in many Indigenous communities across Australia. The one size fits all government housing model delivers fundamentally inadequate and



Figure 8. One of the authors supervising on site as students experience the local tropical environmental conditions, image: Anna Ewald-Rice

culturally inappropriate solutions with devastating national health, education, and wellbeing implications.

The following extracts from a local government submission paper<sup>19</sup> on Yarrabah reports the situation. Yarrabah is 45 minutes drive from Cairns, a national tourist gateway to Australia's Great Barrier Reef. Yarrabah consists of 4,000 people living in 365 houses, a situation that is a crisis and challenging to alleviate. Stories include the following:

'...applicant lives with mother/mother in-law in a four bedroom home which is overcrowded with 16 people, ten children and 6 adults. Applicant and family of 8 were camping on the beach in a tent and tired of being homeless moving from family to family'

'Applicant's living situation causes stress, leading to arguments which is not healthy when working full-time'

'Applicant suffers from a chronic respiratory condition and the constant damp and overcrowding in their house is causing his respiratory symptoms to increase, thus his health is deteriorating'

This task encourages participants to challenge their assumptions around the qualities of architecture and immerse themselves into socially inequitable issues. Architecture is a means to assist and facilitate the rights of Indigenous peoples through sustained and innovative approaches to include and empower lesser heard voices. This architectural educational exercise connects and contextualises seemingly disparate worldviews of the student and the community with a measured and emotional leap of faith to enable rich, previously unknown expressions for exchange.

To aid participants in this complex process of using their own values to expand the accommodation of their home to include 15 family members, we encourage students to develop a set of design principles. This kit of parts activates their chosen value across a range of different aspects and scales of the design and weave its qualities together through the design.

## CONCLUSION

This paper is a reference tool for educators who wish to expand their design studio learning environments, sensitive to the values of marginalised cultures and communities. It outlines a workshop methodology that embeds cultural differences and acceptance into design studio thinking. It aims highlight the complexities of acknowledging and understanding the interface of cultures that exist within our society.

As a means to activate future thinking in this space, the word lexicon promotes values, qualities and themes that imply soft edges and fluidity around meanings, acknowledges overlaps, interpretation and translation. Single or combined words can be continually overlaid onto for students to reflect upon your own narratives and those of others. This morphing adds to its meaning and becomes a part of the process of drawing these themes together in the design process to familiarise design contexts for greater understanding. The workshop instructs students to start with their own story and richness of experiences. It is critical for them to recognize the commonalities and tensions between their own lives and the lives of others. Creating and extending a zone of continuous negotiation between binary norms opens new emergent possibilities for architecture to privilege lower visibility issues, and to advocate and champion change for a better future.

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**ENDNOTES**

1. Daniele Hromek in Kiddle, Rebecca, Stewart, Luugigyoo Patrick, and O'Brien, Kevin. *Our Voices : Indigeneity and Architecture* First edition. San Francisco Bay Area: ORO Editions, 2018 : 205. Hromek describes Country as 'everything within the landscape; land, water and sky, and soars high into the atmosphere, deep into the planet crust and far into the oceans. Country – which incorporates ground, space, site, environment – is aesthetic, environmental, landscape and terrain ... cultural connection to Country encompasses narratives and knowledges, incorporating traditions, practices and art, linked to identity, language and community'
2. Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights – *The Right to Adequate Housing*
3. Venturi, Robert. *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* 2nd ed. London: Architectural Press, 1977.
4. Lockwood, Matthew. *To Begin the World over Again How the American Revolution Devastated the Globe* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019
5. Great Southern Land is a colonial reference to the Australian continent.
6. Deleuze, Gilles, and Guattari, Félix. *A Thousand Plateaus : Capitalism and Schizophrenia* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987 : 479
7. Muecke, Stephen. *Textual Spaces : Aboriginality and Cultural Studies* Rev. ed. Perth, W.A: API Network, Australian Research Institute, Curtin University of Technology, 2004 : 72-75
8. Janet McGaw and Anoma Pieris, *Assembling the Centre Architecture for Indigenous Cultures : Australia and Beyond* New York: Routledge, 2015 : 20
9. Bearn, Gordon. "Differentiating Derrida and Deleuze." *Continental Philosophy Review* 33, no. 4 (October 2000): 441–465
10. Kuku Yalanji is the Australian Aboriginal tribe located north of Cairns, Queensland Australia. A person claims ancestry to place by stating it as part of one's being.
11. The name Erica derived from *Banksia Ericifolia*, the native wildflowers that grow on the headland on Cammeraygal Country
12. Cammeraygal Country is on the northern edge of Sydney Harbour in Australia. It is directly connected to the Pacific Ocean
13. Michael Mossman in Kiddle, Rebecca, Stewart, Luugigyoo Patrick, and O'Brien, Kevin. *Our Voices : Indigeneity and Architecture* First edition. San Francisco Bay Area: ORO Editions, 2018 : 205
14. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies Research and Indigenous People*, 1999 : 142-162. See Chapter 8 for an extensive list of 'projects'. The objective of each 'project' is to frame thinking of particular issues relative to Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing.
15. Attiwill, Suzie, and di Venezia, La Biennale. "Freespace: The 2018 Venice Architecture Biennale." *Artichoke*, no. 65 (2018): 97–100.
16. Homi Bhabha *Location of Culture*, 1994 : 312
17. Deleuze, Gilles, and Guattari, Félix. *A Thousand Plateaus : Capitalism and Schizophrenia* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987
18. Nakata, Martin N. *Disciplining the Savages, Savaging the Disciplines* : 323
19. Yarrabah Aboriginal Shire Council Submission to the Queensland Productivity Commission, 2017 : pp39-42