Art Centre Architecture

Exploring Australia's unique arts and culture spaces

Kate Goodwin

Byera Hadley Travelling Scholarship Journal Series 2023

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Kate Goodwin was awarded the Byera Hadley Travelling Scholarship in 2021.

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Cover image: Mimi Arts, Katherine, 2022
Right: Djilpin Arts, Wugularr, 2023

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are respectfully advised that this report may contain images, words, and names of deceased persons. I have included some details of colonial histories and understand that this may be retraumatising for some readers, but felt it was important to include for truth-telling in this context.

All photographs are mine, unless otherwise stated. For the most part I have excluded images of people, but where I have done so, I sought permission for photography at the time and have permission to include in this report.

I respectfully acknowledge the First Nations people on whose unceded land I live and work.

I am humbled by the welcome that has been extended to me by First Nations people as I have travelled the Country they have cared for since the beginning. I pay my respects to Elders and to artists, past present and emerging.

I commit to supporting and standing alongside First Nations people to achieve Voice, Treaty, Truth.

Near Papunya, Central Desert

CONTENTS

1. JOURNEY/ (PRE) AMBLE 10

2. INTRODUCTION 16

3. CONTEXT 34

Preamble 36
Colonising the Northern Territory 38
Remote communities today 40
The emergence of art centres 42
Art centres today 44
Architecture of art centres 50

4. REVIEW AND SUGGESTIONS 54

Preamble 56
Buildings overview 58
Connection to Country and Culture 64
Role of the architect 66
Client and funders 68
Practicalities 70
Design factors 76
Tourism and visitor experience 80
Designing for evolution 84

5. REFLECTIONS AND FUTURE 88

6. FURTHER READING 96

7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS / ABOUT THE AUTHOR 100

8. APPENDIX

CASE STUDIES

Tiwi Islands 106

a) Jilamara Arts and Crafts, Milikapiti 110
b) Munupi Arts and Crafts, Pirlangimpi 132

West Arnhem Land / Kakadu

c) Marrawuddi Arts Centre, Jabiru 156
d) Injalak Arts, Gunbalanya 174

East Arnhem Land

e) Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre, Yirrkala 192

Big Rivers

f) Mimi Arts, Katherine 214
g) Djilpin Arts, Wugularr 232

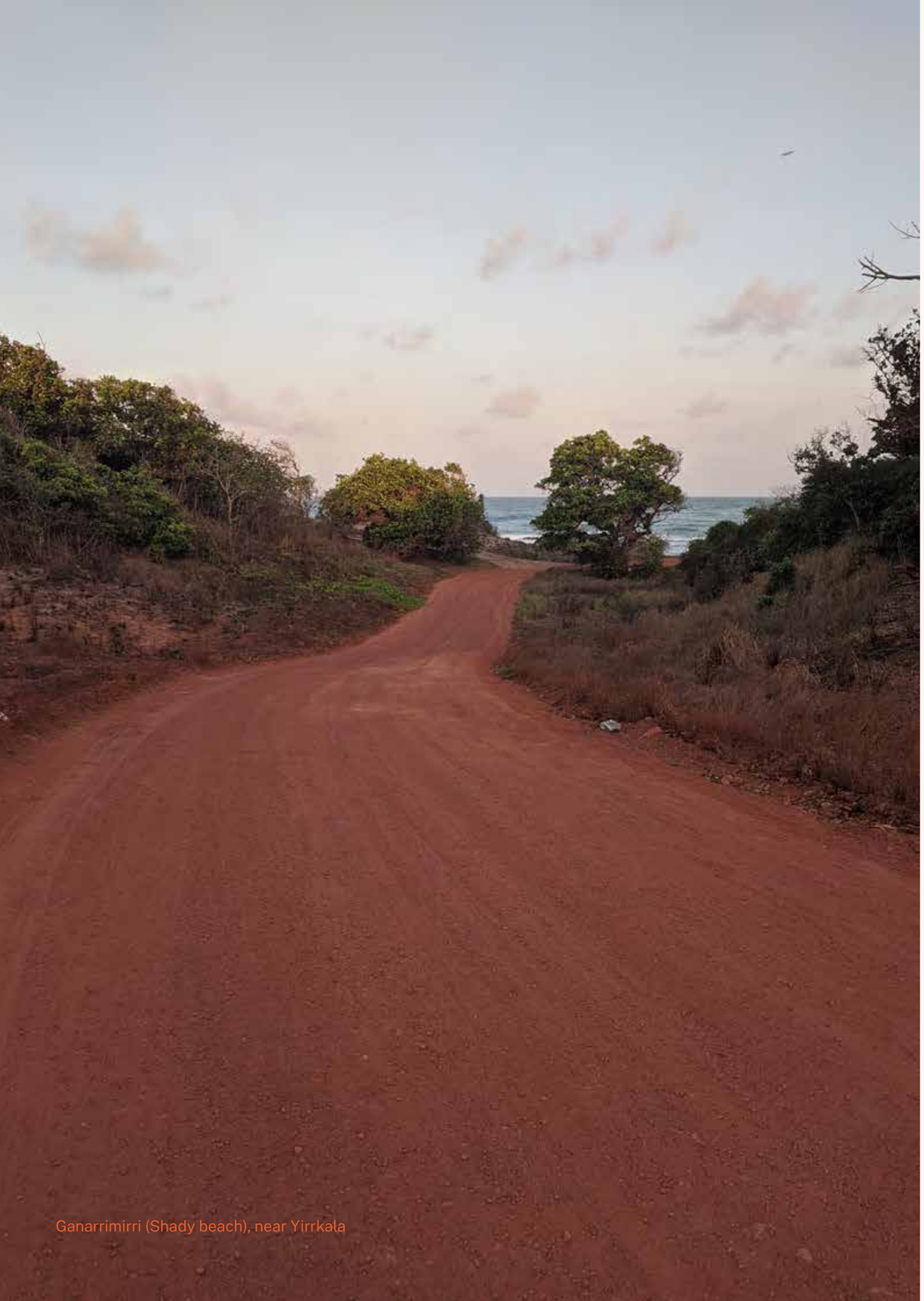
Tennant Creek 252

h) Nyinkka Nyunyu Art and Cultural Centre 258
i) Barkly Regional Arts 274

Central Desert

j) Papunya Tjupi Arts, Papunya 290
k) Warlukurlangu Artists, Yuendumu 308
l) Tangentyere Artists, Alice Springs 328

Late afternoon at Tingkkarli / Lake Mary Ann, Barkly Region



Ganarrimirri (Shady beach), near Yirrkala

JOURNEY / THE (PRE) AMBLE

Our experiences and sensibilities inform how we perceive the world. As I reflect on the lens I bring to this project, I share a few stories that have inevitably shaped me. I was raised on the land of the Carmaraigal (also Cammeraygal, Gammeraygal) people, who had for millennia cared for Country on the north side of Port Jackson. I recall being shown ancient rock carvings and being told hints of their stories. I was intrigued, but my understanding was limited, and colonial narratives abounded.

I frequently walked the undulating shorelines of the far reaches of Port Jackson, over sandstone escarpments, beneath Eucalyptus and Angophora canopies. I found solace sitting quietly in the presence of water, the protected harbour or the ocean expanse. The smells, sights and sounds were imprinted in my body's memory. However, the physicality of my connection to this place only became clear when I left.

Opportunity took me to London, and I made home in the imperialist centre to which my ancestral origins reached. While I was an outsider, it was familiar to me from books, television, and stories I had heard from family and friends. The roots of my surrounding in Australia became clear – in buildings, place names, political systems, language. A sense of time morphed as I walked narrow medieval streets that dated half a millennium and got a job in an institution that was founded before Cook claimed Australia for the British and started the terra nullius myth.

London is an international city where cultures and classes collide. Over 10 million people live in greater London, in a dense urban configuration, full of the diaspora from around the world, especially the former colonies. Like any metropolis it is fast paced and intense. Great wealth sits side by side with poverty and disadvantage; mansions in one street, social housing in another. It is a melting pot of ideas and people, harping from all over. It feels connected, an epicentre full of energy and possibility.

I worked for an artist/architect-led institution, so the artist's view and creativity were always present. As a curator and critic, I promoted architecture as a social and political spatial practice. We asked: what messages do buildings convey; who feels welcome in public spaces, who is excluded? How do we live better together, and with the environment? We pursued projects challenging the status quo and the very institutions we were within. We were supporting projects tracing resource and labour injustice, those that employed circular economies, enabled environmental and social sustainability. I focused on projects that centred embodied practices to engage with those outside of the profession and facilitate an understanding of architecture through experience.

The unique context of my workplace meant I was always talking and working with artists – both the established and emerging. I would do studio visits, commission and converse, finding constant overlaps in our practices.

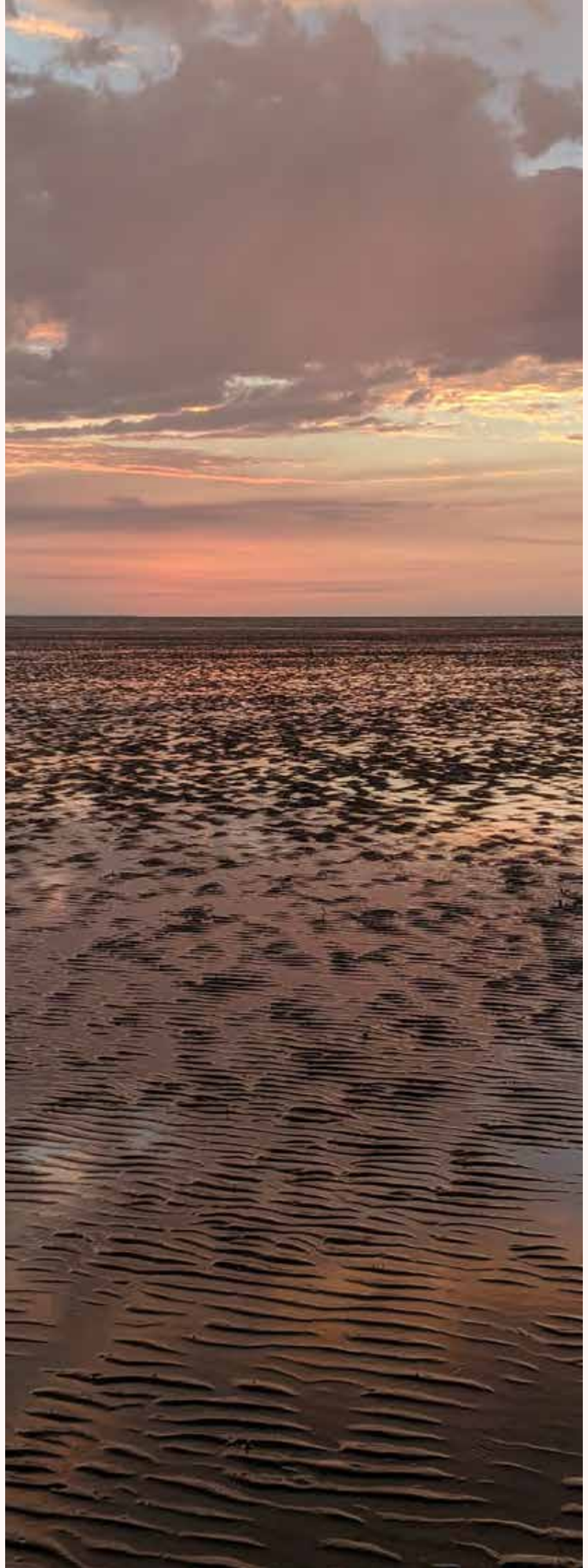
Over 17 years I built a deep network of connections, friends and a world view that was centred somewhere other than where I grew up. Trips back to Australia revealed the notion of home had blurred. I recall an occasion when my two homes collided. I saw the play *The Secret River*, based on the novel by Kate Grenville. It was at the National Theatre, a Denys Lasdun-designed Brutalist building amongst a cluster of cultural buildings on London's Southbank. The play tells the story of two families, one an illiterate convict transported to Sydney from slums of London who finds himself pardoned and seizing the opportunity to claim a future life for his family. And the story of a Dharug family, the ancient custodians of the land of which he lays claim. It is a dark and confronting tale, a history of Australia that was barely mentioned during my education. Watching it in London not far from where the ships left nearly 250 years ago and being familiar with the poverty and class divides of the time, I grasped how incomprehensible these two cultures were to one another, and the tragedy that could have been otherwise.

In the work I was doing, and the context and conversations around me, it became acutely evident that across the globe Indigenous knowledge systems and wisdom have been shut down. Instead, a Western Euro-centric world view has been prioritised that was at the root of many of the problems we face. I felt the desire to be grounded back on the southern side of the globe, my body reconnected with the lands on which I was raised.

I came back at the beginning of the pandemic in 2020, feeling like an outsider. I had changed, as had the country. Perhaps like most people looking to the past, I thought that a lot of changes have not been for the better, except for societal shifts recognising First Nations people and knowledges and the processes of truth telling. *Dark Emu* was one of the first books I read on return, and I watched Rachel Perkins series *First Australians*. For the first time I had a foot in academia – as a Professor of Practice (Architecture) at the University of Sydney – which coincided with the concerted effort to Indigenise the profession and curriculum. The highlight of each month were yarning circles convened by Michael Mossman and Ellie Davidson, where we could come together to share, learn, reflect and envision.

This Byera Hadley project was conceived while on an unexpected extended stay in Darwin on the unceded lands of the Larrakia people in 2021. My heart was taken by a place that was a vast contrast to the life I had led in London for the previous 18 years and before that in Sydney. I was inspired by the unusual town in the tropical north colonised 150 years ago, that pulsated with raw energy, life and contradictions. The humid air is filled with the many Aboriginal languages from across the Top End and beyond, mixing with English and a consortium of different European and Asian tongues. The sounds of birds adding to this truer Australian chorus.

Conversations with Darwin architect David Bridgman and retired archivist Françoise Barr and others I met, ignited an interest in remote Aboriginal communities and art centres. Seeing the vast spectrum of extraordinary art in exhibitions such at NATSIA or in the smaller galleries around town, underlined the breadth and depth of the cultures. Artists, art production and cultural spaces had been my world – what might architecture be in this context? As is the journey of life, the project grew and took over more of



my time and heart than anticipated. It has provoked as many questions and dilemmas as it has offered answers. How does the endeavour not proliferate an extractive practice of taking knowledge? What can I offer to community and what is my appropriate voice and position as a settler?

I noted when visiting Aotearoa New Zealand that I felt more like an objective observer and more comfortable in entering First Nations discussions. While it was not my heritage, I was aware that my privilege has come from the exploitation of Indigenous peoples across the world. I was learning afresh, reading and building knowledge of Māori culture and history. I picked up some te reo Māori, understanding the power of using words and phrases that encapsulated the richness of the culture rather than reducing them, as happens in English. It also highlighted the limits of my engagement with the Aboriginal communities I had been visiting.

The Byera Hadley Scholarship enables practitioners to experience architecture and its wider context – socio-cultural, political and sensorial – elements that are difficult to meaningfully understand in representations. As an embodied learner, I am especially appreciative and supportive of the ambition. Being able to visit Aboriginal communities and their art centres firsthand has been a privilege. It has equally presented a challenge. The nature of the scholarship means that visits are short in time, limiting relationship building, cultural understanding and knowledge of a building's operation over time. I have supplemented my experience and impressions with knowledge generously shared by others to whom I am grateful.

The limitation of time and depth of engagement is counter to what this study – and all First Nations engagement frameworks – ultimately advocates for. I acknowledge that this echoes the dilemmas that architects and communities face when working through procurement processes that necessitate speed and immediate outcomes. It has highlighted the need for the systems to be reimagined to produce change.

The report reflects my struggles with the constraints I have felt within the colonial structures in which I have been taught to operate. My natural inclination is to resist absolutes – black and white, right and wrong, certainty of a singular position. I prefer to be in a nuanced grey, that builds in layers, where there is space to move and question; finding a path forward through dancing and discovering, rather than marching in a straight line.

The report is presented in a relatively conventional structure. It contains the definitive (sounding) statements, desk research, interwoven with personal stories and reflections. Behind every photograph or comment there is a story. I share snippets of these, but inevitably there is as much left out as is included. I have learnt from First Nations ways of being, that knowledges are held and shared when appropriate and imagine more will flow from this study in due course. My hope is that this report provides a starting point to inspire others to learn more, and to allow architects working with specific communities to dedicate their time to specific knowledge and relationship building with this as a reference. For me, this is just a first step – and I make a commitment to continue engagement, to listen always and to share when appropriate.

Papunya, Central Desert

Painted car bonnet showing the layout of Nyirripi outside Warlukurlanga Artists outstation art centre

INTRODUCTION

Terminology
What are Indigenous art centres?
Why look at these enterprises?
Why the Northern Territory?
My lens
Concurrent events
Travels
Summary and report structure

Canvas primed and ready at Papunya Tjupi Arts

To assure First Nations self-determination, connection to Country and Culture needs to be prioritised, enabled and realised.

What must architects do? How does architecture – the buildings, surrounds and spatial operations – support or hinder such ambitions? And what are successful buildings for cross-cultural exchange where a meaningful coming together and dialogue can take place between First Nations and non-First Nations people.

This study seeks to explore these questions by looking at Indigenous art centres, to reveal some ideas and strategies for success.

Terminology

I acknowledge that appropriate terminology changes with time and the preference of specific groups. As much of the text is generalised, I use the term First Nations people to refer to the many different cultures and people who have populated the continent and its islands for over 60,000 years. In relationship to art centres, I use the term Indigenous, in line with the current national bodies and policies representing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities. For the art centres and peoples of the Northern Territory I use the term Aboriginal, as done so by the art centres and the peak bodies Desart and ANKA. In the case studies I have taken the language, spellings and descriptions used by the specific art centre at the time of writing. I have sought to use appropriate place names and spellings, based on the current names and spelling, but have not always been able to verify these with local knowledge holders and when uncertain have left the names out.

What are Indigenous art centres?

These are hybrid organisations, at once cultural and commercial, local and global, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal – fundamentally inter-cultural and operating between thoroughly different locales.

– Jon Altman, 2005[1]

The First Nations people of the country now called Australia have been practicing Culture for over 60,000 years with a deep custodianship and connection to Country. They have always shared stories and sustained knowledges through ceremony, body painting and rock art and now produce visual art that is highly sought after the world over.

Art centres emerged in the 1970s with Aboriginal self-determination and the rise of the Indigenous art market, as places to facilitate the production and sale of art works, primarily in remote locations. There are now over 90 Indigenous-owned and run art centres across Australia that play a vital role in maintaining cultural practice of a particular community, clan group or family, and providing income. They offer support and career development to artists and act as agents to sell and showcase artwork in Australia and abroad. They provide an opportunity for training and employment in arts support for members of the community. They are spaces for community to come together to practice Culture.

Art centres reflect the diversity of nations, cultures, and languages across Australia. While each art centre is particular to Country and community, there are commonalities in their facilities and activities. They offer the means and the space for artists to work, providing materials, training, and support. They generally have a place to showcase and sell work connecting the artist to visitors. Some have facilities for specific art practices such as screen-printing, carving or new media. Some have archives and Keeping Places for sacred objects. They are all social spaces; places to congregate, drink tea, eat, yarn, seek help with administration, learn and get respite from the intensity of community life.

There is a comparable variety in the art centre buildings as this study reveals. Opportunity and circumstance resulted in some occupying repurposed buildings, others in purpose-built structures, or a combination. They can include tin sheds, concrete block building, portable structures, or more elaborate facilities, designed and constructed with varying degrees of involvement from architects.

The ‘Context’ chapter contains more detail of the evolution, purpose and the day to day running of art centres and their buildings.

Why look at these enterprises?

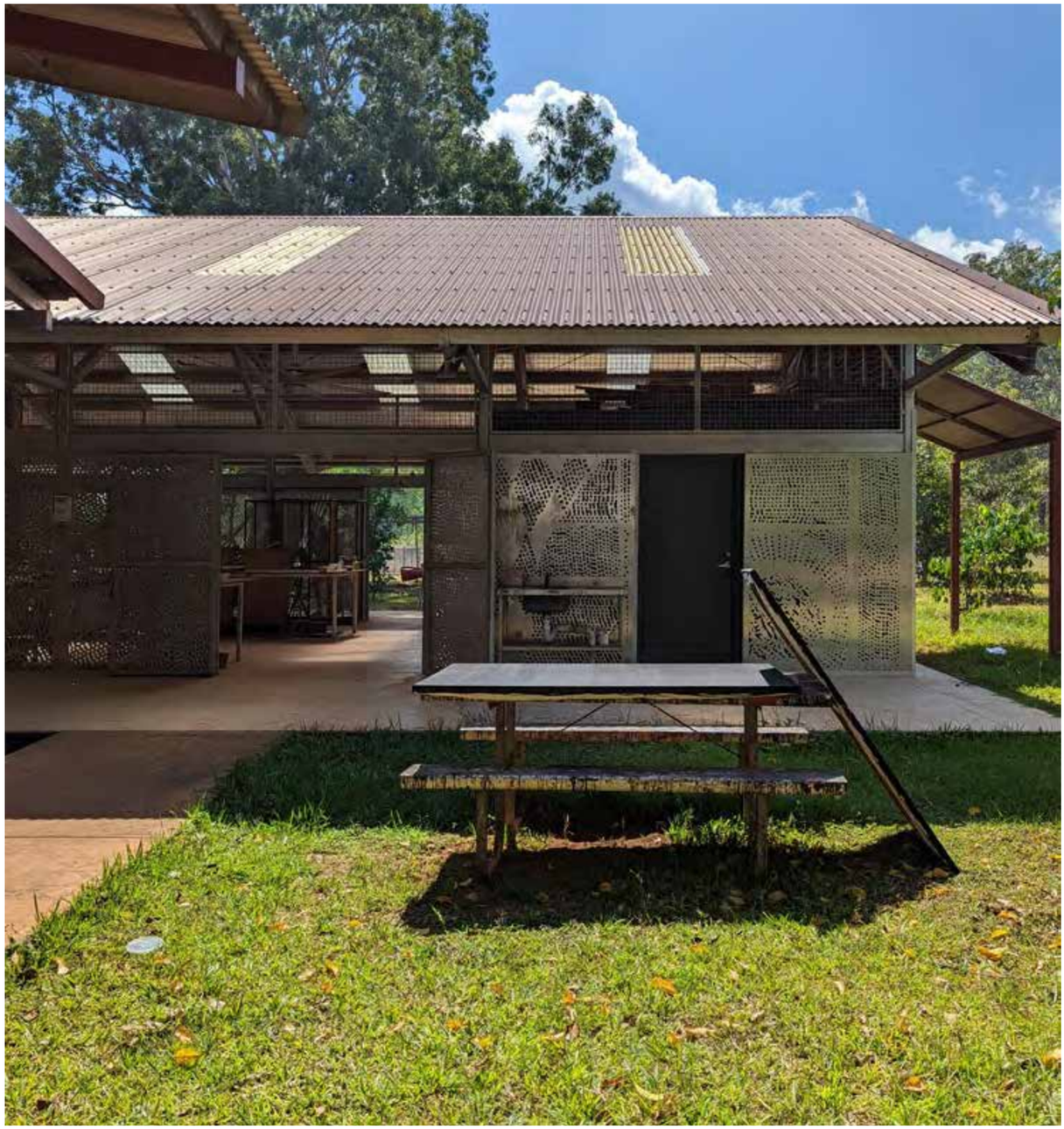
Indigenous art has achieved widespread acclaim and provided a way for people across the world to appreciate and gain an understanding of the diversity and richness of First Nations cultures in Australia. Art centres however remain relatively unknown or mysterious entities to the general populace. They are fascinating hybrid spaces doing many things simultaneously as they bridge worlds – Indigenous, non-Indigenous; art making and market; local and global. For First Nations people they provide places to practice Culture and navigate different worlds on their terms. For a non-Indigenous audience, they are places to build cultural awareness and engage in economic exchange.

The range of art centre buildings provide a strong basis to examine how they support, or hinder, Community, Culture, self-determination, and connection to Country. The case studies in this report were selected to cover some of the diverse approaches and different building outcomes. As we work to Indigenise the architectural profession, there are lessons to be gained from looking at these evolving, hybrid art centre buildings.

As art centres were established, relatively little attention was given to the architecture where the art was created. This is in part due to the art centres in their early decades largely adapting existing buildings with limited resources. There have been changes in the past decades with the growth of art centres and financial investment in capital works. Projects like Martumili Artists in Newman, East Pilbara designed by Officer Woods, that opened in 2017 was widely reported and received the 2017 Australia Institute of Architects National Sir Zelman Cowen Award for Public Architecture. However, there are good buildings that are not well known as they were unpublished. Jilamara Arts and Crafts in Milikapiti by Troppo Architects comes to mind.

There are countless reports and studies that cite the value of art centres to the Indigenous visual arts sector – to artists, to the cultural, social, and economic well-being of communities, and the country at large including a substantive 2007 Parliamentary Report on the future of the sector[2]. The report also highlighted the “poor physical state of many art centres… undermining their success”, which led to infrastructure investment and improvements.

Furthermore, the context of remote communities is often largely unknown to a non-Indigenous population and those who have not visited them. Media reports of social and economic degradation drown out positive stories and initiatives. While there has been a mixed legacy of building on community, with a proliferation of inadequate, inappropriate, and poorly maintained government housing, there has also been notable architectural achievements in housing and community buildings. However conveying the nuance of culture, context, and process in the press to an image conscious consumer can be difficult. Expanding the discourse, to include a deeper understanding of connecting with Culture and Country is needed.



Munupi Arts and Craft, Pirlangimpi

Why the Northern Territory?

In the Northern Territory (NT) 30.8% of a population of 251,000 identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, the highest proportion in the country[3]. The NT covers an area of 1.35 million square kilometres and sits between the 11th and 26th parallel reaching from the tropics in the north to the desert in the south[4]. The majority of the Northern Territory would be described as “remote” or “very remote” which is where art centres are most likely located. The state borders are a colonial construct that do not respect or recognise First Nations people’s relationship or organisation of land, drawing abstract divides through them. However, this study will follow the state borders as they dictate many of the policies and funding mechanisms that impact the development of the art centres, including capital works. Of particular interest is the NT Arts Trail initiative that provided stimulus grants to art centres across the Territory with an emphasis on upgrading facilities for tourism.

There are four Indigenous-led support and advocacy bodies for the art centres in Australia and two cover this region. One in the Top End – ANKA – that covers art centres from the Tiwi Islands to the north, Arnhem Land in the east, Big Rivers o the south and west to Pilbara in Western Australia. The other is Desart that covers the Central Desert spanning the state borders of Northern Territory, South Australia, and Western Australia.

My lens

I am a descendant of settlers and grew up on the beautiful unceded lands of the Carmaraigal people. After almost 20 years overseas, I have returned to these shores with fresh eyes, a new perspective, and a lot to learn. Attentive to a global shift in discourse that recognises the value of First Nations knowledges, catalysed by social and environmental crisis, I have been enthused by this country’s moves to Indigenise the architectural profession. I recognise the systemic change that is needed.

I have a belief in the arts to bring people together, allowing commonality and difference. My career has been spent as an architecture curator and critic at an artist-led, UK cultural institution, independent from government. The institution went through a revisioning alongside a building redevelopment that garnered my interest in how architecture conveys meaning and identity, and the connection between a building and its activation.

I am concerned with spatial storytelling and how architecture makes people feel. I focus on architecture in use, reading it in terms of states of flow and flux; movement of people, levels of energy or calm; agency of different inhabitants, meeting their needs and facilitating ease in activities. I have also been attuned to visitor experience and cross-cultural exchange.

As a critic I have advocated for the early and sustained engagement of architects from brief conception to building realisation and operation. Appreciating the importance of a good client – and the challenges involved – I prioritise a spirit of generosity within the design process – establishing shared values and respect with participation. For me, how things are done are as important as what is done, and where possible I have interrogated the brief and design process of the procurement of the art centres.

As a non-Aboriginal person visiting communities for brief periods, I am aware that the cultural nuances are mostly beyond my comprehension and reading.

Papunya, setting up for Bush Bands 2023 on the Warumpi stage

Concurrent events

In 2020 Australia closed its international borders and many states closed to local travel to stop the spread of the COVID 19 virus. The Northern Territory implemented a costly two-week mandatory quarantine, precluding most people from entering from interstate. This measure was in place at intervals throughout 2020 and 2021. The borders were open for some of the tourist season in 2021, before essentially closing again for the second half of the year. Restricted access to remote communities was in place throughout this time to protect vulnerable populations, which only slowly lifted as I began my travels. Many of the art centres had been closed to visitors for much of the 2 years prior, which shaped what I saw and the conversations that took place. For some, the absence of tourists resulted in greater artist productivity, for others the loss was strongly felt, and they were working hard to attract visitors again.

When I received the Byera Hadley Fellowship the cultural competencies for registering architects had just been announced necessitating a rapid and much needed shift in education and the profession; a process that has been taking place while I have been conducting this study.

Scandals such as the “white hand in black art”[5], which was pursued by the Australian Newspaper, blew up while I was doing the study and drew attention to the operations of art centres and the complexities of the worlds that they navigate.

The Voice referendum also took place during the time of the fellowship. While I did not speak of this with artists, it was the centre of public discourse. I heard Rachel Perkins and Thom Mayo speak in Alice Springs at the NT Writer’s Festival bringing the issues into sharp relief. The ‘no’ result has amplified the need to stand together for justice, voice, treaty, and truth telling.

Tiwi Islands

a. Jilamara Arts and Crafts Milikapiti

b. Munupi Arts and Crafts, Pirlangimpi

West Arnhem Land / Kakadu

c. Marrawuddi Arts Centre, Jabiru

d. Injalak Arts, Gunbalanya

East Arnhem Land

e. Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre, Yirrkala

Big Rivers

f. Mimi Arts, Katherine

g. Djilpin Arts, Wugularr

Tennant Creek

h. Nyinkka Nyunyu Art and Cultural Centre

i. Barkly Regional Arts

Central Desert

j. Papunya Tjupi Arts, Papunya

k. Warlukurlangu Artists, Yuendumu

l. Tangentyere Artists, Mparntwe/ Alice Springs

Red dots are the locations of other art centres I visited that are mentioned in the report but do not feature as case studies.

Travel

My visits were conducted in four tranches, each of approximately 3-weeks travel, over a one-year period. The first in the early “dry” season in 2022 was across the Top End using Darwin as a base – over water to the Tiwi Islands: over land into Arnhem Land and to Katherine and the Big Rivers. Then a few months later to the Central Desert when temperatures had not yet climbed to uncomfortable levels, with Alice Springs as a base to explore the desert, the Macdonald Ranges and further west to spectacular Uluru and Kata Tjuta.

A comparative trip to Aotearoa New Zealand took place when Australia’s north was inaccessible. I arrived a few days after Te Ika-a-Māui (North Island) was hit by a cyclone, with damage to roads and buildings a humble reminder of nature’s power. I drove a hire car across Te Ika-a-Māui seeking buildings of interest. I went as far north as Whangārei with the first Māori Art Gallery in the new Hundertwasser Art Gallery, across to Whakatane in the east, Whangarei in the west and south to Wellington, home to Te Papa, the National Museum. A quick visit to Christchurch on Te Waipounamu (South Island) completed the trip before returning to Tāmaki Makaurau, Auckland. A first journey across the Tasman was a lesson in Māori architecture and the western architecture traditions of antipodean neighbours, plus the bi-cultural path that is being forged.

A final visit to the Northern Territory in the following dry/ winter allowed the opportunity to visit places that I hadn’t been able to previously access due to time limitations, closures for ‘Sorry Business’ (mourning periods for people passed) or outbreaks of COVID. I also revisited some art centres to see how they had changed after a year of operation. The final trip from Alice Springs to Darwin, via Tennant Creek, Katherine, and remote communities filled in some

gaps and really brought home the vast distances of the Northern Territory.

Experiences varied due to planning and opportunities of time, duration, and contacts. I spent less than an hour in a couple of the centres and up to a week in others. In total I visited over 25 arts and cultural centres in the NT, twelve being the focus of case studies in this report. The selected shortlist reflects the amount of time I spent in them, the depth of information I was able to glean about the building and the relative direct contribution to the study. My visits were restricted to the dry / cooler months when communities were accessible. For this reason I only saw the art centres in one (favourable) climatic condition.

In the review section of this report, I make a distinction between those in regional towns – Alice Springs, Tennant Creek, Katherine, Jabiru – and those in remote communities as the context and agendas are different.

The logistics of planning could be complicated. Firstly getting responses from over-stretched art centre staff – then coordinating a suitable time for a visit that didn't coincide with exhibitions, art fairs or curator trips – and factoring in the challenges of travel to remote communities.

Travel planning was a process of weaving opportunities and logistics. From hitching rides with contacts or newly made friends; catching planes, ferries, Greyhound buses, or the "bush bus" that ventured between communities on unsealed roads; and the occasional car hire where the roads didn't require 4-WD vehicles. I stayed in community donga's, teacher housing, art centre manager's lodgings, hostels, motels and camped. It made for a varied and rich experience with a lot of connecting and interdependent logistics.

I was acutely aware of the burden my request put upon the art centres. Being clear about the purpose of the visit was critical to ethical practice: what I would do while there, the benefit to community, and the intended output. All enabled the art centre to make an informed decision to accept my visit or otherwise.

Whenever possible I would assist with daily tasks in the running of the art centre that ranged from making tea or lunch for artists, to cataloguing works, assisting checking fibre art for bugs, attaching jewellery clasps to woven works, to priming canvas' ready for the artists to work. These were also valuable ways of understanding the operations of the art centres.

Beyond the art centres, engagement with community included helping at a music festival; attending the Barunga Festival, and the NT Writers' Festival; enjoying the Desert Festival in Alice Springs; and joining cultural tours for tourists. These developed my cultural understanding and built a picture of the wider context and networks of the art centres. Novels and non-fiction based in related locales accompanied me on the journeys; historic truths adding layers to my understanding and even more colour to the world I was seeing.

Between trips there was time to digest. I met with architects in Darwin, Alice Springs, Sydney, and Melbourne who have worked on art centres and had experience of remote communities. It enabled me to develop contacts, have more conversations, share reflections, attend talks, read, and build cultural knowledge.

Clockwise from top: Donga accommodation in Papunya; flight to the Tiwi Islands; camping in the Macdonald Ranges

Jilamara Arts and Crafts Milikapiti

Summary and report structure

In my experience the ongoing success, vibrancy or otherwise of the art centres is largely down to the individuals who are involved - the Elders, artists, art centre managers and staff. The buildings are a means through which to facilitate their intent and must work for and with them.

It was evident from the visits that every building was born from a specific context and moment in time. Outcomes reflected Culture, the ambitions of individuals and/or groups leading and guiding decisions, government policies and agendas, and resource availability.

Understanding the wider context and the myriad of factors that influence the evolution and operation of art centres is important for architects. The report therefore opens with a brief note on the colonisation of the NT, from the origins of the communities to self-determination. It outlines the history of Indigenous art and art centres, and their buildings.

While each centre and its context are unique, I have identified some key factors I believe impact the art centre and its operation and should be addressed by the design. I have noted my impressions and made suggestions based on those I thought worked well. I have also looked at processes and factors that can inform discussions between architects, clients, and stakeholders, to generate positive outcomes.

Detailed case studies are presented in the Appendix. They include cultural and geographic context, history of the art centres and their architecture. The context includes some desk research, and presents from a non-Indigenous perspective as I did not feel I had sufficient cultural knowledge nor the right to do otherwise. I acknowledge the limitations of this position. There are building plans (as accurate as I could make them), photographs and personal commentary to help the reader understand the architecture and operations.

Ultimately, I advocate for architects creating art centres as precincts connected to Country, designing to maximise the flow and movement of people, and for adaptation and flexibility. I see this study as the start of a longer engagement with community and Country and the seed for future projects.

1. Jon Altman, *Brokering Aboriginal art: A critical perspective on marketing, institutions, and the state*. Deakin University, 2005

2. Report from Standing Committee on Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts: *Indigenous Art - Securing the Future: Australia's Indigenous visual arts and craft sector*, 20 June 2007, © Commonwealth of Australia 2007

3. Census Data: *Reference date of 30 June 2021*, Accessed 5 June 2023

4. Australian Government Website: Area of Australia - States and Territories, updated 26 July 2023, Accessed 6 September 2023

5. *White privilege and black disadvantage in the Aboriginal art industry*, by Quentin Sprague. The Monthly, 21 April 2023

Kata Tjuta

Early evening in Papunya next to the oval

CONTEXT

Preamble

COLONISING THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

REMOTE COMMUNITIES TODAY

THE EMERGENCE OF ART CENTRES

ART CENTRES TODAY

- Outline
- Governance
- Economics
- Day to day
- Visitors

ARCHITECTURE OF ART CENTRES

- Background
- Funding and Procurement

I spent five months living in Darwin in 2021 prior to embarking on the project to look at the art centres. The experience provided an invaluable introduction to the Northern Territory and the foundation for what I would encounter thereafter.

Having travelled extensively, visited six continents and experienced many different cultures, I naively thought I knew the country in which I was born and raised. The stay in Darwin showed me otherwise and reframed how I saw this nation. Growing up in Sydney, my knowledge and understanding of the country was largely urban (with all the amenities it provides), temperate and east-coast focused. In Darwin I became starkly aware that the powerbase in this country is lopsided. Sydney and Melbourne together account for over 40% of the population and hold much of the political and financial power, albeit in part via Canberra. Darwin closer to Jakarta, Indonesia than any Australian city, sits on the edge of the national psyche and refreshingly beats to its own drum. Laksa for brunch is as common as avocado on toast. Darwin attracts international workers, and their languages mix with the Aboriginal dialects of those who are drawn from across the Territory to the services and amenities the small city provides. I think one of the reasons I felt at home in Darwin, was that like London, it was a melting pot of people and cultures, and it had a raw realness you couldn't escape.

Darwin made things I read in the news have presence, and would be part of my journeys. I met highly paid FIFO workers who worked in the mines, long-hall truck drivers who spent days alone on road transports. I experienced the deafening sound as American and Australia fighter jets took off on training exercises, causing the windows to shake and conversations to pause. I began to grasp what it was to live in the tropics. The unusual feeling of a "cool" morning when temperatures drop below 18 degrees, a contrast to the usual sensation of sweat running down your legs as temperatures were in the high 30's. The feel of the "build up" where the warm atmosphere was thick with moisture; humidity pressed on your body; clouds loomed overhead unwilling to drop their cargo and release the pressure. I left before cyclone season but saw the shelters and people's supply cupboards ready for battening down the hatches. Camping trips into the outback made me aware that this was not the rolling pastures of England; climate was harsh, nature could be dangerous, other humans were a long way away and preparation was key.

The years away left me feeling behind on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island matters, and Darwin provided a rapid and real education. The impacts of colonialism were starkly evident. There was no hiding from the socio-economic disadvantage of so many Aboriginal people and the systemic failures that proliferate. It was confronting and mobilising. I spent hours in an exhibition by Therese Richie called *You are Here* that included a large-scale timeline that presented the growth of coal mining, alongside the massacres enacted upon First Nation Australians. There was also positivity. I saw a brilliant film *Djäkamirr* about birthing on Country that centred First Nations wisdom and culture with western knowledge supporting where appropriate. I saw other films by young First Nations filmmakers telling their stories and musicians like Baker Boy hailing culture and resilience. I was around people who had lived and worked on community and was given a window into what to expect and how to be.

When I returned to Sydney it felt like another world away and films and books helped to maintain a proximity in my mind. David Gulpilil's film *Another Country*, based in Ramingining in Arnhem Land tells the story of what happened when his people's way of life was interrupted by ours. He put words and images to what I had been coming to understand, as did Don Watson's book *Passion of Private White*, telling the story of the Ritharrngu (Yolngu) clans living on their ancestral lands in the settlement of Donydji. I met a young Ritharrngu man at one of the art centres and was able to place him within his family connection, having read about his father and aunties. I constantly found connection across the NT with people I had met or heard about. I learnt to lean into every experience, to try not to over plan or control, and allow things to flow.

On each trip I faced challenges of reconciling the context of life in the urban southern centres with remote communities. I would go through a process of adjustment, trying to shake off my city-ness and western ways. Although my experience was very different to Kim Mahood who had grown up in the Tanami Desert, speaking language and returning to communities with whom she has a long-standing relationship – her words in *Position Doubtful* echoed with me and I copy them below as I think she describes the different worlds beautifully:

> *The hours of driving through that particular landscape are hours in which I revisit the cultural disjunction within Australia, a gap that is both geographic and psychological. Retaining an embodied sense of this is central to what I do, since the gap between the urban, Euro-centric, aspirational, heavily populated south-east corner of the continent and the remote, predominately Aboriginal, barely sustainable, thinly populated pocket of desert is the space in which my writing and my art practice are made. This is the improvised life I have chosen to live for the past twenty years, straddling two worlds, settling in neither, trying always to keep alive the awareness of the other world in the one I currently occupy.*
>
> — *Position Doubtful: Mapping landscapes and memories*, Kim Mahood, Scribe Publications 2016

Red Flag dancers from Numbulwar, Barunga Festival 2023, celebrating 20 years since the Barunga Statement

COLONISING THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

Looking at the AIATSIS map marked with over 250 languages of First Nations people, a patchwork of colours shimmers across the continent. Imagining 800 dialects overlaid, the map comes further alive with sounds and hues. It is a clear reminder of the plurality, diversity and complexity of First Nations cultures. Each has their own Culture, customs, language and lore that remain strong. Clans and kin travelled their lands and cared for Country for millennium. Trade took place with one another, and with neighbours from the archipelagos to the north. From the early 1700s Makassan fishermen visited Arnhem Land every year from southern Sulawesi to collect trepang (sea cucumbers). Yolŋu people would trade and interact with the Makassan as they made temporary camps from December through to March or April. Europeans arrived in the region from the early 17th century – first the Dutch, followed by the French then the English.

While the British colonists carved a line on the map on the east coast from 1788, their early attempts to settle the north were marred by challenges of distance and the harsh climatic conditions, illness, and the defence of their lands by Aboriginal peoples. The first successful crossing from south to north was conducted by John McDouall Stuart in 1862, along a route which became the Australian Overland Telegraph Line connecting Australia to the rest of the world. Port Darwin was established in 1869.

From this time on pastoralists, miners, and missionaries took over the lands and would come to shape the lives of Aboriginal peoples thereafter. Large cattle stations emerged across the Territory, disrupting cultural practice and the rightful movement of Aboriginal peoples across their lands. Often expediated by drought and water shortage caused by the settlers, many Aboriginal peoples moved to the stations or mines for work in exchange for basic supplies and often poor conditions. Others set up camps on the outskirts of towns. Missions also distributed government rations, established schools, set up dormitories for children of mixed descent and in some cases would prove a more appealing alternative to the stations.

Having been annexed to South Australia in 1863, the Northern Territory came under Commonwealth administration in 1911. The Northern Territory Aboriginals Act 1910 gave the government responsibility for the control and welfare of Aboriginal peoples in the Northern Territory, with a Chief Protector the legal guardian of every Aboriginal child. Finally in 1967, Australians voted to change the Constitution to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as part of the population with the Commonwealth Government making laws for them, previously at the discretion of the states. The Northern Territory was granted self-governance in 1978.

Beginning in the 1970's the Homelands Movement saw Aboriginal families or clans leaving government or mission settlements to reoccupy their traditional lands, in self-defined community outstations. The Town Camp movement also gained momentum at the same time catalysed by the displacement of people from their traditional lands who migrated to towns such as Alice Springs, Tennant Creek, and Katherine. There are now 43 Northern Territory town camps, that are primarily areas set aside where Aboriginal people live in and around towns and cities.

Aboriginal peoples of the Northern Territory were at the forefront of land rights movements and made ground-breaking resistance through initiatives such as the Yolŋu bark petitions asserting their right to the land against Bauxite mining, the Barunga Statement for treaty and sovereignty, and through music such as Yothu Yindi's resistance song *Treaty*. The Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act was passed by the federal parliament in 1976 and enabled First Nations people to claim rights to Country.

More recently the Northern Territory National Emergency Response (the 'Intervention') in 2007 involved changes to welfare provision, law enforcement and land tenure by the Federal Government. These types of government policies continue to have a significant impact on communities and shape the lives of Aboriginal people.

REMOTE COMMUNITIES TODAY

Each community in the NT has its own unique character and pulsates with an energy that is different from colonial towns and cities. First Nations ways of being – values, lore, kinship, family obligations intersect with colonial structures and governance. In most cases remote Aboriginal communities are made up of people from different language and cultural groups displaced from their lands when the settlements were established by church or state. Communities will often be spatially arranged reflecting the geography of their inhabitants – for example those who come from the west, will live in the direction of their ancestral homes. There can be rivalry between clans and the forced proximities can cause tension.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) divides the country into five classes of remoteness, derived from a measure of the relative geographic (road) access to services (rather than First Nations proximity to traditional lands). The Aboriginal communities and the towns that are the focus of this report fall into the ABS categorisation of “Remote” for those in and around either Darwin or Alice Springs and “Very Remote” for all others. Getting services and supplies from these centres or other cities has both financial and time implications, although most have airstrips that can accommodate small aircraft.

Sport, especially AFL and music are a big part of community life. They provide an important focus especially for the young, with many well-known bands hailing from remote communities in the Northern Territory. In some locations people are employed in a Rangers Program to manage Country according to Traditional Owner objectives or gaining skills training through the Community Development Program (CDP). However, the long-standing negative impact of colonialism remains strong in communities. Aboriginal peoples experience disproportionate poverty and poor health outcomes, lower life-expectancy, and intergenerational trauma. The inadequacy and inappropriateness of housing in communities is widely recognised and studied.

Official permission for access to a community needs to be sought from the Traditional Owners prior to arrival. A permit, if granted by the relevant Land Council (Tiwi, Central or Northern) should be carried while on community. Even with a permit it is often not appropriate to wander through a community. For cultural reasons there may be places or routes that should not be taken by visitors.

There is a very good chapter in the *Desart Art Centre Guidebook* that talks about cultural safety. It advises to start with critical self-reflection – being aware of how one’s own world view and consequent actions may affect others and their own cultural identity.[2] It also gives helpful tips about how to have engaged communication, minimise power in-balance and decolonise ones practice. Cultural competency entails being self-aware; being respectful; being observant and willing to learn; and to ask for advice and use it.

A few basic principles to abide by; ask before taking photographs of people, homes and campsites and taking pictures of children is best avoided. In some communities shaking hands or eye contact may not be appropriate. In many communities the name of a deceased person and those sharing their name, cannot be spoken for a period after their passing. You shouldn’t enter a house without permission and should dress modestly, not wearing short shorts or revealing tops.

Indigenous people will often not speak up or voice an opinion unless they are ready and want to. This needs to be considered when conducting meetings and consultation to achieve effective participation. All relevant information for decision making needs to be provided, and sufficient consultation time needs to be built into processes. Appropriate questions must be asked, and questions structured accordingly. Translators may be needed.

Artist and author Kim Mahood, who grew up on a station in the Tanami Downs and has longstanding close connections with Warlpiri people, wrote an essay called *Kartiya are like Toyotas: White workers on Australia’s cultural frontier*[3]. The title, taken from a Western Desert woman about whitefellas who work in Indigenous communities: “Kartiya are like Toyotas. When they break down we get another one.” It’s a great read and provides an astute insight into the complexity and dynamics of living and working in remote communities.

Above left: Ltyentye Apurte (Santa Teresa), Eastern Arrernte, named a tidy town in 2022, with the painted concrete block houses that are seen in all communities regardless of the climate and geography. Right: Yuendumu, Central Desert, again with concrete block houses.

Art is central to Aboriginal life, identity and culture.

- Marcia Langton, *Welcome to Country*

THE EMERGENCE OF ART CENTRES

Aboriginal peoples have always shared stories and sustained knowledges and connection to Country through ceremony, body painting and rock art. Post colonisation, Indigenous people use art as an increasingly important political tool to assert self-determination and land rights. Aboriginal art and the emergence of the commercial market has been well documented. For this context I include a brief introduction following Desart's guidebook for art centre managers with some additional information from Marcia Langton's *Welcome to Country*.

Trading was a part of Aboriginal culture, taking place between clans, with objects finding their way from one side of the continent to the other. Likewise, Makassan trepang fisherman traded with the Yolŋu, as did early European explorers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who gathered objects as exotic trophies of their travels. Aboriginal art, such as bark paintings and funerary sculptures were collected and studied primarily by anthologists as 'primitive' cultural artefacts, rather than for their merit as works of art. They reside in collections across the country and the world.

Many of the missions bought and sold Aboriginal 'art and craft', sometimes exporting works to their stores in the country's capitals to fund their activities and make money for artists. The first art centre was established in 1948 in Ernabella, a Presbyterian mission in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands in South Australia. These missionaries promoted the language and culture of the Pitjantjatjara alongside Christian teachings. The first exhibition that attributed artists names to works of art was held in the David Jones Gallery in Sydney in 1949 called *Arnhem Land art* curated by anthropologists Catherine and Ronald Berndt. It was also a time when interest was growing in Australia's more remote corners as transport links opened the regions to tourism.

In 1965 the establishment of an Aboriginal arts industry was recommended by Australia's first national tourism report and was seen as a way of bringing economic opportunity to communities. The Aboriginal Arts and Craft company was established by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, a government funded 'art advisor' pricing, buying, marketing, and establishing art sales outlets. In 1973 the Aboriginal Arts Board (AAB) of the Australia Council was established, chaired by the renowned Yolngu artist, activist, and leader Wandjuk Marika (1927-1987). The board protected Indigenous intellectual property rights and was vital in coordinating exhibition and market opportunities for art centres in Australia and internationally in the following decades.

It was the same period that saw the emergence of the renowned Western Desert art movement and the establishment of Australia's first artist cooperative, Papunya Tula Artists in 1972 that reached international acclaim. Over the successive decades art centres emerged in remote communities and in towns across the country.

A peak support and advocacy body for Aboriginal art centres in Northern and Central Australia was founded in 1987. In 1993 Desart was established as a separate association for the central regions (across state boarders in the NT, South Australia, Western Australia) and ANKA (Arnhem, North, Kimberley Artists) remained as the peak body for the Top End. The global art market was soaring in the 2000's as was unethical buying practices which prompted the National Association for the Visual Arts (NAVA) to establish the Indigenous Art Code which enables buyers to be assured they are purchasing from ethical sources and money reaches the artists.

There are now reportedly about 90 Indigenous art centres across Australia with 53 located across the Northern Territory who are members of Desart or ANKA.

Papunya Tjupi Arts

Papunya Tjupi Arts

Art centres are one of the few long-term success stories in remote communities, generating self-employment, non-welfare income, cultural pride and making a profound contribution to Australia's identity.

- Tim Acker, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Economies Project*

ART CENTRES TODAY

Art centres are vital and dynamic spaces in communities that are owned by and for Aboriginal people. They offer empowerment, leadership, employment, training opportunities and safety. Each art centre's output, operations and activities are specific to the context of Culture and Country. They can serve as Keeping Places and repositories for Indigenous cultural knowledge and artefacts; they can provide art studios and workshops, education spaces, meeting and general community gathering spaces. They uphold artists rights and intellectual copyright. They are the means through which the art is showcased and brokered for market – onsite, online, on consignment to galleries or shown in major institutional exhibitions locally and internationally. They produce work for the tourist market and works that sell in commercial galleries to private collectors and institutions, and everything in between. Art centres serve artists within the community, and from surrounding homelands.

Governance and operation

Governance at the art centre is a mix of cultural authority, communal and collective decision-making, men's and women's business, and Office of Registrar of Indigenous Corporations compliance.

- The Desart Art Centre Guidebook [4]

Art Centres are frequently one of the few (or only) Aboriginal owned business and source of independent income for people in remote communities. They are central to Aboriginal people's ability to exercise self-determination. Their governance ties to both kinship systems and cultural protocols, as well as legislation. Most are not-for-profit corporations, registered with the Office of Registrar of Indigenous Corporations (ORIC), with a board of directors elected by its artist community members who will set the cultural agenda and ambitions. There are generally between six to ten board members and their level of engagement can vary with time and context. Those not part of ORIC sit within regional or local governments or are annexed to a school or non-government organisation.

The board employs a manager who is responsible for the day-to-day operations and management of the art centre. The art centre manager is invariably non-Indigenous, and covers a multitude of tasks and roles, across many levels of responsibility and worlds. They are responsible for corporate leadership and supporting the directors in functional governance. They manage the money including payment to the artists; seek grants; do market mediation and act as art advisors informing the direction of practice cognisant of market demands. It is a hands-on and highly involved role that also includes community development, support, and artist welfare. They need to translate and mediate across worlds and cultures – Indigenous and non-Indigenous; remote to regional and urban Australia, and internationally. It is a demanding job, far from family and friends, that can have a high staff turn-over.

The art centres employ art workers to assist with day to day running (often one of the few Aboriginal-run employers in a community). The roles and responsibilities of art workers vary within the art centres, dependent upon leadership models and individual aptitude. They are generally artists with long-standing relationships with the art centres and have worked with numerous art centre managers.

The financial success, art production, stability, and atmosphere of an art centre is very dependent on the people, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, who are involved.

Economics

Art centres generally make money from a combination of art sales, licensing, and product sales and in some cases can be extremely profitable returning significant income to communities. Art centres principally follow one of two payment structures to artists – either full payment up front, or on consignment, with a part payment and the remainder on the sale of the work. There are advantages and disadvantages to each system, and communities (or the art centre manager) selects the mode deemed most appropriate for them. Artists will generally receive 60% with 40% going back to the art centre to cover their costs which includes providing the materials and servicing the sales. Works can range in price from tens, hundreds to a thousand or two for the tourist market, through to five and six figure in the fine art market.

Invariably the base operational funds for arts centres comes from the Commonwealth Government, primarily through the Indigenous Visual Arts Industry Support (IVAIS) program that contributes to salaries and related costs for managers and art workers. Further income and grants come from Creative Australia (previously the Australia Council for the Arts) and Arts NT. This can include travel for artists to their exhibitions across Australia or internationally, building maintenance, special projects (such as digitalisation) and capital works. Very often they are dependent on match funding, requiring the use of the art centres funds, in-kind support, philanthropy, corporate support, or other grants.

Paint mixing pots at Warlukurlangu Artists, Yuendumu

Clockwise from top: artists working at Barkly Regional Arts, Tennant Creek; retail and storage for merchandise and artworks, Warlukurlangu Artists, Yuendumu; artists cooking recently caught meat on a fire pit at Munupi Arts.

Day to day in an art centre

At any one time there are multiple activities taking place simultaneously in an art centre. A central priority is supporting artists, supplying materials, and selling works. There can be acrylic paints to be mixed; barks to be collected on bush trips, dried then prepped for painting; and canvases that need to be stretched and primed. Each art centre has its own system for storing, preparing, and distributing supplies, with efficiency being a priority with a small staff and space limitations.

While some artists will work at the art centres others will choose to take their supplies home to work, returning with finished work for processing and sale. For many artists the art centre is an important place of social and cultural connection – spaces away from family politics or feuds. For other artists the space is too busy and they will seek respite elsewhere. The art centres can swarm with infants or school children depending on the time of day or year, and almost all will have camp dogs wandering through.

Money business, the settling of accounts, can be a time of heightened energy within the centres as artists bring finished work in, prices are negotiated, and payment made. There may be sensitivities to when and where this takes place – some centres elect to do it at specific times or days, or in more private spaces. Details, including cultural stories of the artworks are recorded and logged into a cataloguing system, then photographed. Artwork is packed and shipped to online purchasers, galleries, or institutions for exhibitions.

Art centres also provide social and community care. Tea, coffee, and biscuits are always on offer and is often a major part of the daily ritual. Some also provide breakfast and lunch, or kitchens are available for artists to make their own meals. Art centres can be places for wider community information exchange with meetings, presentations, and messaging on notice boards by community or government bodies.

Visitors

Visitors are both an opportunity to share culture and a source of income. Art centres are very often the primary, or only, space in a community for cross-cultural engagement. Visitors to art centres in remote communities tend to be health-care workers, teachers or service providers who are working – for a day or more permanently – within communities; those on road-trips across the country; art collectors or curators. There are also those who come to provide support to the art centres, including artists doing workshops, conservators, art professionals or volunteers. Available tourist infrastructure and accessibility varies between communities.

Online

Over recent years there has been investment in art centres' online presence and almost without exception they have very good websites. They host online shops as well as artist profiles and information about the art centre, Culture and Creation stories. Very often there will be films featuring the artists, their works, trips on Country to gather materials or paint, all providing an insight into their unique Culture. There is often helpful information about visiting – the amount of detail gives an impression of the attitude towards visitors.

ARCHITECTURE OF ART CENTRES

The physical space of an art centre signifies outward intent, providing a place for artists to convene and to sell work. In many cases the art centres had relatively informal and organic beginnings, opportunely occupying existing spaces. Art centre buildings are generally repurposed spaces – often former government administrative concrete block buildings or large tin sheds. For these reasons, the location of the art centres can as often be circumstantial as intentional. Most have purpose-built additions, but there are a few entirely new buildings. Building works and upgrades are often done incrementally as funds allow.

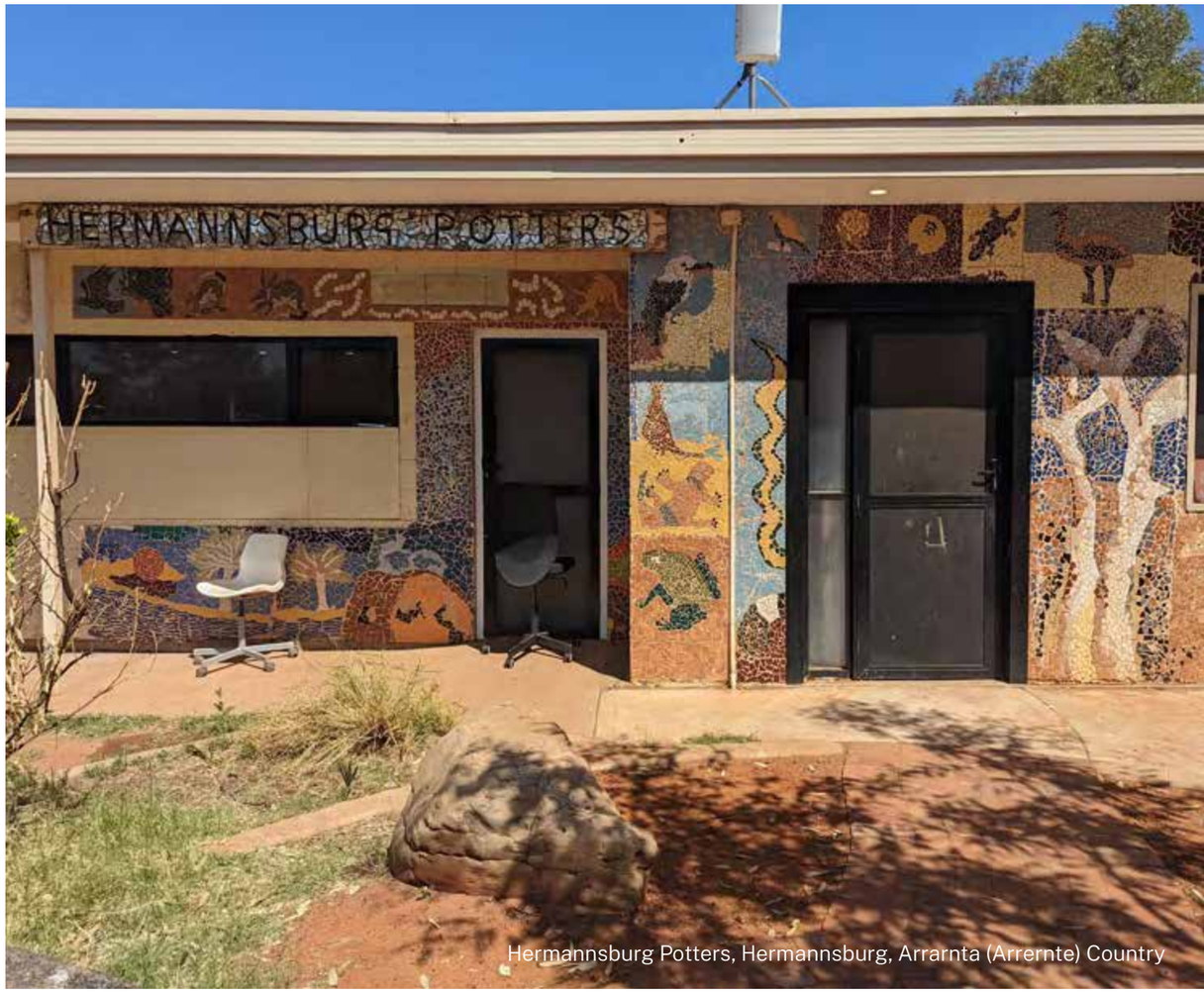
The facility requirements can change as the board and art centre managers shift ambitions and practices. The art centres need to secure accommodation within the community for the art centre manager, and often for other staff and visitors. Accommodation can include dongas (transportable buildings) or existing houses that may require upgrades or alteration, and in some cases these have been purpose-built.

Depending on the circumstances, the art centre will either own or lease the land and building(s) that it occupies. Leasing arrangements are generally made with the local Land Council and will have various conditions attached.

Funding and procurement

The political and funding landscape for capital works and infrastructure is continually changing. Looking at the relationship between funding, processes, and outcomes, is beyond the scope of this report, but would likely be illuminating. To date the main funding streams in the NT for capital works have been from the former Aboriginal Benefits Account (ABA) which was established under the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976 distributing monies from mining royalties.[5] The ABA grants process was discontinued in 2023 and will be now managed by a new Aboriginal-led corporate Commonwealth entity, the Northern Territory Aboriginal Investment Corporation (NTAIC).

The importance of art centres to Aboriginal communities was outlined by a 2007 senate inquiry that also highlighted the acute need to improve infrastructure. As a result, the ABA launched the NT Arts Infrastructure Project in 2009, that supported many art centres with maintenance and upgrade projects. More recently the Northern Territory Government launched an investment fund to establish an arts trail to “create more local jobs and position the Northern Territory as a world-class tourist and cultural destination”. The Arts Trail Gallery Extension Program funds “targeted gallery infrastructure and innovative facilities” in Katherine, Tennant Creek, and Arnhem Land, some of which have been realised, others are still to be. The Arts Trail Regional Stimulus Grants gave four rounds of funding to centres across the NT directed towards facilities and infrastructure upgrades between $10,000-$100,000.[6] The intended fifth round was suspended in response to COVID-19, and remaining funds directed to “provide practical support and business continuity”.



Hermannsburg Potters, Hermannsburg, Arrarnta (Arrernte) Country

In many projects, partnerships with builders offered employment and training to Aboriginal workers as part of the Community Development Program (CDP), an employment and community development service to support job seekers in remote Australia.

As well as connection to Country and Culture, the architecture of art centres is influenced by countless logistical factors including personnel, opportunity, government policy and funding. The impact of these will be explored in the following chapter.

1. The ABS uses the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia Plus (ARIA+) produced by the University of Adelaide. Accessed 12 September 2023

2. *The Desart Art Centre Guidebook*, Third Edition, 2018 – p 34, section written by Cara Kirkwood and Robyn Frances Higgins

3. Mahood, Kim, *Wandering with Intent, essays*, Scribe Publications, 2022

4. *Desart Guidebook*, p 139 – Art Centre operations

5. Australian Government Website: National Indigenous Australians Agency / ABA grants details. Accessed 17 October 2023

6. Northern Territory Government Website: Arts Trail Regional Stimulus Grants. Accessed 17 October 2023

Kakadu National Park

Jilamara Arts and Crafts Milikapiti

REVIEW AND SUGGESTIONS

Preamble

BUILDINGS OVERVIEW

CONNECTION TO COUNTRY AND CULTURE

ROLE OF THE ARCHITECT

CLIENT AND FUNDERS

PRACTICALITIES

- Budget
- Designing for climatic extreme
- Logistics, tenure & infrastructure
- Security
- Maintenance

DESIGN FACTORS

- Location within Community
- Creating a Precinct
- Facilities and spatial requirements
- Accommodation

TOURISM

- Visitor experience
- Shop / Gallery
- Cultural tourism

DESIGNING FOR EVOLUTION AND GROWTH

Through conversations with those involved in the art centres and my readings about them – including Vivien Johnson's *Streets of Papunya* – I appreciate that for many communities establishing an arts centre is a huge achievement. A building, any building, is better than nothing. It has made me ponder whether in these circumstances my expectations or ambitions for the architecture are different from other contexts. This project has also made me think more about biases. I err on the side of optimism; I often want to see the best in a building. I noted circumstances where I was shown a building by someone who was very proud of it, most commonly when they had been involved in its creation. I realised it influenced my experience of the place – seeing it more favourably. When reviewing these buildings for the report, I became more objective and often more critical. I also noted that there were situations when someone would show me a building and was negative, the process of its creation, or upkeep weighing heavily on them. Here, as someone with fresh eyes, I could see the big picture positives.

I must admit that I didn't always find it easy to talk to artists about the buildings. It seemed much more appropriate to talk about their art and see what might evolve after that. I was conscious that probing questions from someone who was unknown and with whom there was no reciprocal relationship, was not appropriate. With the limited time and little opportunity to build trust, I would sometimes shy away in my questioning and in conversations. I imagine it would be a very different process working with the artists and community to create a building for them and would like to operate from this alternate position. I learnt from experienced architects, that they would use activities as a starting point for understanding a brief. They would invite artists to describe what they did, where and why to understand the operation of the architecture.

As an outsider to the First Nations communities I was visiting, I was highly aware that there were social and cultural dynamics beyond my comprehension that were influencing what was happening around me. I would often sit and absorb the atmosphere of a place and feel how the building and its surrounds changed during the day or with different activities. In every place there is a story – too many to recount here. They seem to come out as I chat with people about the project or when I am reminded of a place. Likewise, conversations with architects, those working in these remote First Nations communities and around art centres hang in the air, connecting with what I experienced, giving clarity or context to an impression I had. Layers of information and voices have built over time that I now find hard to specifically attribute. The ideas of others are threaded within and throughout the review and suggestions that follow.

Eeeesh, twang. Eeeesh, twang. The sounds of doors opening with a slow creak, returning on their spring as footsteps shuffle in, often accompanied by voices announcing arrival or greetings to others. Sometimes community come in only to exit with another squeak into the enclosed courtyard to use the amenities, get a drink from the bubbler, have a smoke or a yarn. After school kids run up the ramp; babies crawl underfoot in the central hub of the art centre where visitors and staff gravitate. The art centre is a constant state of ebb and flow. Taxis or family pull up outside delivering artists with bundles in the arms. Sometimes a collection of small pandanus spirals that will be turned into earrings, or a larrakitj or large bark painting wrapped in an ordinary sarong… dropped to reveal an extraordinary marvel.

The spaces are in constant flux. Works of all sorts come in – the art centre encourages experimentation and nothing is deemed a failure or rejected. Artists and community are supported. The works are moved by staff for conservation, or prepared for sale, documented, photographed for the web or an exhibition, stored or brought out again to show a visitor. Every time I walked through the gallery something had changed.

Propped against the wall, an older artist sits in 'the chair' or so I came to see it – next to the main desk that everyone seemed to drop into at some stage.

Waiting patiently, gently rocking, someone will be with her soon to discuss money business. Activity can be glimpsed through narrow vertical window slots to the retail space; to the courtyard and spaces beyond. Surveillance and connection.

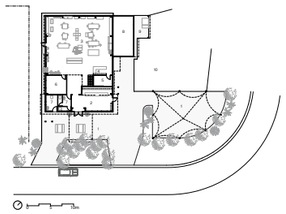
When I first arrived, I wasn't sure where I could go, which thresholds could I cross. Was I intruding, was I welcome… this was my first time in an art centre and I was green and hesitant. I watched and followed the lead of others. After a few days lending a hand, I started to become familiar with its workings, becoming more confident and recognised by artists. With time I notice details that I had initially missed – I start to distinguish the moieties of individual artists, see links with their kin, my eye slowly attuning to the complexity at play.

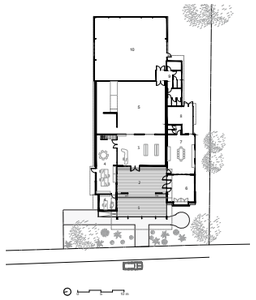
Paint splashes on the floor of the space that has 50 to 100-year-old works, reveal art is made here too. Things are not delineated in the way I understand from my western view of this space they call a museum. But knowledge and ideas are honoured – copyright is fiercely protected. I see one Elder sit on the chair observing a larrakitj in front of her that has markings very close to her own; she enquires where it has come from.

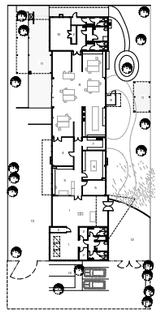
The visitors are of all varieties, young and old, curious art seekers and families living in the community stop by to say hello. There are flowing skirts and bush gear; those who are accustomed to being on community and a few less so. Many wear uniforms (often emblemed or branded t-shirts) representing the military, mining companies, government agencies or various not-for profits. And this is the humid "build-up" with COVID restrictions in place…. what must it be like in the 'dry' when tourists descend?

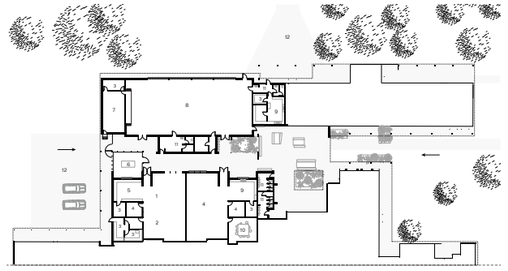
The architecture seems somewhat secondary to me. The people create this art centre and make it pulsate with life and incredible outputs.

Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre, Yirrkala,
November 2021









Art centres in towns

Plans to approximate same scale. They are reproduced at a larger scale in the case studies, pages noted.

Marrawuddi Arts Centre, Jabiru (p 156)
Est. c.1993

Old bakery refurbished by Marrawuddi with Billy Can Constructions, 2020

Amenities:
Gallery / retail
Studio
Café
Community / artist space
Administration

Mimi Arts, Katherine (p 214)
Est. 1978

Existing workshop, with Troppo Architects refurbishment and addition, 2021

Amenities:
Gallery
Retail
Artist Studio
Workshop/ community space
Administration

Tangentyere Artists, Alice Springs, (p 328)
Est. 2005

Tangentyere Designs, 2014

Amenities:
Studio spaces
Gallery
Retail
Administration

Barkly Arts, Tennant Creek (p 274)
Est. 1996

Occupies portion of a c.1970s ex-school building

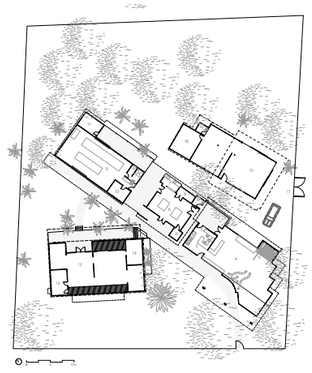
Amenities:
Studio / community spaces
Arts workshop
Gallery / retail
Event / music space
Sound recording studio
Administration

Cultural centre in town

Nyinkka Nyunyu Art and Cultural Centre, Tennant Creek (p 258) Est. 1995

Tangentyere Design, 2003

Amenities:
Cultural exhibition space
Gallery / Retail
Studio / community spaces
Administration
Café
Men + women performance space
Sacred site

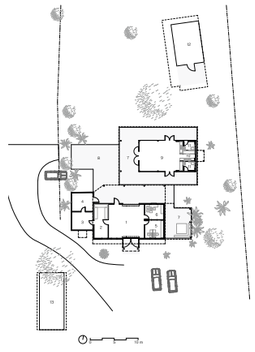


Art centres in remote communities

Jilamara Arts and Crafts, Milikapiti (p 110)
Est. 1985

New and old buildings refurbished by Troppo Architects, 2010-12

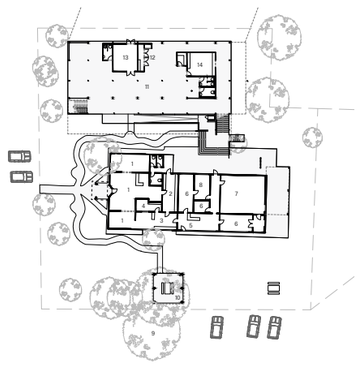
Amenities:
Gallery / Retail
Artist studio
Women's screen print studio
Men's carving shed
Keeping Place/ Museum
Art packing / processing space
Administration



Munupi Arts and Crafts, Pirlangimpi (p 132)
Est. 1990

Original building refurbished with new by Kaunitz Yeung Architecture, 2020

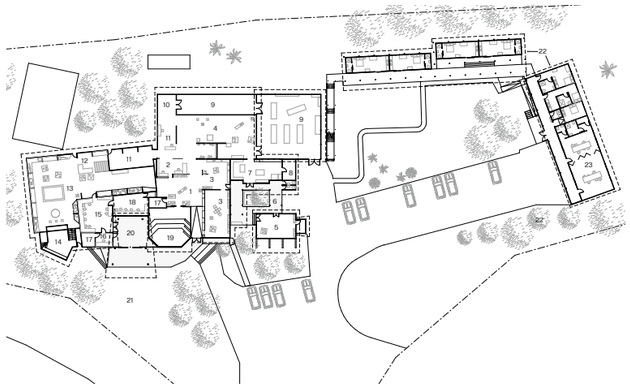
Amenities:
Artist Studio
Gallery / Studio / processing
Men's Carving Shed
Art material prepping
Storage
Offices
Pottery Shed (dormant)



Injalak Arts, Gunbalanya (p 174)
Est. 1989

Initial building 1989 with various extensions.
New building 2021

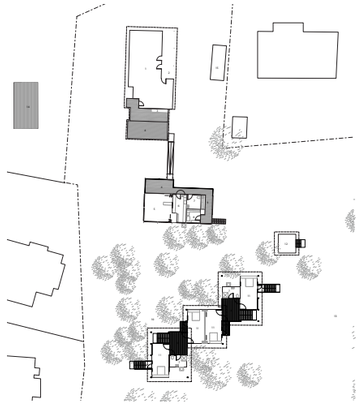
Amenities:
Studio / community spaces
Arts workshop
Gallery / retail
Event / music space
Sound recording studio
Administration



Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre, Yirrkala (p 192)
Est. 1976

Adaptation of existing buildings / subsequent additions by various architects and builders

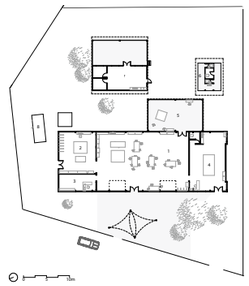
Amenities:
Gallery / retail
Printing studio
Carving workshop
Multi-media lab
Auditorium
Office / administration
Guest accommodation
Museum
Archive
Storage



Djilpin Arts, Wugularr (p 232)
Est. 2002

Adaptation of existing building plus new build by Insideout Architects, 2012, 2015

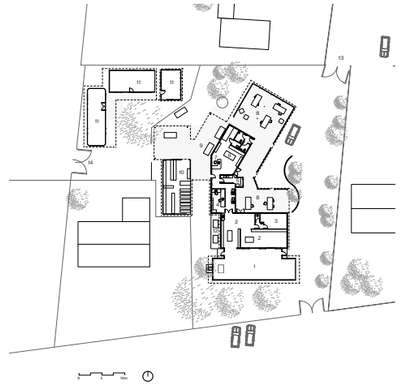
Amenities:
Gallery / retail
Museum
Carving space
Performance space
Community workshop
Guest accommodation
Camping



Papunya Tjupi Arts, Papunya (p 290)
Est. 2007

Refurbishments of existing building from 2009 architect unknown

Amenities:
Artist Studio
Gallery / Retail
Men's Space
Art preparation space
Offices



Warlukurlangu Artists, Yuendumu (p 308)
Est. 1985

Adaptation of existing building: Centre for Appropriate Technologies 2005. Extensions: Michael Watts c.2012

Amenities:
Artist Studio
Gallery / Retail
Art preparation and storage
Processing and packing spaces
Administration space
Staff/ volunteer accommodation
Art centre manager's houses

CONNECTION TO COUNTRY AND CULTURE

Centre First Nations knowledges and ways of being in the design process and project

First Nations world views need to be at the centre of the process in which buildings are briefed, procured, funded, designed, constructed, and operated. The following pages of analysis and suggestions are built upon this foundation.

Keeping Culture alive is a prime focus of most art centres. For their boards and artists, they provide the opportunity to practice Culture, exercise self-determination and pass knowledge to younger generations. This occurs through making art and within all the activities of the art centre.

Existing buildings that are appropriated for use as an art centre, may carry negative associations for the artists or impede cultural practices. The design can help negate this. Those that have been designed by an architect and purpose built, were found to have stronger connections to Country and Culture.

The art centres that appeared to work best were those that could be occupied in multiple ways for hybrid uses, and with freedom of movement and flow. Importantly this assists with cultural avoidance practices, where certain male and female kin should not be in close proximity, have eye contact or speak.

Some art centres have Keeping Places, spaces to house sacred objects, including those repatriated, for community use and viewing. Each community will have their own ideas and attitudes to the keeping of, and access to, these objects that need to be respected. For ideal conservation they require a secure space with stable environmental conditions, with relative ease of access. Metal plan chests and cupboards can be a good storage options (depending on the cultural artefacts to be stored), located in a sealed room. It should be noted that certain objects may have access restricted to knowledge holders.

Arts centres can provide spaces for cultural gathering across their sites, for instance at Jilamara on the Tiwi Islands (left) or Nyinkka Nyunyu in Tennant Creek (above) that has performance grounds and hosts major NAIDOC events. Nyinkka Nyunyu is distinctive within the buildings covered as it is primarily a cultural centre where Warumungu culture is embodied in its architecture and in the spatial storytelling that includes a sacred site.

Many of the centres I visited had beautiful paintings or mosaics on buildings, walls, paving or the like, created by the artists and telling stories of Country and community. Artists showed me the works on numerous occasions with pride and as prompts to stories. As a visitor I found they gave a distinct and memorable identity to the place and understanding of the Culture. In some cases they also introduced new art practices, such as mosaicing, to the artists.

Munupi Arts and Craft, Pirlangimpi

ROLE OF THE ARCHITECT

Art centres are central to Aboriginal people's ability to exercise self-determination. The community has a deep knowledge of Country and the workings of the art centres. The role of the architect is firstly as **translator and enabler,** assuring the Culture, values and ambitions of the Community are clear in the brief and upheld throughout the design and delivery process. In some cases, government bodies (most commonly in town centres) are also stakeholders, which will need to be managed and factored into the process.

Invariably built infrastructure projects are a response to non-existent or inadequate facilities to meet the requirements of the community. This can cause anxiety and frustration for community with a long list of needs and wishes. Ideally, the architect's role should be to assist in **prioritising and managing expectations** within available resources.

The legacy of colonialism and government intervention runs deep. Aboriginal people have endured decades of sometimes well meaning, non-Indigenous coming into a community reviewing housing needs for instance; researching and consulting, then either nothing being done, or the opposite to requests. This leads to consultation fatigue and scepticism.

Indigenous knowledge is built relationally. It is important to establish trust; **share information and be transparent** throughout the design and build process. The more time that can be spent in and with a community, to develop relationships and understanding, the better. However procurement processes, budgets and timelines do not make this easy and it therefore often becomes necessary to rely on the art centre manager to transmit information.

Country and Community first
Listen deeply
Leave ego at door

A commonly heard critique, largely from art centre managers, was that architects wanted to assert their vision and ambitions on the project. Real or perceived it highlighted the need to put client wishes first, to listen deeply. Having community ownership and investment in the process from start to finish (including the build) was fundamental to the outcome and the ongoing use of the building.

The architecture needs to express and embody the values of the community, not the values of the architect. The aspirations for recognition in architecture awards celebrating signature buildings that photograph well can, but will not always, align with the context or ambitions of the art centre. In some cases, an architecture statement or a visually arresting design can be a source of pride for the community, attract tourist and express values, however a few conversations I had suggested there may be circumstances where it was not deemed appropriate to have an arts centre that stood out.

Some architects took on the role of project manager to assure the intentions of the community were followed through in the best way possible during the construction process. Many of the architects who designed the art centres I looked at – notably Susan Dugdale and Associates in Mparntwe (Alice Springs) and Troppo Architects in Darwin - have been working with Aboriginal communities for many years. They have established trust with Elders and communities and have worked in remote contexts for decades. For those who have not worked in this context, understanding the uniqueness and extremes of remote communities and their specific micro-climatic conditions is vital.

I had an inspiring conversation in Aotearoa, New Zealand with a non-Indigenous designer who described his process of working with a Māori clan on a new masterplan for their town. He would spend many days staying with them, often on his weekends and personal time, being present in their lives and letting conversations evolve alongside life. He would capture what they were saying in plans that he would draw alongside them and never take away to work on – assuring they always maintained their ownership and control of the knowledges imbedded in the project.

Architects, know your limitations,
seek advice from those with experience when necessary

Design workshop for Nyinkka Nyunyu at Karguru Nursery/First Nations Seed Bank Tennant Creek. Left to right: Stephen Ryan (Freeman Ryan Design), Natalie Hardbattle (FRD), Sue Dugdale (SDA), Ra Sim (Arid Edge), Jerry Kelly Jappaljarri (Warumungu Elder / Kargaru Nursery gardener).

CLIENTS AND FUNDERS

Involve an architect
Experienced builder
Informed client
Work together

The projects that I found to be most successful and able to meet most user aspirations were those that involved architects. Having experienced builders on the procurement team was evidently advantageous. As always a good client is vital for a successful project. In almost all cases the art centre manager would apply for funding, manage the building project and act as the client on behalf of the art centre board. As discussed, the managers role is multifarious and demanding. They are invariably nimble, talented, and able to turn their hands to multiple tasks, but many will not have had experience in a construction project. Guidelines about the role and responsibilities of a client, expectations and steps in the process would relieve pressure and provide clarity for all.

The peak body Desart was aware of this, and invited architect Susan Dugdale to give a paper at their 2012 Conference that was later summarised in their guidebook for art centre managers. It provides good, clear, practical advice based on her experience of art centre build projects broken down into key headings including land tenure and authorities; time; build costs; running costs; process and management; design; quality; projects ‘gone wrong’. This paper and conversations with Sue Dugdale also informed my analysis.

Keep in mind that faster is not always better.
Thorough is always good.
- Susan Dugdale, architect

Nyinkka Nyunyu Art and Cultural Centre, Tennant Creek, by Tangentyere Design, opened in 2003

PRACTICALITIES

To be deemed a success by the community a building must meet the practical needs, function appropriately and be suitable for the extreme climate.

Budget

I heard numerous stories of budget issues. Aligning ambition and vision with available budgets is vital for everyone involved in the project. So is being transparent with money. The client needs to understand the whole project costs (including consultant fees, services, escalations, accountancy costs, fit outs, contingencies etc). The architect and client should be cognisant of the operational costs of a building and factor this into design decisions, so they don't strain or collapse the art centre in the future. Funders agenda's need to be met and accounted for in the project brief or timeline from the outset.

Costs associated with building in remote areas are considerable – everything from labour to materials needs to be transported which impacts timelines and budgets; working with contractors and consultants with experience in remote communities could be advantageous.

Extending or altering existing buildings may get better value from tight budgets, however depending on previous use there may be negative colonising associations for community. Using transportables (prefabricated portable structures) is common on remote communities. The whole of project costs need to be included when testing the viability of prefabricated or transportable buildings against a purpose-built solution. Things to consider include costs for service connections, disabled access and maintenance, as well as building lifespan and inevitable compromises in design or functionality to meet transportable requirements.

Transparency with money
Expectations aligned with budget
Operational costs factored in
Strategic with spend

Start with Community knowledge of microclimates
Design for context
Consider all seasons and extremes

Jilamara Arts and Crafts Milikapiti designed by Troppo Architects, 2012
Below: Kutuwulumi Gallery with ceiling fans and glass louvres that passively cool the space at certain times of the year. When I visited the tropical Tiwi Islands in the cooler "dry" in June, they only ran the air conditioning in the afternoon as temperatures rose.
Right: Gutters are large to deal with high rainfall in the "wet"

Designing for climatic extreme

Community knows the microclimate of the site, through its many seasons and cycles. Place their knowledge and wisdom at the centre of the design. There are extremes of climate across the region being studied, ranging from tropical monsoonal conditions in the north (hot-humid), to the hot and cold desert climes in the centre (hot-arid). The degree of protection given to outdoor spaces can influence how much of the year they can be utilised. For most artists, being in air-conditioned environments is the appeal of working at the art centre. As well as the environmental impact, electricity in remote communities is expensive. Passive solar design becomes vital to minimise load on systems. There are many design tools to assist; siting of buildings, orientation, shading, location of windows, insultation, thermal mass.

There were several instances where transparent roofing materials, used to allow light into spaces, created uncomfortable heat gains making temperatures inside art centres unbearable in the height of summer. Intense monsoonal rains need to be factored into the design of roofs and canopies between buildings, as does how water is dispelled and managed across the site.

PRACTICALITIES (CONT.)

Logistics, Infrastructure, Tenure

Tenure of lots within communities is often complex. Establishing ownership and negotiating with Land Councils can be a drawn-out process for the art centres and should be done early. Understand from whom permission needs to be sought and consult with the board and local senior cultural advisors. Art centres can occupy more than one lot as they have grown or aggregated over time. Leases can be short or the lease timing on multiple sites may not align. This needs to be resolved for long-term investment in capital projects.

Getting access to services such as power, water and sewage is paramount. Having a full picture of the situation is vital and may dictate decisions on siting and design. Access may not be possible in all areas of the site, it may require upgrades or new connections which can be costly.

Confirm lot tenure
Factor power, water and sewage access into design and budget
Establish the planning requirements of the community

Tangentyere Artists, Mparntwe, Alice Springs
Tangentyere Designs

Maintenance

Maintenance and cleaning within remote communities is an issue due to limited availability of resources and skills, and the extreme climate conditions of high rainfall and sun, salt on the coast and dust in the desert. Basic maintenance can require people, materials, or equipment to be flown or shipped in, which is expensive and slow. Minimising maintenance requirements from the outset is best. It should be assumed that the wear and tear from climate and people will be significant. Robustness across materials, finishes, structures and detailing is important. Using materials with seals or with imbedded pigment will reduce the need for upkeep of surface finishes.

Communities may not have basic equipment to hand. Even ensuring lights are at a height where bulbs can be changed using a standard ladder makes a difference. Cleaning may not be very frequent, keep detailing simple without places to gather dirt or dust. Skills deficits could be addressed through training as part of CPD programs.

Design for minimal maintenance

Security

Break-ins are an issue in many remote communities and towns. The frequency and likelihood can ebb and flow with life and times. I saw some buildings with ordinary door locks and nothing on windows and in others, a total security layer. At its most extreme any part of the building envelope that could be knocked in (for instance a wooden door) is a target, as is an opening that can fit a small child, including high windows and roof skylights.

Integrating basic security principles of visibility, robust materials and structures is a good starting point. If deemed an issue by the client board, review propositions with savvy community members and think highly imaginatively about ways that access might be gained. There may be examples of successful security solutions in other buildings in the community that could provide inspiration. Having on-site accommodation could reduce security issues.

Retrofitted security measures were invariably heavy-handed, done in haste by contractors, using ready-to-hand solutions that often lacked any design consideration. These could make a building look defensive and negatively impact the internal experience. The best solution may be to design security solutions that can be added if required – in such a way that they look like they are part of the design intent.

Perforated metal security screens with designs by local artists have become a common, popular solution that connects with Culture and allows for some visual transparency. Translating an artist's drawing into a screen requires care to maintain integrity and achieve an elegant solution. Attention needs to be given to the thickness of the metal and the detailing to ensure that sections can't be bent or severed to create holes.

There were examples in several art centres where heavy-duty, roller shutter were part of facades, that opened the building during the day and closed it at night.

All building openings can be a target
Use robust materials well detailed
Decorative security screens or roller shutters

Sliding metal doors at Mimi Arts, Katherine, with artist design

PRACTICALITIES (CONT.)

Location within the community

The location of the art centre within the community and distances to public amenities influences its operations, and atmosphere. The location is sometimes intentional, and in others by default due to availability of sites or occupation of existing buildings. Being within the community heart or on its outskirts can influence those who frequent it and perceptions of its symbolic place within the community and cultural life. Some also had connections to sacred sites in the immediate vicinity.

Of relevance is the proximity to the community store which people frequent at least once if not more times a day and is a hub of community life. I witnessed artists locating themselves within the art centre grounds so they could watch the comings and goings of the store.

Fences in communities, high and low can be common. Some of the art centre sites were fenced – others not – which shaped the movement within the site and the relative feeling of porosity with the community. Those with fences would always have an open gate during operational hours so people could come and go freely, albeit through single or multiple entrances, that could be actively or passively monitored.

In the context of the major towns, the location of the art centre has a significant impact on visitor numbers and awareness. This was noted in Tennant Creek with Nyinkka Nyunyu located on the Stuart Highway running through the town centre attracting many more visitors than Barkly Regional Arts which is located on a backroad. In Mparntwe Alice Springs there is a cluster of art centres in a light-industrial neighbourhood, creating a critical mass for visitors.

The local cow also wanders through the Jilamara Arts and Crafts precinct in Milikapiti

Site occupation

From what I witnessed the most successful centres created a cultural precinct offering a range of spatial conditions for different activities, within and between buildings, including space for cultural practice and community gathering. Consideration could be given to gradients of public to more private use of the site. Connection with Country principles should inform the site planning and occupation, working beyond the demarcation of lots.

Good environmental design is vital in these extreme climatic conditions, including orientation of buildings in relation to solar gain and breezes; shading and protection with roof canopies and trees; working with topography for water run-off.

The “front door” and street presence of the art centre is important marking its place and presence within the community and identifying it easily for visitors. Vehicle access and parking on the site needs to be factored in relation to artist access, supplies and services.

Desire lines within communities, show paths that are naturally taken between different points, and these paths may occur across the sites of art centres. For some art centres this could be unwanted, as it brought additional activity, and paths were diverted by fences or more subtly by planting or building positioning.

Many art centres have used ‘transportables’ or shipping containers to assist with relieving immediate space and storage needs. Connectivity between the ‘temporary’ and more permanent buildings using ground surfaces or roofs can give a feeling of cohesion and increases the relative use of the whole site.

Landscape design was utilised in some cases very successfully to create gathering spaces for artists, community, and visitors. Low walls or pathways defined by ground surfaces or edges, guide or direct movement and articulate entrances.

Create a cultural precinct

Djilpin Arts, Wugularr

Munupi Arts and Craft, Pirlangimpi

DESIGN FACTORS

Facilities and operations

Art centres are hybrid spaces that need to do a lot in often constrained circumstances. Spatial efficiency and configurations appropriate to the specific operations assists them to work well. In some cases, spaces were judged by the artists and workers to be too small, however it was evident that their layout and operations was the hinderance. Perceived space deficits may be rectified with functional or spatial reorganisation, new furniture or storage, or changes to management practices.

Cultural protocols such as avoidance practices and gender segregation underpin Aboriginal societies. The details, emphasis and strictness will differ between different groups and clans and need to be understood and accommodated within specific designs. Open spaces and clear sightlines allow people to see others and avoid them if necessary, as well as assisting with general safety and reducing potential theft. Multiple entrances and exits enable people to easily respond to another's presence.

Artists often prefer to work in gendered groups and most art centres have defined men's and women's spaces, or the ability for genders to separate when desired. The position of amenities and their entrances needs to be carefully considered as it is generally not appropriate for one sex to see the other visiting a bathroom.

Kitchen or at least basic tea-making facilities are required and invariably shared by artists and staff. In some cases these were operationally overseen by art centre staff with tea and coffee supplies made accessible to artists in central locations.

Artists will work on the ground sitting on large square cushions, round mats, or at, or on, folding tables. They move around the spaces depending on climate, time of day or season and with social or family groupings. I was made aware that there were also hierarchies between artists that dictated who occupied which spaces. In other cases, there were individual preferences that dictated whether they sat in the middle of the action or preferred to work in isolation. Even small things like proximity to the radio seemed to influence preferences. Having a variety of conditions seems advantageous, and spaces between and around buildings appeared to work well.

I saw some good examples where larger shed-like spaces were given programmatic articulation by moveable furniture or floor coverings such as a rug defining a space to look at books and albums or sit and eat (or sleep). If fixed furniture is used, it's scale and location need to be carefully considered as it can constrain the use and fluidity of a space.

Many artists have mobility issues and will rely on being driven to the art centre – either collected in the art centre troopie or by family members. Accessibility within art centres is vital – ramps, adequate door widths and support rails. Many of the older and appropriated buildings have been retrofitted to meet current accessibility codes and standards, although often not very elegantly or satisfactorily. Stairs can be physical and psychological impediments. On my visits I didn't see stair-lifts being used and heard reports of maintenance issues with dust and the like.

At Tangentyere Artists, refreshments are served through a large window connecting the kitchen in the administrative wing to the artist studio.

At Warlukurlangu Artists, Yuendumu a large storage shed (on left of image) houses supplies including pre-cut wooden frame segments, canvas, paints. There is space to assemble and store them. The canvas is primed outside and racks allow multiple canvases to dry before and after being painted by an artist.

Making artworks

Each art practice has spatial requirements and will be impacted by the design. For instance, the size of openings will impact the scale of paintings that can be worked on; the length of the screen-printing table that can be accommodated will impact the production capabilities. Carving is both noisy and messy work, so generally this area is in a separate shed or away from other activities. Pottery will need kilns and the like. A detailed understanding of every step involved in making artworks, plus processing, packing, storing and distributing them, and the space requirements at each stage, should form the basis of the building's functional design brief.

To highlight just one example – a painting on canvas. The canvas is bought in rolls, stored and when required laid out on tables the width of the canvas, cut then stretched onto a frame (which will need to be made) and primed and dried. The canvas will be painted by artists in a frame on the ground or at a table. Acrylic paint will be mixed, or natural ochre collected, crushed and turned into paint. These are stored in small containers for the artists. Painting utensils are cleaned in a sink (ideally with a paint-trap), and should be easy for artists to access. When the paintings are complete, they will be left to dry, then stored (with or without frames), and shipped in a roll to their buyer. The sizes of canvas's being produced will be a strategic and logistical decision that will also affect the artworks price. Larger canvases require a greater investment in materials and more space to prepare, suitable transport facilities, and adequate space to paint.

Screen-printing at Tiwi Designs shows that paint is pushed with a trowel between two people standing either side of the table laid with a cloth. The screen is then lifted and placed alongside, repeating the process the length of the table. The screens are cleaned with a high-pressure hose outside, dried and stored where they are easily accessible. The printed fabric is hung in large ovens or cupboards to dry.

DESIGN FACTORS (CONT.)

Administration

There are numerous approaches to the location and nature of administrative spaces for the art centre manager and staff. These include closed offices, open plan, or a hybrid; at the centre or periphery of the building. Invariably a balance needs to be found between being able to work quietly without interruption verses being accessible to both artist and visitors with an oversight of activities. Many have semi-enclosed spaces with windows located with eyesight across the working spaces. Where offices were isolated or very enclosed, they appeared to impact staff and artist relationships, and set a more hierarchical culture. Money business invariably generates a lot of energy and noise, where and how it takes place – with privacy or otherwise – impacts other activities and the general atmosphere.

Storage

The high cost and lengthy timeframes for getting supplies to remote communities requires bulk buying and storage. The design needs to consider the location of the storage areas relative to vehicle access and daily use, as well as the maximum size of materials to be stored (for instance large rolls of bubble wrap that are bulky at 1.5m tall x 60cm wide).

The most productive and efficient art centres had purpose-specific storage facilities, located for ease of use with good systems in place to manage them. Off the shelf-furniture and storage systems were often well utilised. These included cabinets on sliders that stacked for space efficiency or racks that could both store artworks and be accessible for interested buyers to peruse. Drawing cabinets were effectively used to safekeep paper works. In some cases, simple purpose-built solutions to storage had been employed. I saw innovative examples of storage integrated into furniture like benches for efficiency. In all cases consider the operation, ease of access (and for whom) and assure they are fit for purpose.

Accommodation (staff, visitors)

It is recognised that decent housing for an art centre manager in remote communities assists in staff retention. However, when housing for Aboriginal people is so inadequate, seeking money for an art centre manager's accommodation is difficult territory to navigate. For the art centres that had built good manager houses to accommodate families and in some cases guests, it was a notable positive asset. Art centres will invariably have guests they need to house, including artists doing professional development workshops; archivists and conservators looking after historic works; curators and other arts professionals. A few had facilities which was a positive addition, but many spoke of the need for these facilities.

Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre in Yirrkala has guest accommodation in portacabins and in a converted former Commonwealth Training Centre that also houses a conference meeting space.

Two of the nine art centres I visited in remote communities had tourist accommodation - Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre and Djilpin Arts. The latter was in architect-designed raised pavilions and was very successful. The central pavilion could work as two rentable rooms to sleep or as a single room for workshops, gatherings or activities. Managing and servicing the accommodation is a significant undertaking for an art centre within its operational structure – managing bookings; meeting guests; preparing and cleaning rooms including doing laundry; upkeep on communal facilities like a kitchen and bathrooms. The site was well chosen on the edge of the community and had space for campers as well as serviced rooms. Raised platforms provided spaces for artists and visitors; verandahs were used as shared spaces. For further details see Djilpin Arts case study (p 232).

Djakanimba Pavilions, Djilpin Arts

TOURISM

Tourism allows communities to share culture and for artists to sell work, although the appetite and facilities for tourists can vary with the art centres. Over the past few years, many of the art centres have received funding for infrastructure and amenity upgrades from the NT Government through the Territory Art Trails “a tourism initiative promoting the Territory as the premier global destination to visit for Australian Aboriginal art and culture.” This has directed investment for signage, landscaping, gallery upgrades and painting murals, which seemed to have a positive impact on their presentation and welcome to visitors.

The art centres in tourist hubs like Tennant Creek and Katherine or destinations such as Uluru and Jabiru seek visitors and can be more likely to attract government funding. Visitor experience, quality of spaces, curation and interpretation all become factors in an art centres success in this context.

In remote communities with significant distances from main towns and little to no tourist infrastructure, there are fewer and less regular tourists. One exception I visited is the community of Hermannsburg in the West MacDonald Ranges, which is only a few hours from Alice Springs, with accommodation nearby. Hermannsburg has a historic precinct with cafe and the house of the famed artist Albert Namatjira, both popular with tourists. However, Hermannsburg Potters is very modest in scale with a compromised gallery space, and there are currently plans for a new arts centre.

Tourists are seasonal with peak periods between May and September when the climate is most conducive – cooler in the desert or dry in the tropics. Some remote communities will be inaccessible to visitors from December to April during the northern wet season.

Keringke Art Centre, Ltyentye Apurte (Santa Teresa)


Mimi Arts, Katherine

Marrawuddi Arts Centre with cafe , Jabiru

Tangentyere Artists, Mparntwe, Alice Springs with distinct entrances for artists and visitors

Visitor experience

For many visitors to art centres, especially in remote communities, these places can be culturally unfamiliar. Visitors may be unsure of protocols or where they are welcome within these hybrid spaces. Care with the spatial sequencing of a visitor’s journey coupled with management are key components to facilitating a positive visitor experience.

Welcome, entrance and amenities

Good and clear signage within the community marking the route to, and arrival at, the art centre is important and there were some creative examples made by artists such as painting discarded car bonnets. Signage in the larger towns is invariably overseen by council bodies and will fit within streetscape strategies and aesthetics. A building’s expression can identify an art centre through its form or artwork on screens or murals. A strong street presence and sense of welcome makes a considerable difference to perceptions and enticement for visitors. Clearly marked parking, pathways into the site and building entrance facilitate visitation.

Along with signage many art centres employed landscaping to successfully denote entrances and articulate thresholds especially in the urban contexts to mediate the transition from the street. Spaces to sit create a positive welcome for both artists and visitors and can create spaces of cross-cultural meeting. Easy access to toilets for visitors is advantageous. A couple of art centres serve good expresso coffee or run a café that was a drawcard for locals as well as visitors. The facilities need to be run well and be in the right location.

Some art centres have separate, others shared, entrances for visitors that seemed to relate to management attitudes, operations, site and building planning. To be visitor friendly, an entrance is best placed through or near the gallery or shop as it is a familiar space to them. Sightlines to this space are important if the art centre has no formal reception, so artists or staff can see and greet visitors.

Cross-cultural exchange

Visitor access to artist spaces varied – in some art centres visitors were free to roam, in others the visitor was guided and, in some instances, discouraged to enter artist working spaces. Spatial planning and openness (or otherwise), doors and doorway widths, can all be helpful indicators for tourists to assist with informing them whether they can, or cannot, enter a space.

To my sensibilities and as an avid appreciator and regular visitor to arts venues, the spaces that felt most captivating were those hybrid spaces where the multifarious activities took place and the spirit of the art centre felt alive. The most enjoyable and easy to navigate were spatially fluid. The experience of being taken through an arts centre by an artist was very special. Prompts of artworks or objects encouraged the artist to tell stories and share Culture. Having spaces to sit, pause and be present was valuable in being able to absorb and appreciate what was taking place.

The welcome verandah at Mimi Arts was a semi-enclosed transitory space between the street and the gallery shop that was cool and pleasant. The artist studio also opened onto it, and I could imagine it being a vibrant shared space when full of artists.

Shops/ gallery

Depending on location and visitation, the sales galleries in art centres are generally a small but important strand of income and a way of moving stock. Like any retail space, their fit out and object display impacts returns. The density of artworks impacts the perceptions of quality and ease of viewing. A delicate balance needs to be struck between covering a breadth of artists and works, and visual overload for a visitor. A management tactic is to rotate works but this requires adequate storage space.

Layering spaces so some works are seen in the foreground middle-ground and distance, rather than on a single plane helps reduce the amount of work being processed by the eye at any one time. Likewise, it is good to establish places for key works. Good lighting makes a considerable difference to viewing and perceived value.

Basic principles such as hanging works with two wires rather than one, will enable the works to sit straight. A standard hanging height is a centreline of 1500mm from the ground which makes comfortable viewing for most people. Artists or those with subject knowledge may want to hang differently, but there should be a comfortable relationship between the artwork, human body and the given space. When designing spaces for display, ensure sufficient ceiling heights and walls free of protrusions, openings or services.

Some art centres hung canvases on racks or laid them on tables, allowing customers to peruse them and make discoveries. I saw artworks hung against plywood with positive effect especially for mixed media works and weavings. Plinths will often be needed and can help articulate spaces and direct movement. Works can be delicate so it is important to ensure they will not be knocked or brushed against by people moving through spaces.

Levels of interpretation varied in the art centres but was generally recognised as being important, however difficult with limited resources. There were some great examples of folders communicating background information about the artists that enables a visitor to connect artist, content and work.

Plywood lined walls and shadow gaps helps to give clarity to the display at Marrawuddi Arts Centre, Jabiru.

Kutuwulumi Gallery with natural daylight, and works on walls, floors, shelving and retractable racks, Jilamara Arts.

Tiwi Designs offer tours and a cultural experience on a day trip from Darwin. Refreshments and lunch are served in this covered outdoor area.

Cultural tourism

Cultural tourism is seen by numerous art centres as important for knowledge sharing and a source of income and local employment. For some it involves day trips to local sites (eg Injalak offering trips to Injalak Hill or Djilpin running cultural tours to Melkulumbu / Beswick Falls). These can be on a regular or semi-regular basis to meet demand. In other cases, the art centres have worked on festival-models with an often-annual special event that will entail a day or weekend of programming. In both cases it encourages prolonged and deeper engagement with visitors but requires additional amenities and in some cases the ability for on-site or nearby accommodation.

DESIGNING FOR EVOLUTION AND GROWTH

There are many factors, from within and external to an art centre that influences its direction, ambitions and scope that change with time and circumstance. Their hybrid nature means that they are also operating on multiple levels and meeting numerous, and sometimes conflicting demands. A building or a precinct wants to have enough flexibility to respond to future growth or shifts in operation.

Strategies can include creating / occupying one large shed or single structure into which facilities can be inserted as required. One exemplar is Martumili Artists at Newman in Western Australia designed by Officer Woods that featured in Doug Hamersley's Byera Hadley report. I saw more basic examples where existing shed structures had been converted to art centres. These had a couple of enclosed spaces for offices or storage, with most of the space left open and articulated with moveable furniture. This allowed clustering of activities to suit need, but had limitations for gender separation. Openness and multiple entrances to spaces can allow the art centre building to be used in different ways in the future.

Another approach is to master plan a site and build in stages as need arises and money allows. The most successful example I saw was Djilpin Arts (top right) where they first built accommodation and flexible community spaces, then a gallery shop and amenities. An art centre's operational success should not be dependent on future building as funds may never eventuate. In many cases the art centre buildings I visited have developed incrementally with small additions and adjustments to existing buildings – and all with varying degrees of success. There is a danger of putting a band aid on a problem rather than making a larger investment for more radical, and effective change. Proper investment and good design at Jilamara Arts and Crafts in Milikapiti, evidently paid off (photo far right).

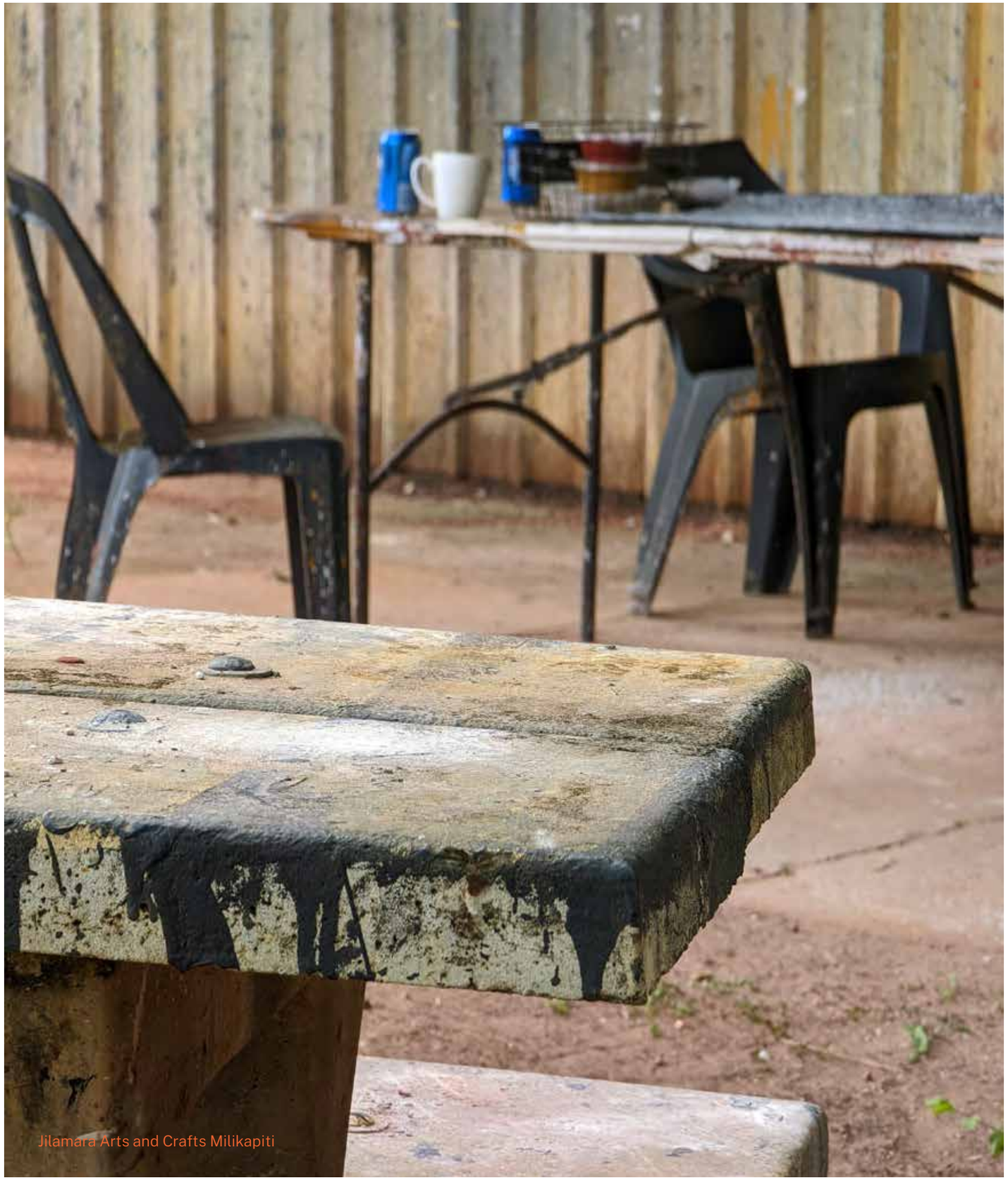
Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre in Yirrkala (below) is renowned as one of the most successful and productive art centres in the country. The building has grown with time and need, making effective additions to suit resource and ambitions, under the direction of a long-standing art centre manager and a strong board and team. It has multiple elements that includes a museum, a digital media centre, print space, carving workshop, all within a single building of many parts and additions. Its internal functioning has been the prime driver over its external architectural expression. It also has visitor accommodation from where the picture below is taken.

Djilpin Arts, Wugularr designed by Insideout Architects


Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre, Yirrkala


Jilamara Arts and Crafts,Milikapiti

Tennant Creek, Barkly Region



Jilamara Arts and Crafts Milikapiti

REFLECTIONS AND FUTURE

Munupi Arts and Craft, Pirlangimpi

Through my visits and conversations, it was evident that art centres play an important role in self-determination for First Nations people, and their future success is vital. Art centres navigate different worlds; Indigenous, non-Indigenous, culture and market, local and global. They are held together by people, and the complex web of relationships that exists between artists and managers. I could grasp – and witnessed – the vulnerability of art centres. Individuals can destabilize the social, cultural and financial ecosystems that hold art centres together and they can decline (or at worst fold), overnight.

While good buildings can't solve these issues, nor generate good art, I believe that they can create conducive conditions, or at the very least not add to, or amplify strain on those who occupy them. For the artists and community it is important to have spaces that allow them to practice Culture and connect with Country. So many of the buildings in these remote communities, produced by successive governments, do not. Boards, managers, and staff need suitable facilities, designed to support efficient operation in remote locations with limited resources.

I believe that architecture can reflect the vision and aspirational functionality of an entity – from a home for a family, to a cultural institution, to a corporate organisation. Previously I looked at the architecture of western cultural institutions and how spaces can be curated and programmed to facilitate audience engagement and inclusivity.

Art centres are hybrid entities that do not fit neatly within western categorisation. Each emerges from, and operates within, specific contexts and circumstances tied to Country and Cultures, and the interfaces (and tensions) with western systems. As art centres bridge these worlds, there is an act of negotiating that takes between people, priorities, and ways of being. To allow this negotiation, the architecture needs to connect with Country and support self-determination.

Perhaps the architectural intent might focus on the activity taking place and the atmosphere created, rather than just form. Can we design in terms of journeying and storytelling through and across a site and buildings? Can we think of architecture in terms of flexibility and flow, with the ability to adapt to, and accommodate hybrid circumstances and identities? These would seem to be principles to integrate across other buildings for, and with, First Nations people.

Elders, artists, community have the deep knowledge of the place that should be respected and guide briefing and design. Furthermore, I could see a correlation between successful projects and architects being involved in feasibility studies and assessment of existing buildings and operations from the start.

Where there is scarcity, necessity and practicality prevail. The exemplars I saw offered solutions that are simple, robust, meet practical requirements and get a lot from a little, designed and executed with aesthetic sensibility. Many of those who ran the build and design projects for the art centres told me that the language and aspiration of architects had put them off. They suggested that architects were making propositions that were fancier than needed (and I guess using corresponding language).

On my travels I was asked many questions about build projects and working with architects. As previously mentioned, the Desart Art Centre Guide for managers has some very good pointers from Sue Dugdale developed from her extensive experience of building art centres and working in remote communities. I am not aware of other sources. The development of a comprehensive step by step guide for art centre staff and boards to

take them through the construction process, that included brief development, project management, budgeting, how to find and engage an architect, what to expect from them and best practices, may be highly advantageous and could integrate the needs of many stakeholders including funding bodies. I could also see the value in expanding the range of architects working on the art centres. There could be scope for invited competitions that generate ideas, coupled with interviews to assure the inter-personal relationship fit is right.

Looking to the future, I am excited to think how architecture (in its broadest sense) can create places for cross-cultural dialogue. The starting point for this is evidently Country centred design and spaces that allow Cultural practice with self-determination. Might the essence of art centres infiltrate and disrupt existing, urban, western cultural establishments, and the buildings in which they are housed?

I question whether there is an art centre typology. I am intrigued to investigate the relationship between spatial arrangement and program and what the diagram reveals. Are there spatial commonalities between the arts centres or is the opposite the case? Is their distinction their hybridity, where the relationship between program and space is fluid?

In October 2023 *Uplands*, a partnership between Agency Projects and art centres across the county was launched. It is described as a “large scale digital mapping project …[that] will revolutionise the way that people engage with remote Art Centres and visual arts”. The interface is via a map of Australia. Each art centre is first seen through a short piece of drone footage that shows the context in the community. Then the building can be virtually walked through. There is supplementary information about art works or life in the art centres, via written descriptions or films of the artists and art workers.

Currently 20 regional and remote art centres are part of the project. Three of the art centres featured as case studies can be experienced via this means; Jilamara, Marrawuddi and Tangentyere.

The digital mapping was taking place at a similar time to my visits in 2022. The project launched a year later, and I have not had the opportunity to speak with any of the partaking art centres about the outcome or its impact. For me the experience of traveling to, and being in a community, added a layer of colour and complexity to how I looked at art centres. I have wondered how those less familiar with the context judge them, and how to negate simplified readings of the places via virtual means. The art centres that feature reflect the range of building types from the very simple sheds, or concrete block buildings to those purpose built by architects. Might there be worth including some information about the buildings? Could it promote an investment in better and more culturally appropriate buildings?

This Byera Hadley Travelling Scholarship has constituted an incredible journey. I have travelled across a previously unknown part of the country. I have gleaned an insight into what art centres do and have begun to grasp the richness and breadth of Aboriginal cultures. It has been a personal process of developing cultural awareness, confronting my settler history and understanding First Nations ways of being. I am aware of the how much I do not know.

I continue to be amazed by the artists and communities who practice Culture and share incredible artwork with the world, and those who support them in doing so. Art centres are a vital cultural and social resource to the communities. I hope that this project can help advocate for the investment in good architecture to enable art centres to continue to thrive.

Jilamara Arts and Crafts, Milikapiti

Some thoughts for success:

- Centre Culture and connection to Country in the design process and outcomes
- Conceive a precinct
- Meet practical, logistical and functional requirements
- Robust design, build and detailing that requires minimal maintenance
- Enable flow of movement and appropriation of spaces
- Flexibility and adaptability
- Architect as spatial translator and facilitator
- Assure time to build relationships of trust and respect between all parties
- Don’t over-design

Mardukal Billabong, Kakadu National Park

FURTHER READING

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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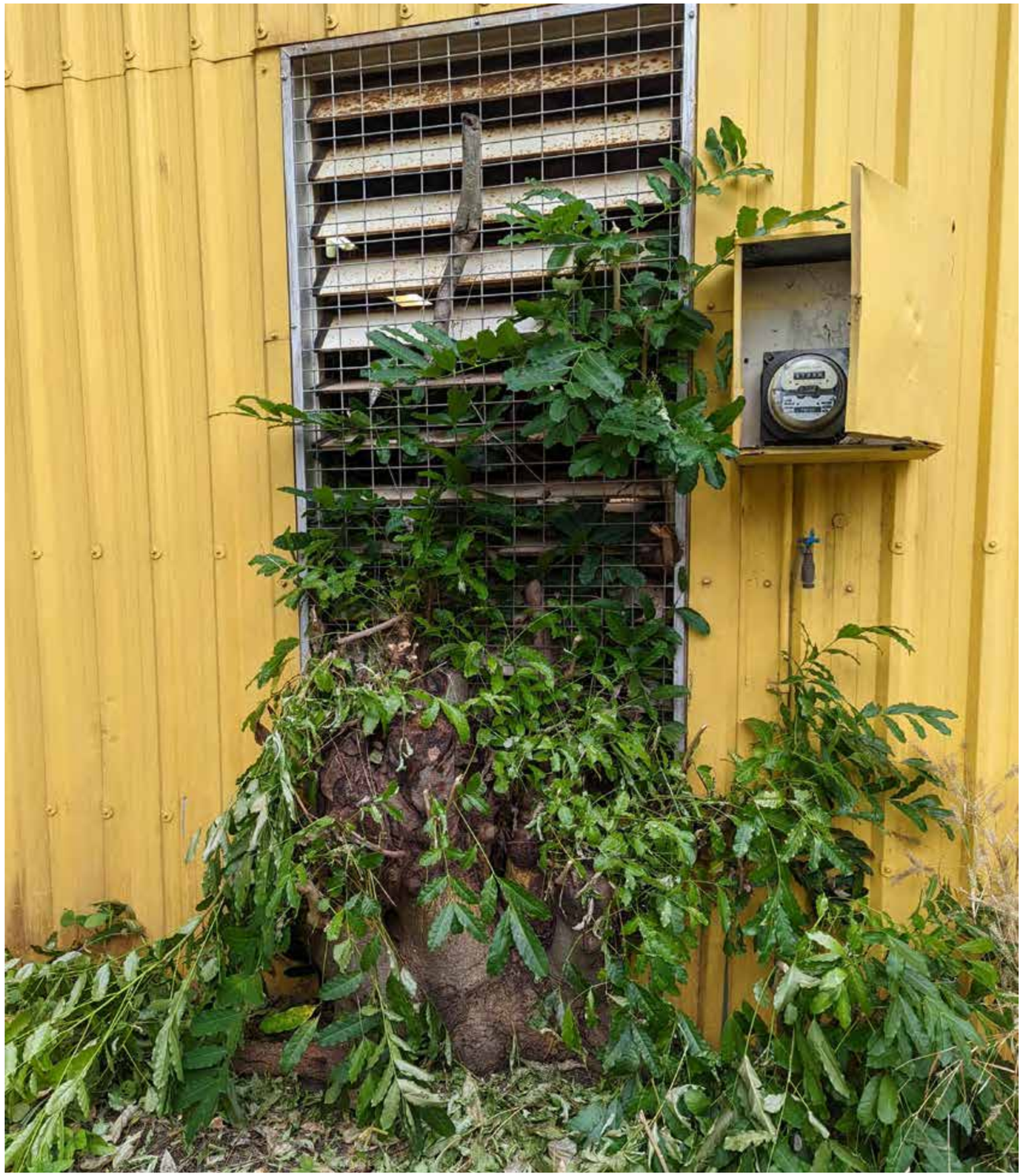
Kate Goodwin is an independent architecture curator, writer, critic and educator. She is a founder of the event platform Architecture Amplified, a member of the Tin Sheds Gallery Advisory Board, Adjunct Professor and former Professor of Practice (2020–23) at the University of Sydney. For 17 years as Heinz Curator and Head of Architecture at the Royal Academy of Arts in London, she directed the public-facing activities that promote a broad engagement with architecture. She has commissioned artists and architects, directed arts festivals and curated numerous exhibitions including the ground-breaking *Sensing Spaces: Architecture Reimagined* (2014), *Inside Heatherwick Studio* (2015-2016), and *Renzo Piano: The Art of Making Buildings* (2018). She was a member of the Golden Lion Jury for the 2018 Venice Architecture Biennale and awarded a RIBA Honorary Fellowship in 2016.



APPENDIX

CASE STUDIES

Tiwi Islands

a) Jilamara Arts and Crafts, Milikapiti
b) Munupi Arts and Crafts, Pirlangimpi

West Arnhem Land / Kakadu

c) Marrawuddi Arts Centre, Jabiru
d) Injalak Arts, Gunbalanya

East Arnhem Land

e) Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre, Yirrkala

Big Rivers

f) Mimi Arts, Katherine
g) Djilpin Arts, Wugularr

Tennant Creek

h) Nyinkka Nyunyu Art and Cultural Centre
i) Barkly Regional Arts

Central Desert

j) Papunya Tjupi Arts, Papunya
k) Warlukurlangu Artists, Yuendumu
l) Tangentyere Artists, Mparntwe/ Alice Springs

Milikapiti airport

TIWI ISLANDS

A. JILAMARA ARTS AND CRAFTS, MILIKAPITI

B. MUNUPI ARTS AND CRAFTS, PIRLANGIMPI

The Tiwi are today arguably Australia's most intact Aboriginal group. Certainly, they retain their fiercely possessive attitude toward their land and their culture, and they have a resolute determination to maintain controls over those essentials of Tiwi integrity.'
- Peter Forrest (Historian) 1998

Access, Climate, Geography

The Tiwi Islands are located approximately 80 kilometres north of Darwin in the Arafura Sea between latitudes 11° and 12° South and longitudes 130° and 131°40' East. They have more than a thousand kilometres of coastline and 8,344 square kilometres of land. They consist of two large inhabited islands - Melville and Bathurst, originally called Ratuwati Yinjara (two islands), and numerous smaller uninhabited islands.

The Tiwi Islands are relatively accessible from Darwin with twice daily half-hour fights that stop at both Pirlangimpi and Milikapiti during the week and once a day on the weekend. Ferry's operate a couple of days a week during the dry season, taking 2.5-hours from Darwin to Wurrumiyanga on Bathurst Island.

The Tiwi Islands have a tropical climate with high temperatures and humidity throughout the year. The wet season, typically occurring from November to April, brings heavy rainfall and occasional tropical cyclones. The dry season, from May to October, has milder temperatures and lower humidity, making it a popular time for visitors.

The vegetation of the Tiwis includes open Eucalyptus forests and woodlands, Punkaringa Melaleuca (paperbark) forest, monsoon rainforest, Acacia shrublands, treeless plains, freshwater swamps, sedgelands, grasslands, mangroves, coastal dunes and saltmarsh. The Tiwi Islands are a biodiversity haven, supporting a high diversity of plant and animal species including many not recorded anywhere else in the world. There are at least 1200 species of native plants, 17 frog species, 81 reptile species, 222 bird species and 36 mammal species.

The coastal area of Milikapiti and Pirlangimpi is characterised by sandy beaches and mangrove forests, which provide important habitats for various marine species. The coast offers access to fishing grounds and other activities.

Information taken from the Tiwi Land Council website and Munupi Arts.

Tiwi culture and recent history

The population of the Tiwi Islands is just over 3000 with more than 90 per cent Tiwi, speaking traditional and modern Tiwi. 'Tiwi' is translated as 'we, the only people' and they consider themselves distinct from the inhabitants of the mainland.

Dancing or yoi is an important part of life on the Tiwi islands. Dancing, accompanied by singing, plays an important role in ceremonial events, for example, during the Pukumani ceremony, conducted up to six months after a burial, where dances are performed to reflect relationships to the deceased. At the close of these ceremonies Pukumani poles or Tutini, elaborately carved and painted in ochre, are installed around the grave site to signify the end of the mourning period.

The Tiwi traditionally paint their body for ceremony using natural earth pigments known as ochres. This traditional mark making is the foundation for modern Tiwi art.

> "For Tiwi people, to sing is to dance is to paint."
> - Judith Ryan *Art and Australia*, 1997

The Tiwi courageously held off intruders and permanent settlement until a lone priest arrived in 1911 and established a mission, bringing English education and change to the Tiwi world. Tiwi art drew ethnographers and later curators and collectors. The anthropologist Charles Mountford visited Melville Island in 1954 with his National Geographic Society Expedition giving international exposure to the culture and arts of the Tiwis.

There are now five art centres on the islands. Tiwi Designs art complex was established in 1968 in a small room underneath the Catholic Presbytery at Wurrumiyanga (formerly Nguiu) on Bathurst Island. A year later Bima Wear, a fabric printmaking and clothing business, was also established at Wurrumiyanga and in 1994 Ngaruwanajirri, supporting disability artists and working in what is referred to as the "Tiwi Sistine Chapel".

For a detailed history of Tiwi culture see *Tiwi: Art, History, Culture* by Jennifer Isaacs, 2012.

JILAMARA ARTS AND CRAFTS
MILIKAPITI

Fly Tiwi occupy a small building on the edge of Darwin Airport reserved for charter flights where baggage (and sometimes passengers) are weighed before climbing into the small propellor plane. It was not long before the northern coast of Australia was behind us, and we were flying low over Melville Island. Rivers and waterways glistened in the sun as they snaked through wild forests that were distinguished from the patches of plantations, an important Tiwi industry.

After landing I got a ride the short distance to Milikapiti with a couple of friends visiting school teachers for the week. They kindly dropped me at the accommodation for temporary workers – a single room in a row of prefabs arranged around a central landscape of shaded grass and palm trees. I wanted to explore and followed my map to Snake Bay. A warm air came off the water, and I took a deep breath and closed my eyes as the sound of birds washed over me.

MILIKAPITI

Milikapiti is the traditional lands of the Wurlirankuwu people. Also known as Snake Bay, it is located on the northern coast of Melville Island, nestled on hilly country on the edge of the large estuary of the Tjipripu River and towards the Arafura Sea. By road it is approximately 75km from Pirlangimpi, but closer to 20km as the crow flies.

Population and Amenities

The 2021 census records a total population of 414, with 390 (94.2%) Indigenous. Facilities for the community include the main store, social club, health clinic, primary and middle school, Centrelink office, post, recreation hall, library and sports oval. There is also a fishing lodge with accommodation for visitors.

Recent history

Milikapiti community was established in 1940 as a permanent Aboriginal settlement by the Native [sic] Affairs Branch of the Northern Territory Administration, to accommodate 'incorrigibles' from the Darwin area. During World War II, the settlement served as a military depot that saw the construction of an airstrip and jetty, and all three services were represented in the area. Tiwi men were enlisted as coast watchers and served during the war, establishing an ongoing relationship with the Defence Service. As the military forces withdrew, the Native [sic] Affairs Branch was established and began forestry programs as a basis for self-sufficiency. Milikapiti moved through welfare control to become managed under a Community Government Council in 1983. It is now managed by the Milikapiti Community Management Board under Tiwi Islands Local Government.

In 1963 traditional carver Mani Luki returned to Milikapiti from East Arnhem land and was employed by the superintendent to teach carving and painting.

Above left:
Aerial photograph of Milikapiti by Allan Laurence, 2009
https://www.flickr.com/photos/grey_albatross/page14

JILAMARA ARTS AND CRAFTS

I was soon greeted on arrival by artists who were milling around and introduced to the art centre coordinator who was expecting me. He was answering numerous questions and requests, setting artists up in their various preferred working locations, checking on some photography of works, and kindly accommodating me. He first gave me a tour of the art centre explaining what each space was used for. Later artists showed me their works hanging in the gallery and albums of them or their family members, when the art centre was being established. The atmosphere was relaxed and welcoming with people – community, visitors (and the local cow) coming and going throughout the day. I sat in a breezeway with the women while one painted and another ground ochre. Top End Aboriginal Bush Broadcasting Association (TEABBA) played on a large radio – with a similar one in the Men's Carving shed, playing a mix of rock and pop that for me became the soundtrack of the place, mixing with the animated chatter. I had read that the Tiwi were renowned for their friendliness and experienced it firsthand on my visit to Jilamara between the 13 and 15 June 2022.

In 1985, an adult education program was set up with the first coordinator Ian Forster launching a 6-month programme to teach women screen-printing, and to use existing knowledge of sewing and leatherwork. Anne Marchment joined in 1987 and expanded the program to include garment sewing of screen print fabric, employing 10 women making products for sale. She created the Muluwurri Museum with the core collection acquired with money from art sales and the social club. The prime objectives were firstly to meet the cultural requirements of community who approved the contents for display, and secondly as a tourist attraction and art sales outlet.

In 1988 the education centre became incorporated as the Jilamara Arts & Crafts association. The artists Kitty Kantilla and Freda Warlapini were instrumental in bringing Jilamara arts to life. Major exhibitions across the country followed and the Ngawa Mantawi disability program was established in 1994 .

Jilamara in Tiwi refers to body paint design. Contemporary works are based on ceremonial body painting designs, clan totems and Tiwi creation stories. The Tiwi palette of red, yellow, white and black are made from natural ochre pigments collected on Country. Milikapiti artists have maintained the tradition of carving figures and Tutini poles, ochre paintings on bark, canvas, linen and paper, original limited-edition prints, and hand screen printed textiles.

Art centre management structure

Jilamara has strong self-governance by Tiwi artists from Milikapiti. The board whose members are rotated every two years includes older and younger artists. The art centre represents the artwork of around 60 active artists, with a membership that is vetted twice a year. They currently employ nine arts workers and two coordinators.

Funding model

Jilamara receives Indigenous Visual Arts Support (IVAS) and NDIS funding. They also get project funding from the Federal Government / Northern Territory Government / Tiwi Land Council. The Department of Health provides money for cultural projects including inter-generational cultural mentoring.

Key priorities

Currently the key focus is on artists and the community. Jilamara provides access to employment, education and training and is open to all Tiwi people living in Milikapiti, offering cultural classes, tea, toilets and comfort. Artists are supported to build careers of international renown, through workshops, training, and representation. They are producing work for the fine art market and for the tourist market. Within the community, the art centre is a supportive workplace to learn new skills and earn money to support family.

The Muluwurri Museum is an important Keeping Place for Tiwi culture and stories for the community, and young people come to learn Culture and be guided by Elders to build a strong future. Visitors are welcome but are not a priority.

Opening to artists and visitors

Visitor hours are Monday to Friday, 9am–4.30pm. It was observed that artists came in earlier and would often have breakfast before working.

- Jilamara Arts and Crafts
- General Store
- Centrelink office
- School
- Sports and Recreation / Social club
- Police Station
- Fishing Lodge tourist accommodation
- Main access road to Milikapiti

Location

The art centre is located in the centre of the community, with roads on three sides. The front gate, for both community and visitors, faces towards the community store, social club, and the Centrelink office. Artists sit and watch the coming and goings. Art centre vehicles access onsite parking from a side road. The site is wrapped in a fence.

Entering Jilamara Arts and Crafts from the front gate

A photograph shown to me by an artist from an album at the art centre shows the buildings before renovations as they opened towards the street and before the fence was put in.

ARCHITECTURE

Jilamara Arts and Crafts is a collection of buildings and surrounding landscape that has been developed in stages over the past 35 years. In 1989 the Milikapiti Cultural Complex was built which included the Muluwurri Museum and the Adult Education Centre, occupying basic concrete block buildings, with a screen print workshop in a shed behind.

In 2004 Jilamara received funding for a feasibility study conducted by Troppo Architects, with plans developed and executed over subsequent years. The first stage was a new gallery that opened in 2009 and the final renovations and new buildings were opened in 2012 by Pedro Wonaeamirri, President of Jilamara Arts and Crafts. These include the Kutuwulumi Gallery, named after the late Kitty Kantilla, with artworks on display for sale, and the Murrununggumirri Carvers Shed named after the late Paddy Freddy Puruntatameri. The adult education centre building was renovated to house the Muluwurri Museum Collection. The entrance has been moved from the street-side, and now presents a quiet façade to the community, with translucent corrugated polyurethane sheets and glass louvres at either end. This provides a very pleasant backdrop to the central display space. Further rooms provide more enclosed spaces for the presentation of artefacts, photographs and memorabilia and there is a secure air-conditioned room to store archives and repatriated objects.

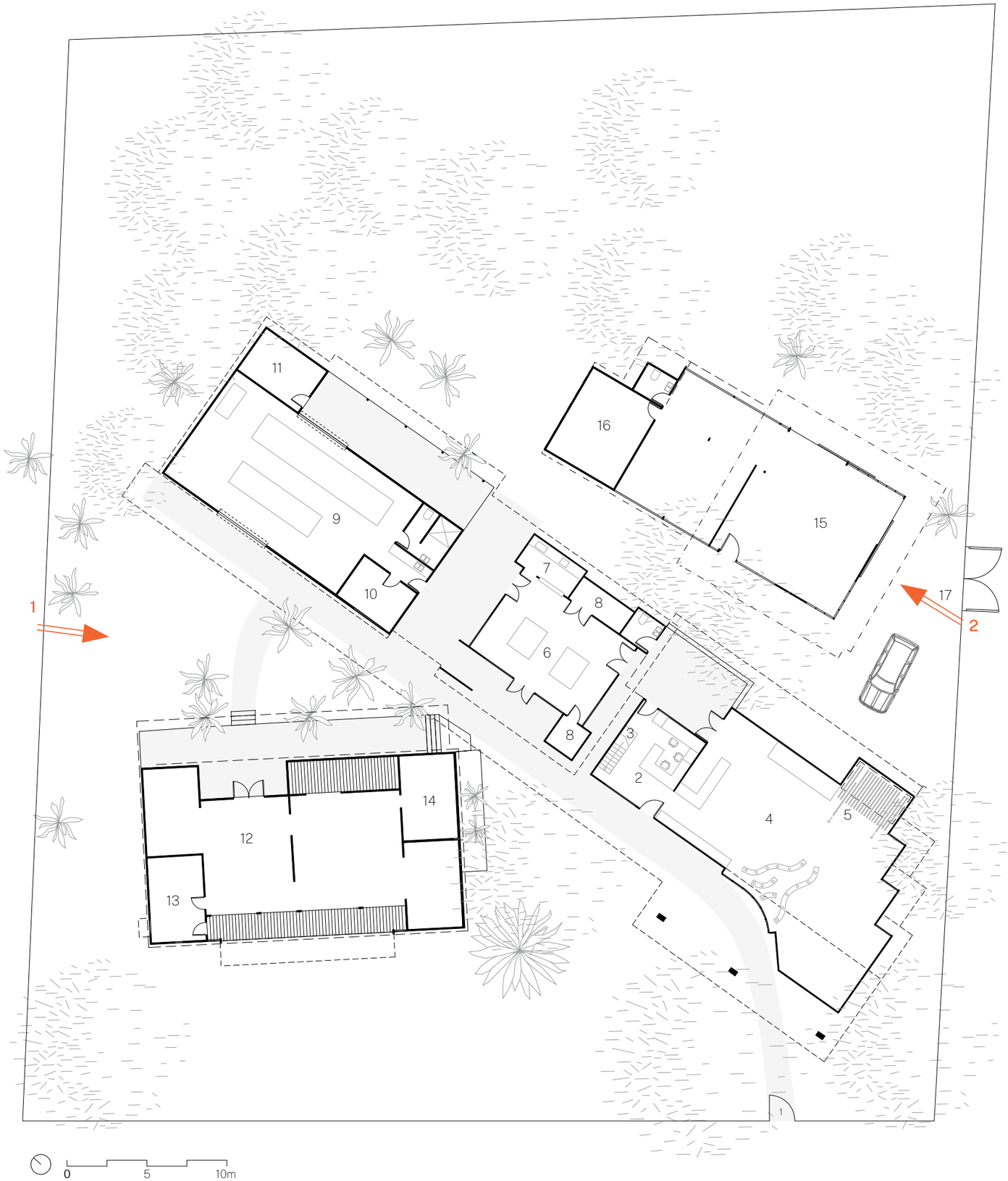
The women's shed, named after acclaimed artist Nancy Henry Ripijingimpi has a textile screen printing studio, with a sewing room and amenities at one end that define an entrance passage. Two large roller doors on either side open to allow people and air to pass through. Artwork packing, kitchen and amenities are housed in one of the original concrete block buildings.

The spaces between the buildings are carefully designed with connecting canopies over the paths and verandahs that offer places for artists to work. There are solar panels on the roof of the gallery.

Large, coloured murals decorate the walls of the museum and the art centre that date from the late 1990s. The site includes space for communal gatherings for special events, and has fire pits to cook food.

The timber used in construction of the new buildings was sourced from Tiwi Forestry and milled from locally grown Jukwartirringa Eucalyptus tetrodonta (Stringybark). It was built by McKenna Constructions who had done other art centre projects as part of the same ANKA/ ABA funding initiative.

A house for the art manager is located on the other side of the community, designed by Troppo Architects in the 1990's, with the later addition of a deck and an air-conditioned room beneath.



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1. Main gate entrance
2. Managers office and artist space
3. Mezzanine with storage above
4. Kutuwulumi Gallery
5. Artwork racks
6. Packing and art preparation
7. Kitchen
8. Store
9. Nancy Henry Ripijingimpi, women's shed (screen-printing)
10. Sewing Room
11. Caretakers room/ office
12. Muluwurri Museum
13. Archive and Keeping Place
14. AV screening room
15. Murrunungumirri Carvers Shed
16. Print making space
17. Staff and loading entrance

Funding

The first buildings were made possible through funds from the Bicentennial Authority's National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Program, Commonwealth Education Department and the Aboriginal Development Commission.

The work in the 2000s was part of ANKAAA's application on behalf of seventeen member Art Centres, with funding received from the Aboriginal Benefits Account (ABA) and administered through the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA).

Design strengths

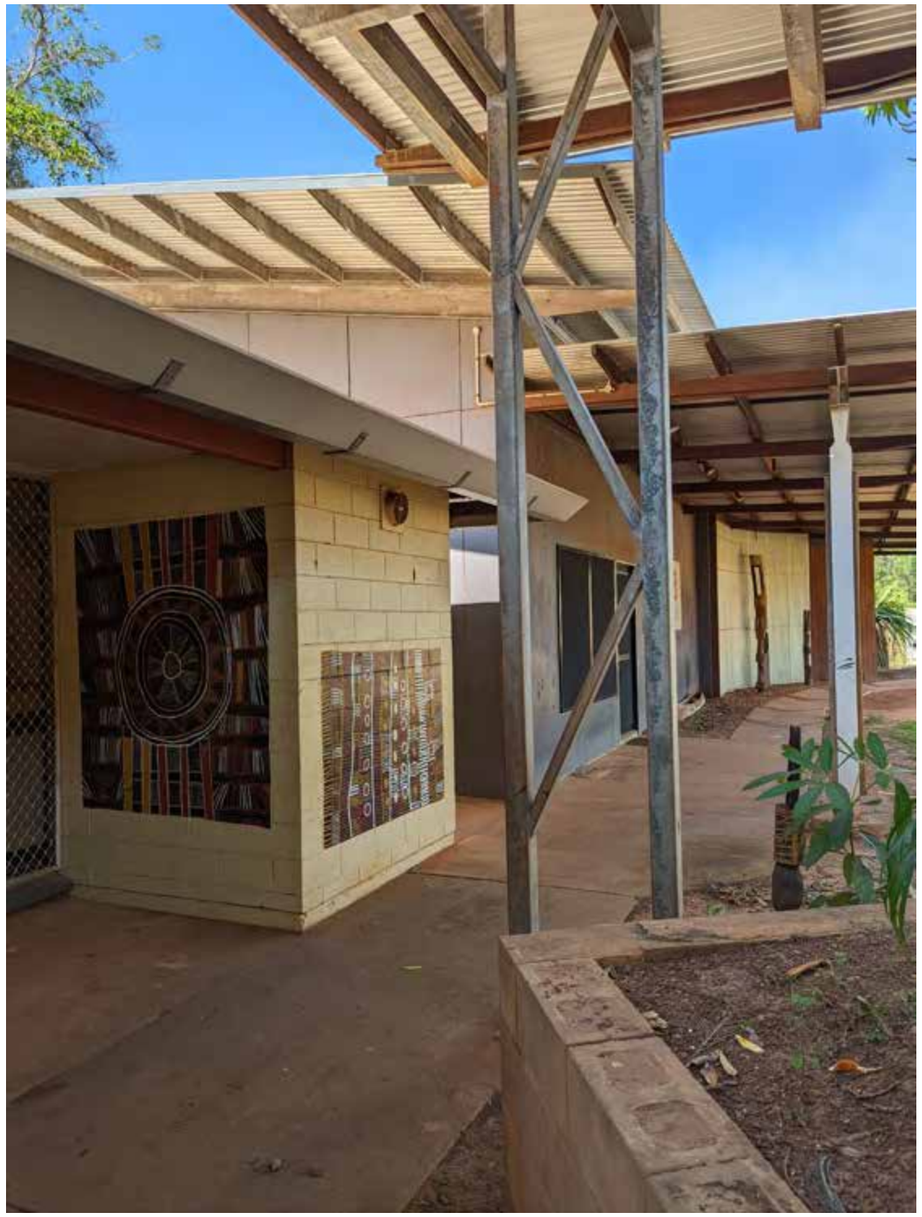
This feels like a very positive and successful precinct of buildings and outdoor spaces connected to Country. It integrates old and new buildings well, and the spaces between are a delight to inhabit.

There was a clear spatial logic between spaces for men and women, and artists and visitors. The entrance sequence is strong and welcoming, although for some visitors the gallery was not immediately obvious. The visibility of the entrance gate however means that art workers and artists can greet visitors and guide them into the gallery.

There is a variety of spaces located between the buildings that offer various levels of either solitude or collectiveness for artists, who select their place to work according to preference. Breezes coming in from the sea moved well through the spaces creating pleasant temperate environments.

All the spaces and details were well designed – combining function, aspiration and design finesse. Older, simpler buildings had been integrated well into the complex and connected with elegant canopies that encouraged flow between the buildings.

The gallery is of a high standard and well-designed with generous volume, natural daylight and visual connections to the outside through glass louvres. Ceilings are high with sufficient space for the large artworks. During my visit in June passive cooling was effective for half the day with air conditioning only needed in the afternoon.



Elegant canopies connect the buildings, old and new, with beautifully designed columns that in my mind evoked the Tutini poles that sat nearby. The large gutters and roof overlaps are necessary for the tropical downpours in the wet season.

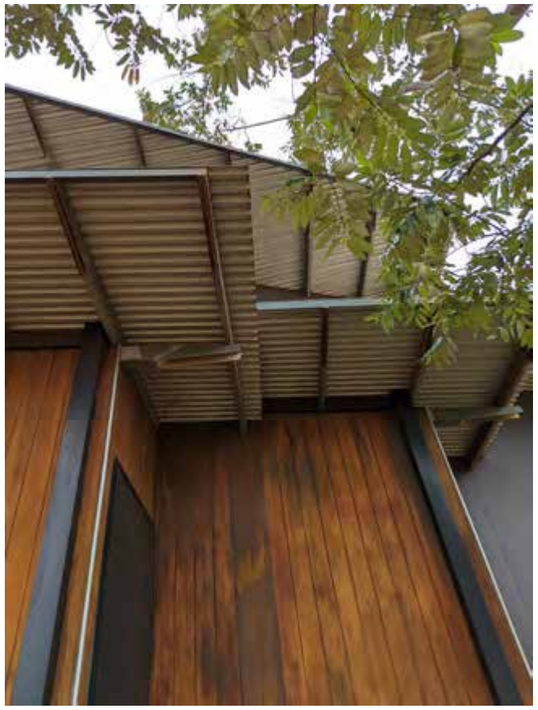
Muluwurri Museum with a slot of glass louvres looking out to the community and the polycarbonate sheeting offering diffuse light into the gallery. To the left of the window is an original painting on the facade of the building before it was enclosed. Next to it, one of five murals on Masonite that previously decorated the Milikapiti Store.

Above and right: Inside the Muluwurri Museum with an informative display that includes an introduction to Tiwi culture and life, the Milikapiti community and Jilamara Arts and Crafts.

The fitout is simple with a neat hanging system, basic spotlights, white walls and black plinths of different heights. The timber panelling behind the Tutini poles helpfully introduces natural materials into the space.

A workshop for kids had taken place the day before using traditional ceremonial head dresses and arm bands.

The buildings are positioned around existing trees, with the Murrunungumirri Carvers Shed to the right and Kutuwulumi Gallery to the left. The Stringybark facade of the Gallery with overlapping roofs feel light and celebratory, guiding the eye skywards.



Observations

Artists sat on the ground, or at / on tables, inside the sheds and outdoors underneath the canopies and breezeways. The front lawn was an active and a social space with artists sitting on plastic chairs watching the community. People were continually coming and going, but as the art centre is fenced, they enter through a one-person wide gate so are easily visible. Artists welcome non-Tiwi visitors, talk about culture and show work hanging in the gallery or around the art centre available to purchase.

The main entrance into the art centre is into a space where the art centre manager sits with a couch for artists that was often occupied while I was there, even though the manager was away. This is also the location of the digital archive. The gallery is entered from this space through a generous opening. The art packing space occupied one of the original concrete block buildings and was not especially generous, so larger works were packed in the gallery. Artworks were also photographed there.

Curatorial

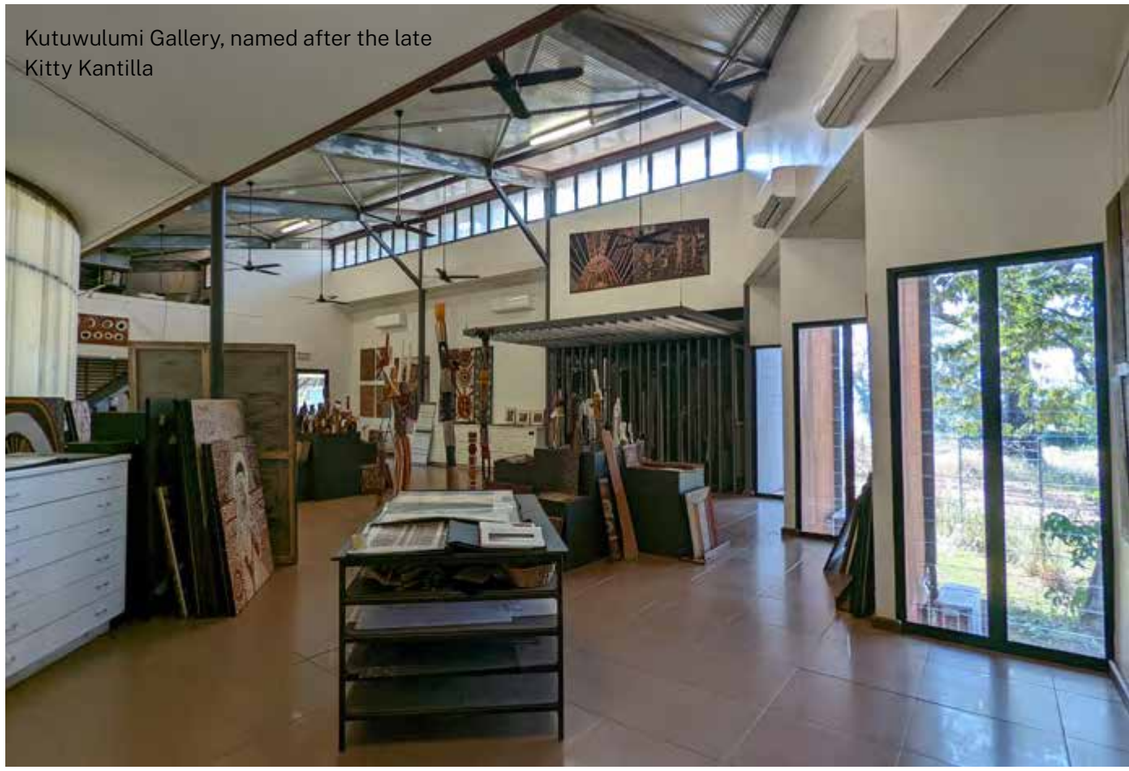
The museum was well laid out and the works located near the louvred wall were viewed under filtered soft daylight as well as some artificial spotlights.

There was a lot of very good interpretation and contextual information that was well presented. There were special artefacts in the museum including a collection of five murals that were painted onto Masonite in the 1960's or 70's and originally decorated the old canteen that later became the Milikapiti store.

Future needs or ambitions

Recent success and further opportunities around digital media and artworks have prompted a desire for a dedicated space to create film and audio works as well as a space to show them. At the time of writing plans for a multimedia space were being created. There are also plans for expanding the capacity to house repatriated objects. It was reported that they would benefit from a second kitchen/ amenity space for the men. I noted there could be improved disabled access such as handrails to the Museum. Artists suggested larger roofing structures between the screen printing shed and museum so the spaces can be used during wet. There was also a desire for a larger print table to increase scope and productivity.

Facade of the Muluwurri Museum



Kutuwulumi Gallery, named after the late Kitty Kantilla

The Murrunungumirri Carvers Shed, named after the late Paddy Freddy Puruntatameri, was added onto an existing building.

The site is used for different activities by the artists and community. Men carve in front of the shed and gatherings take place around fire pits and underneath a simple corrugated iron shelter.

The long screen-printing table runs the length of the shed with storage and sinks to one end. Roller doors open to connect the screen printing shed and the adjoining verandah where tables are set up for artists to work.

MUNUPI ARTS AND CRAFTS
PIRLANGIMPI

Left: View from Clear Water Lodge
Above: Aerial view of Pirlangimpi. Courtesy Artback NT; Photographer Stefan Carrillo

PIRLANGIMPI

It felt almost as casual as a bus ride but with better views. The small plane on its round trip to Darwin via Pirlangimpi, landed at Milikapiti dropping off a few passengers. I joined those already on board, along with cargo that included large rolls of canvas packed at Jilamara the day before. We were not long in the air soaring over the densely green vegetation before making our bumpy descent to the runway of the town just 20km away. I quickly surmised that the manager of Munupi Arts and Crafts and his wife were also on the plane and they dropped me to the Clear Water Lodge where I was the only guest other than mosquitos. The setting was beautiful and wild. I saw a croc pass in the water just beyond the jetty as the sun was setting and I was reading more about Tiwi culture and Munupi. I was served a large plate of delicious fish and vegetables, surrounded by Tiwi art and artefacts along with fishing paraphernalia and photos of giant catches by brimming tourists. The warm days air was starting to cool and the sounds of nature were all around.

Pirlangimpi, also known as Garden Point, is located on the north-west coast of Melville Island on the Apsley Strait, the body of water that separates Melville and Bathurst Islands.

Population and amenities

The 2021 census records total population of 317, with 289 (91.2%) Indigenous. Facilities include a general store, health clinic, laundromat, library, recreation club, police station, garage and workshop, swimming pool, sport and recreation hall, football oval, and golf course (although I didn't see), along with Centrelink, and a post office. There is a tourist fishing resort that offers guided tours and full-board accommodation.

Recent history

Garden Point as it was then known, was established in 1939 a few kilometres from the British settlement of Fort Dundas that failed largely due to Tiwi resistance. A police officer was stationed in the area to prevent contact between Tiwi people and Japanese pearling lugger crews, to act as 'Sub-Protector of Aborigines' [sic]. In 1940, a Catholic Mission was established as an institution for Aboriginal children of "mixed descent" [sic], and within a few years the community had a wharf, market gardens and dormitories. After World War II it became a collection station for "mixed descent" [sic], children from across the Northern Territory, with 94 children in its care in 1945.

In 1967, the settlement was taken over by the Commonwealth Government's Welfare Branch, and in 1978 the Tiwi Land Council established under the Commonwealth Land Rights Act. In 1984 the town came under the NT local government and is now managed by the Pirlangimpi Community Management Board.

In 1978 the Yikikini Women's Centre opened in Pirlangimpi. Between 1980 and 1988 Sisters of St Josephs California took over teaching women to sew, cook, make fibre craft and embroider for the altar. Nuns also introduced fabric screen printing from Wurrumiyanga. Eddie Puruntatameri worked at Tiwi Pottery at Nguiu for many years until he moved to Pirlangimpi in late 1983 and set up a pottery workshop in the community.

MUNUPI ARTS AND CRAFTS

I spent an enjoyable full day at Munupi Arts on 16 June 2022. There was a quiet consistent buzz, with Elders and community stopping by and artists working throughout the day. They moved their locations but women generally painted on the verandas around the buildings, a man painted inside the new shed and a father and son painted poles suspended from a frame in the shade beneath a tree next to the carving shed. I felt free to explore and wander across the site. Reppie Papajua (Orsto), proudly showed me her painting of the white cockatoo, her skin group, on the facade of Munupi Arts and Crafts (photo above). The art centre manager who had overseen the build process showed me what had been done and described the briefing, design and construction stages to me. At the time of writing a new manager has just begun.

In 1990 the two flourishing organisations, Yikikini Women's Centre and Pirlangimpi Pottery, were incorporated under the name Munupi Arts and Crafts Association with the potter Eddie Puruntatameri as the first president.

The first art advisers were printmaker Marie McMahon and ceramicist Susan Ostling who were instrumental in setting the direction and structure of Munupi. They encouraged the existing diverse range of media, which includes painting, tunga, tutini and other carving, weaving, printmaking and ceramics. They encouraged artists Thelca Puruntatameri, Reppie Orsto, Fatima Kantilla, Donna Burak, Francesca Puruntatameri and Therese Ann Tipiloura to create bight flamboyant murals around the community, including the airport, the Council office, Pirlangimpi Pottery and at the Women's Centre.

The art centre's first exhibition *Munupi Dreaming* was held in October 1990 at Shades of Ochre in Darwin and included paintings, limited edition prints, terracotta pots and painted furniture. In 1990 printmaker Annie Franklin took over as art advisor, emphasising works on paper. Following a two-week printmaking workshop with Theo Tremblay, the centre flourished in 1990s as multiples proved profitable. However as competition rose and space and conditions were limited print-making became uneconomical and artists instead went to use facilities at Charles Darwin University in Darwin.

Munupi artists employ ochres, gouache and acrylic paint. The majority of the works currently produced are painting (including for the fine art market), traditional carving and occasional print-making with a small but famous pottery output.

Art centre management structure

Munupi is a not-for-profit Tiwi-owned and governed social enterprise. There are five board members, an art centre manager and two arts workers. The centre is open to anyone in the community and it seemed that some artists worked between here and Jilamara at different times.

Key priorities

The recent focus has been on supporting artists to produce high quality work and selling the work through commercial galleries, art fairs and online. Local and international recognition for the work is important as are institutional exhibitions.

Opening to artists and visitors

The art centre is open every day, but opening times are not noted on the website at the time of writing.

- Munupi Arts and Crafts
- General Store
- Tiwi Council
- School
- Sports and Recreation / Social club
- Police Station
- Clear Water Lodge
- Road into Pirlangimpi

Location

Munupi is located within walking distance (if you brave the heat) to the air strip, and very close to the community store, Tiwi Council office, school and other community amenities. However the street frontages of these buildings are onto the road to the south with the art centre located on a smaller, less frequented back road to the north.

Movement around the community is fairly fluid and people wander over from the store to the art centre regularly. Vehicle access is down a small street which makes the approach directly to the new workshop, with the main entrance (or was traditionally so) off a dirt road to the side.

The art centre is located off the road that leads to Munupi Clear Water Lodge that attracts tourists on fishing trips. The part-fenced site is fairly open and has an adjoining lot to one side with a house.

Looking up the street from the art centre that connects with the road to the Clear Water Lodge. The art centre's lot is partially fenced.

Above: Photograph by Sail Darwin taken in 2014

ARCHITECTURE

In 2020 Munupi went through an upgrade and a new building was added by Kaunitz Yeung Architecture. The art centre had been operating out of a fairly rudimentary shed which had incrementally grown with an enclosed verandah and extensions added, including as noted in an ANKAA report, one under a powerline that stopped the leaky roof from being repaired. Its various iterations had seen it brightly painted with sections covered in murals (photo above right). A greenhouse on the site was demolished as part of the recent work.

The art centre now comprises the upgraded existing building, a new workshop that sits alongside with covered outdoor working spaces between and a carving shed further across the site. The pottery shed sits on a site nearby but is currently non-operational. The original corrugated metal-clad building has been rationalised inside and painted a deep ochre red that complements the roof of the new workshop. New murals have been painted by artists in a band around the outside that give the building unity, scale and visual cohesion.

The art centre is entered through large barn doors into an open central space that operates as a combined entrance, gallery, packing and gathering area with a roller garage door to the far side. The shed-building is over 3.5m tall internally with high windows. To one side there are two offices – the art centre manager's with a window to the street, the assistant with a window looking at the new workshop. The proportional volume of these spaces feels relatively large. To the other side are storage, photography and archive spaces, and a room for canvas stretching and priming that is also accessible to the rear so canvases can be taken directly out for drying then painting.

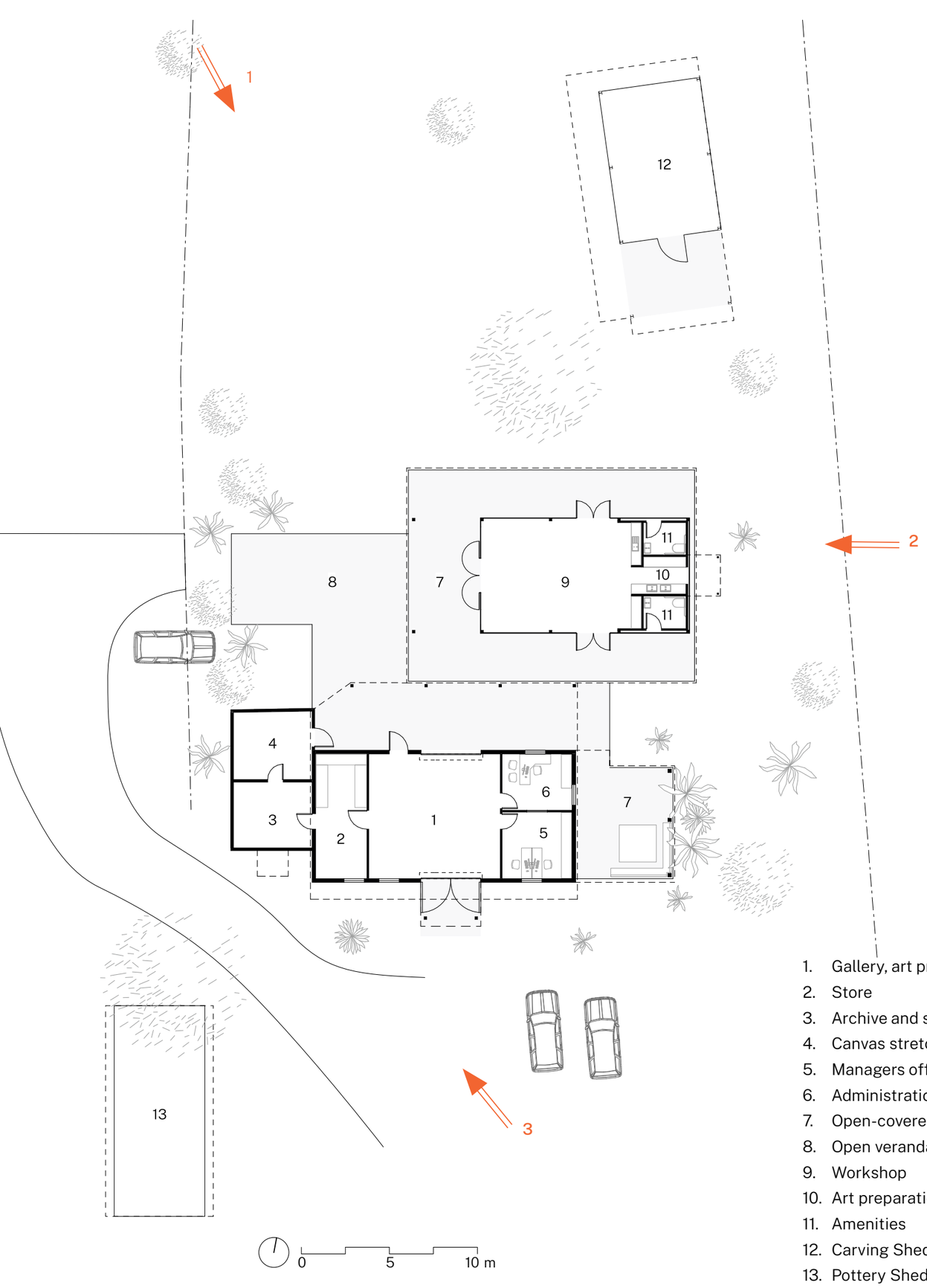
The new workshop building, wrapped in a perforated metal screen, sits parallel. Two-thirds is an open space for working, the other third contains a kitchenette, art preparation and storage space, with men and women's toilet accessed externally on either side of the building.

A large roof reaches out over the concrete slab a further 2.8 metres from the enclosure on each side and 4 metres at one end, providing covered outdoor working spaces. The roof of the old building has a canopy extension to meet the new.

The lower portion of the enclosure is wrapped in a perforated metal screen with a design by Natalie Puantulura, the upper section has mesh and louvres, making it feel relatively porous.

Puantulura's distinctive Jilamara (design) have been transposed onto a series of hand-drawn, laser-cut metal panels that wrap around the new building. As Lisa Slate, of the Art Gallery of South Australia says, "these dynamic perforated panels protect the body of the building just as Jilamara protects the body in Tiwi ceremony. Like skin, they also enable the body to breathe". The relatively young acclaimed artist Puantulura passed before the buildings' opening, which became a ceremonial testimony to her.

Art Screen Consultant: Vashti Gonda, (Di Emma Creative Solutions)
Community Artist: Natalie Puantulura
Structural Engineer: Chapman Hutchison
Building Services Engineer: Lucid Consulting Engineers
Quantity Surveyor: Charles Wright, (QS Services)
Contractor: Murray River North



1. Gallery, art prepping, packing
2. Store
3. Archive and store
4. Canvas stretching room
5. Managers office
6. Administration office
7. Open-covered verandah
8. Open verandah
9. Workshop
10. Art preparation
11. Amenities
12. Carving Shed
13. Pottery Shed

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Funding

The 2019 upgrade and new workshop primarily received Federal funding, with additional money from NT Arts Trail. The building contractors MRN state that the contract value was $1.1 million.

Procurement and design process

There had been plans for a new building for a number of years, before funding was confirmed and Kaunitz Yeung Architecture were engaged. The brief was relatively simple – proper artist facilities, a 10% increase in exhibition space, and a building with dignity. The primary community engagement took place with Natalie Puantulura over the art screens. It was reportedly an involved process with a lot of time spent with the artist to translate from drawing into the metal screen.

The architect was the contract administrator and managed the contractors. The design was amended due to cost and practicalities that resulted in the shrinking of the new building and less extensive changes to the existing building. Materials were brought from the mainland on barges and the builder was reported to be very experienced in remote communities and technically good.

Design strengths

There is a coherent aesthetic and language used across the site. The new workshop makes a bold and distinct statement that complements the existing buildings. The large roof provides good shading from sun and rain and makes the building clearly identifiable from a distance. The metal screen reflects light constantly shifting it's appearance and creates very pleasing shadows.

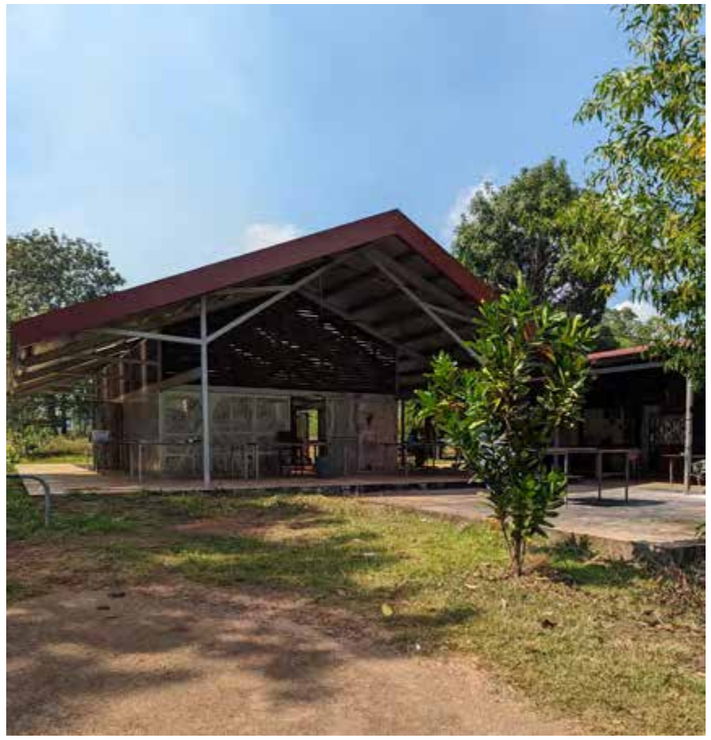
Security has been achieved with elegance and cultural meaning through the screen with the art work of Puantulura. The amenities function well. There are good sightlines and vista's through and around the building and across the site.

The canopy from the new workshop (left) mimics those placed on the original building (below) and acts as a framing device. It could be imagined that this space could be a nice place to sit and paint although I didn't see it in use, perhaps due to ground surface and size. Artists sat at the table in the photograph below and the passage between it and the building seemed to be used by artists and community as a point of entry.

Large barns doors supplemented by roller shutters for security, open to create a light filled welcoming space that is used for multifarious activities.

The new workshop has a strong visual presence that is seen on the driving approach (image right). This driveway space is intended for and used by art centre staff vehicles. Community seemed to park at the entrance of the original building (image above). Visitors would invariably arrive by aeroplane and be collected so the intuitive logic or clarity of arrival point is less important for them.

The site felt porous and could be entered from many points, with the buildings seen in the round from different angles.



There are clear sightlines and spatial connections across the site. From the entrance (above right) you can see the verandah in front of the workshop and the large tree in the centre of the site that shades the carving shed. The new workshop also has large doors either side that fully open and connect to the outdoor carving space (right).

Observations of operations

There are several spaces for artists to sit and work around the building, with the most desired space on the main terrace under the new pitched roof. The space to the side, or what might be described as the rear of the original building was not considered by the artists to be as desirable. It was also the passage through which a lot of the artists arrived, rather than going through the centre of the main building.

There is a fence on two and a half sides, but the property is fairly open, making it feel porous. Although artists would sit on the grass, make fires and occupy some of the surrounding open space, the site does not feel fully utilised.

Curatorial

The central gallery space has multiple purposes and is primarily a place in this context to hang big works – often temporarily as they are being considered for, or on their way to exhibitions. It feels more like a workshop or studio than a gallery. Currently there is no interpretation material on offer for the works, artists, building, or Tiwi culture.

Future needs and ambitions

There was a desire expressed for improving the men's carving shed and working space. In addition I understood the community would like to have a Keeping Place and accommodation for visitors who come to engage in professional development, workshops, and for curators. It seemed there is potential to revive the pottery shed.

The covered spaces between and around the buildings are used by artists to work at tables or on the ground. It was reported to me that the artists deemed the space under the front prow of the roof to be the prime and most sought after space (below left and right).

The large roof and extended prow creates a welcoming gesture and creates a working space at the centre of the site, that is visible from most entry points. The space internally feels relatively modest by comparison (not conveyed by wide camera angle).

Tables used by the artists across the site, are stored within the workshop when the art centre is closed.

Large double doors connect to the landscape outside. The enclosure allows air to move across the space and a large fan assists air circulation. However polycarbonate sheeting on the roof to bring in light also allows sun penetration making it warm inside.

The carving shed includes an area that can be locked and an open covered space. To the side is a frame to hang trunks under the shade of the tree. The artist I spoke to suggested they would like a more permanent structure.

The pottery shed, currently not in operation, occupies an old repurposed WWII Sidney Williams Hut. A fig tree has firmly taken a grip on one end of the building. (p137)

KAKADU AND ARNHEM LAND

C. MARRAWUDDI ARTS CENTRE, JABIRU
D. INJALAK ARTS, GUNBALANYA
E. BUKU-LARRNGGAY MULKA CENTRE, YIRRKALA

MARRAWUDDI ARTS CENTRE
JABIRU

JABIRU

Above: A photograph of a Jabiru in Kakadu National Park taken on my first tourist visit in the dry season of 2021. Even on the few days I was there I witnessed the landscape ever changing with light, clouds, weather, and as animals and birds went about their daily routines.

Above right: The library in Jabiru town-centre with painted murals.

Jabiru is on the traditional lands of the Mirarr. Mirarr country includes Australia's oldest documented site of human occupation dated at around 65,000 years. The area hosts an array of ancient rock art which remains vitally connected to the life and culture of Mirarr and other local Aboriginal peoples.

Jabiru is the only town within the World Heritage listed Kakadu National Park that covers an area of 13 square kilometres. Jabiru is situated on the southern edge of the East Alligator River floodplain, approximately 250 kilometres east of Darwin. Access is via a sealed road from Darwin which is a 2.5-3 hour drive that can become impassable in the wet. The town also has an airport for charter flights.

Climate

Jabiru has a tropical savanna climate, experiencing distinct wet and dry seasons. The wet season, from November to April, brings high temperatures, high humidity, and heavy rainfall, while the dry season, from May to October, is characterised by milder temperatures, lower humidity, and minimal rainfall.

Geography

Jabiru is surrounded by the stunning natural landscapes of the Kakadu National Park, which is renowned for its unique biodiversity, and includes the vibrant Djabulukgu wetlands and the stunning sandstone escarpment of Djidbidjidbi (Mount Brockman).

Population and Amenities

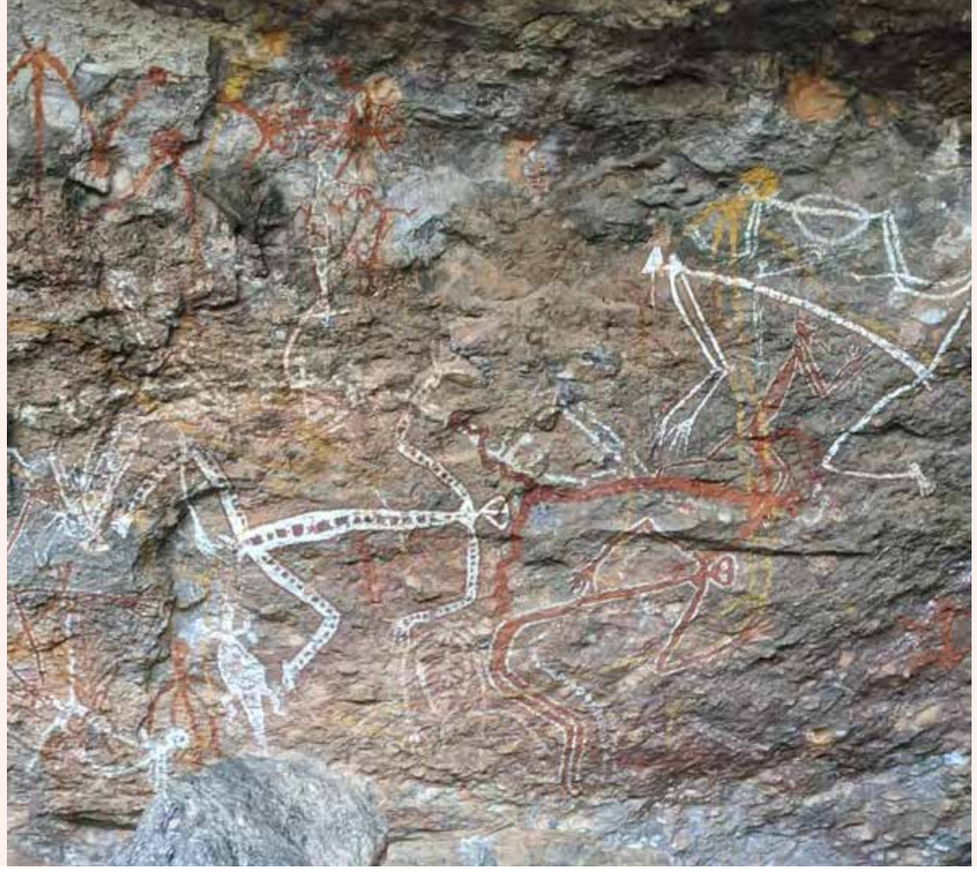
The 2021 census records Jabiru's total population as 755, of whom 27.4% are Indigenous. Jabiru has a shopping centre with a supermarket, convenience stores, and various retail outlets. The town is well equipped for tourists with accommodation options including hotels, lodges, and caravan parks and a tourist visitor centre. There are a few restaurants, cafés, and takeaway outlets for food.

There is a school, medical centre, police station, Centrelink, post office, community centre, and library, plus a public swimming pool, sports and recreation centre and a golf course.

Recent History

Jabiru was established in the late 1970s as a purpose-built mining and residential community to support uranium mining operations in the area which were imposed on the Mirarr against their clear opposition. The Crown leased the land without the involvement of the Traditional Owners and the town was built by Energy Resources of Australia (ERA), a subsidiary of Rio Tinto. It was named after the Jabiru, a species of bird found in the region.

While Mirarr had rights over some of their lands in Kakadu National Park, Jabiru and the Ranger Uranium mine were not included in native title until a decision in 2016 by the Federal Court. It was one of Australia's longest running native title battles. The mine closed and from 1 July 2021, Jabiru was formally handed to the Kakadu Aboriginal Land Trust with a township lease held by Gundjeihmi Aboriginal Corporation Jabiru Town (GACJT). The Mirarr now have control and agency over their lands. The intention is to make Jabiru an Aboriginal-led tourism and government service centre for Kakadu National Park and the West Arnhem region.



MARRAWUDDI ARTS CENTRE

I visited Marrawuddi on two occasions. The first in 2021 as a tourist on a 5-day group tour, camping and exploring Kakadu. At that time I knew almost nothing of art centres and was keen to check it out. My fellow travellers were more interested in the coffee on offer and we only stayed long enough for me to get a feel for the place and be intrigued. My study visit took place on 3 June 2022 after a longer stay in Injalak an hour further east into Arnhem Land. Despite Marrawuddi representing some of the same artists and shared cultures, the context, space and the display felt very different. It was slick, and due to its location, tourists at times outnumbered artists. Always occupied, it could oscillate between feeling like a workspace or a retail gallery. In June 2023 the art centre manager in place since 2016 who had overseen the refurbishment, left. I have had reports that the moveable furniture has been reconfigured, changing the flow of the space that I documented here.

Marrawuddi is the Kundjeyhmi word for White Bellied Sea-Eagle, commonly found in the region.

Djabulukgu Association first established Marrawuddi Gallery at Bowali Visitors Centre in Kakadu National Park. In 2011 management was taken over by Gundjeihmi Aboriginal Corporation, which was established in 1995 to represent the Mirarr and receive, distribute and invest royalties from the Ranger uranium mine.

The art centre engages over 500 artists from across Kakadu and West Arnhem Land.

Art Style and Practices

West Arnhem Land art is characterised by intricate rarrk (cross-hatching) techniques, fine line work, and detailed depictions of ancestral figures, Dreamtime stories, and creation narratives. These artworks often conceptualise Cultural knowledge, spiritual connections to the land, and the relationship between humans and the natural world.

Natural pigments sourced from the environment, such as ochre, were commonly used to create the earthy tones found in West Arnhem Land art but have now largely been replaced by acrylic paints. Marrawuddi art centre is currently producing bark paintings, works on paper, fibre art, sculpture, photography, jewellery, clothing and merchandise.

Art Centre management structure

Owned and managed by Gundjeihmi Aboriginal Corporation (GAC), a board of Mirarr Traditional Owners is elected annually. The board directs the day-to-day running of GAC which is managed by the Chief Executive Officer and staff. At the time of my visit the art centre employed a manager, an assistant, and two arts workers, plus a café team.

Key priorities

To sell work and represent artists, building the reputation of the art centre and the work that is produced. Create a positive space for artists to work.

The future and direction of the art centre is tied to the Mirarr Vision for Jabiru and its masterplan. The intention is to create a cultural tourism hub and a town that showcases carbon-neutral technologies, attracts and retains long-term residents and supports and employs Bininj (Aboriginal people) living on Country.

Opening to artists and visitors

Monday – Friday: 8 am – 4 pm
Saturday & Sunday: 8 am – 2 pm
Coffee machine ceases operation 1 hour prior to close.

Above: Anbangbang Gallery, Burrungkuy (Nourlangie), Kakadu National Park

- Marrawuddi Arts Centre
- Stores / Petrol Station
- Council Services - Fire and Rescue
- School
- Sports and Recreation
- Police Station
- Accommodation
- Main access road into Jabiru

Location

The Marrawuddi art centre is located just off the main road that leads into Jabiru from Kakadu National Park. The town is laid out with tourism and town service facilities to the north and residential and related amenities to the south. Marrawuddi is within walking distance of the town centre and distinctive Crocodile-shaped hotel (designed by Wilkins, Klemm and Morrison) and adjacent to the service station, a key refuelling point for the National Park.


KAKADU
Campos

ARCHITECTURE

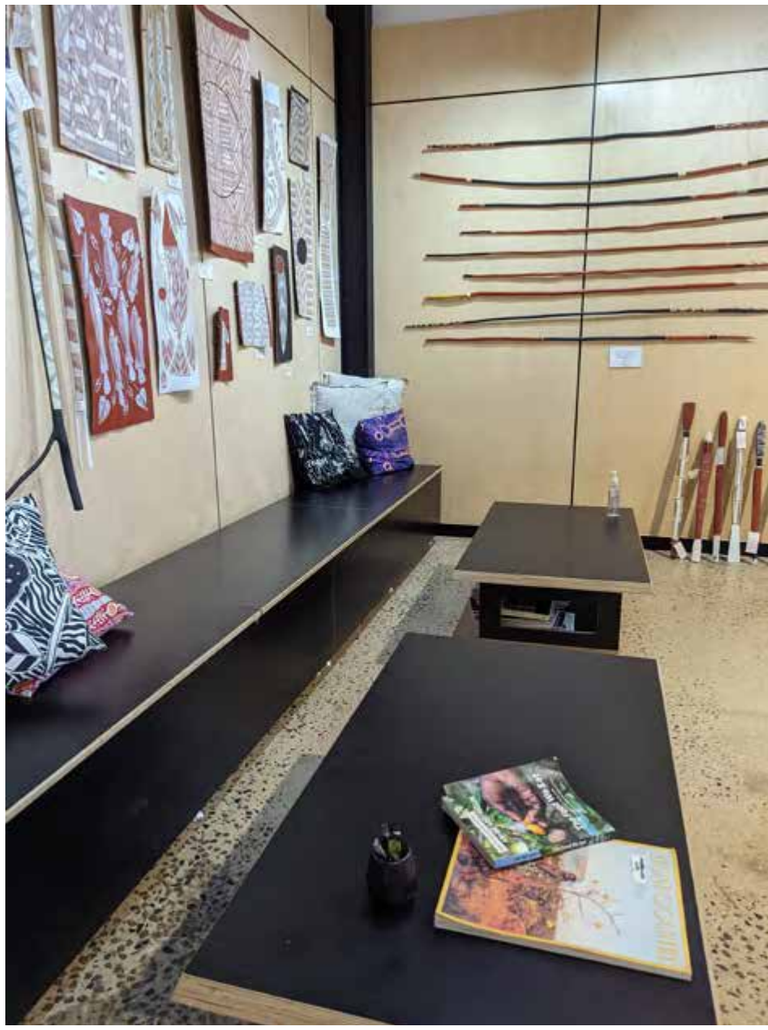
In 2020 Marrawuddi moved from the Bowali Visitors Centre, 6 km away in Kakadu National Park into a refurbished former bakery constructed in the 1980s in Jabiru. Bowali was designed by Glenn Murcutt in association with Troppo Architects in 1994 and the gallery had been refurbished in 2015 with NT Infrastructure money.

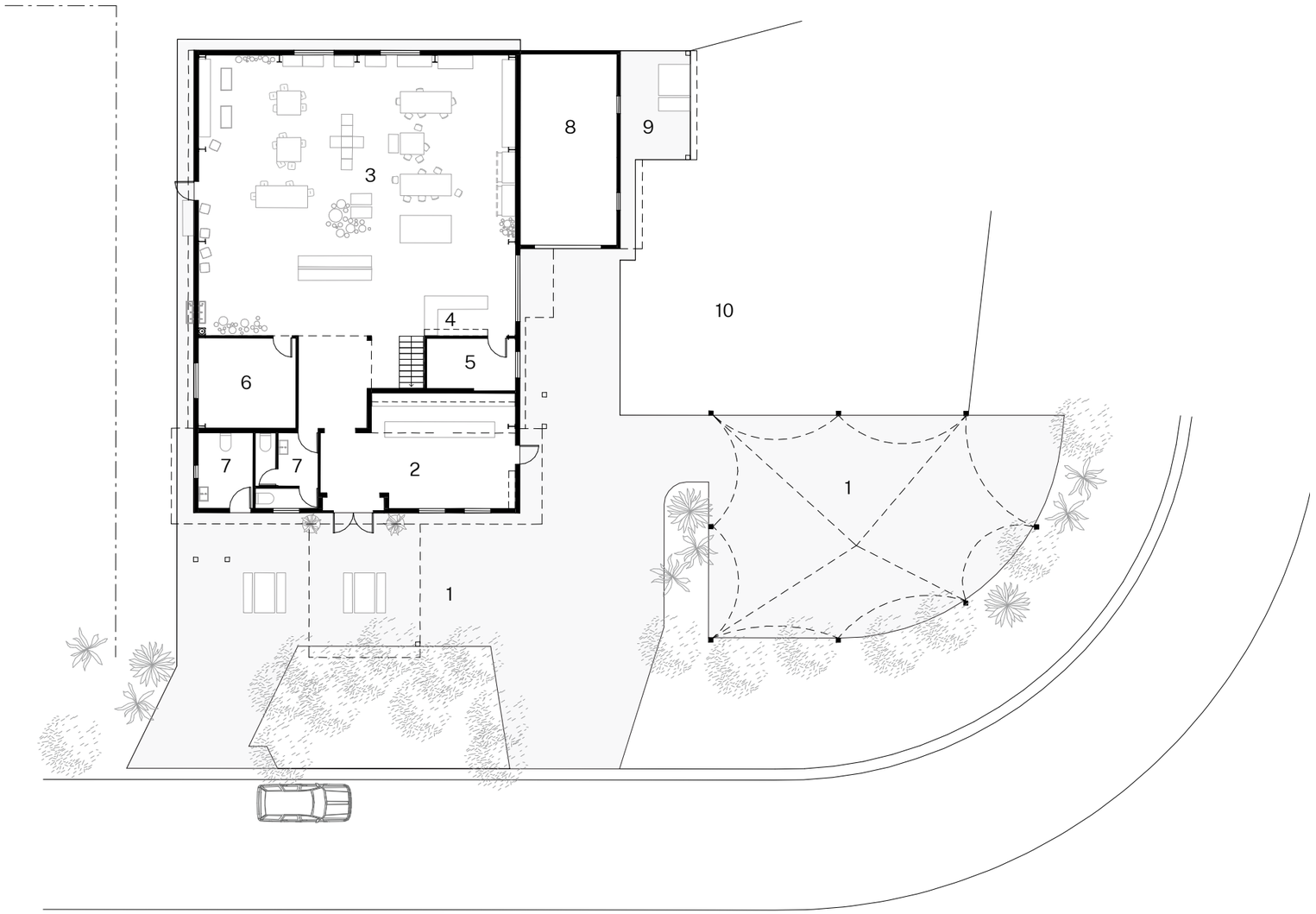
The move to Jabiru enabled Marrawuddi to expand its activities and bring creation and display together. The fit-out received funding from the NT Government and the Indigenous Land and Sea Corporation (ILSC). The entrance space hosts a coffee station and sales point. Behind is a larger open space that is used as a combined gallery/showroom, artist workspace and packing facility. An enclosed office sits to one side and an open mezzanine accessed by a steep stair is used as storage space above. The old bakery oven remains in the wall but is inaccessible.

Procurement and design process

The brief for the refurbishment was written by the CEO of the GAC, the Traditional Owners and the art centre manager. The art centre manager did initial sketches of the fit-out proposal within the existing footprint and structure, advised by some architecture friends on the details. The design was finalised and built by Billy Can Constructions to plans drawn up by Wilkins Drafting Services. The art centre manager credited the carpentry skill of Billy Can and the positive working relationship for the good result with attention to detail. The project was overseen by the art centre manager with CEO sign-off.

I particularly enjoyed sitting in this corner looking out over the space and appreciating the carpentry of the furniture that doubles as storage. Painting the steel structure black, having black shadow gaps at the base of the walls and between the ply boards makes the industrial shed look very elegant. The polished concrete floor helps reflect light and is a complementary tone to the walls.





1. Outdoor seating area
2. Welcome, sales point, café serve
3. Gallery, display and workshop space
4. Sales point
5. Office
6. Artist and staff room
7. Amenities
8. Old bakery oven
9. Outdoor workshop
10. Bus and art centre parking

Above and below #3: Gallery, display and workshop space

Design strengths

The building, with its large colourful murals is clearly seen on entering the town and has a strong and welcoming street presence created by the entrance canopy and forecourt. The design aesthetic is refined yet natural and warm, with good carpentry detailing on the fit out.

The main open space has been well utilised and subtly defined between wet, making spaces and clean display. Moveable furniture creates spaces to produce and showcase artworks, alongside places for visitors, artists and community members to sit, read and drink coffee. Sinks adjacent to the display may have practical implications, but are a positive reminder that this is a working space. The mezzanine is an efficient storage solution, although there are access limitations via a steep staircase and low ceiling heights.

Observations

Many bus visitors only went to the coffee shop or briefly into the arts space, preferring to sit outside. Artists worked at both the larger tables intended for making as well as the smaller, café-style ones. The absence of demarcation between spaces for artists and visitors appears to work very well.

Curatorial

Walls or moveable structures for the display of works have been lined with plywood, helping to define exhibiting/retail spaces and providing a complementary visual background to the works. There are elegant hanging solutions, with good density of works, good labelling and some flexibility with layout due to moveable structures. The atmosphere is relaxed yet refined, conducive to selling works. The works are presented in a way that is accessible to a non-Indigenous audience.

Future needs and ambitions

Marrawuddi Gallery is also home to the Gundjeihmi permanent collection, a curated selection of stunning and important works by senior Mirarr artists. The Mirarr website states: “we are currently working with the assistance of Tourism NT to create a permanent exhibition space for these powerful pieces of art”[1].

1. https://www.mirarr.net/what-we-do/marrawuddi-gallery. Accessed 15 September 2023

The entrance sequence is welcoming, transitioning from a covered outdoor space with seating into the entrance lobby (above right) which has a staffed counter, coffee machine providing seductive smells and beautiful art works well laid out. The gallery can be seen in the distance and draws visitors through the succession of spaces to discover the combined display and working spaces.

The old bakery dough mixing vats are used as pots for plants, a nod to the past history of the building (right).

There is an enclosed office for the art centre manager and an open desk to deal with sales and artwork processing in the main studio retail gallery space (far right).

INJALAK ARTS
GUNBALANYA

I arrived late in the afternoon to the 'Border Store", as one of the Injalak Arts team were closing after a successful day of selling works to tourists visiting Cahills Crossing on the edge of Kakadu National Park. It was an initiative set up by Injalak during COVID as Gunbalanya was closed to visitors. We got into the Injalak 4WD 'troopie" and headed west, crossing the East Alligator River where I marvelled at a couple of crocs floating not far away. Coming out of the water, we went up a steep incline and passed a sign announcing we were in Arnhem Land Aboriginal Land Trust, with permits required. Thereafter it was a spectacular 40-minute drive. It was early dry season, there was still water around, and the terrain was luscious green, contrasting with the deep red earth and rocky cliffs. This was the beginning of my visit to Injalak Arts in Stone Country between 30 May and 2 June 2022.

GUNBALANYA

Gunbalanya, also known as Oenpelli, situated in west Arnhem Land, is Kunwinjku Country and the Traditional Lands of the Mengerrdji people. The community is a 3-hour drive on sealed roads from Darwin and 12km from Kakadu National Park across the tidal East Alligator River which becomes impassable in the wet. An airstrip a few kilometres from town is accessible in all weathers, with charter flights on request.

The 2020 film *High Ground* with local actor Jacob Junior Nayinggul, was set and filmed in and around Gunbalanya and gives a good sense of the place.

Country

Sitting seven metres above sea level, the area is known as Stone Country, with dramatic sandstone escarpments that hold some of the world's most important rock art, dating back over 20,000 years. Gunbalanya, is located on the edge of a floodplain alongside the Adjumarllarl billabong and Injalak Hill, an important cultural site with rock paintings that were featured on the original $1 note.

The Kunwinjku identify six seasons and a beautiful graphic calendar has been produced by CSIRO in collaboration with Traditional Owners to document Kunwinjku knowledge of the seasons and the environment.[1]

Gunbalanya has a tropical monsoon climate, simplistically with distinct wet and dry seasons. The wet season, typically from November to April, brings heavy rainfall that results in flooding, high humidity, and the possibility of tropical cyclones. The dry season, from May to October, is marked by warm temperatures, lower humidity, and little to no rainfall.

In West Arnhem Land bininj (local men or people) and daluk (women) are born into eight skin groups and two moieties, Duwa and Yirridjdja. Each cultural group has their own history and traditions and each belong to a kunmokurrkurr (clan).

Population and Amenities

The 2021 census records the total population as 1,177, with 87% Indigenous. The community has a school, health clinic, service station and convenience store, supermarket, police station, crèche facilities, aged care, butcher and licensed sports and social club.

Recent History

When the colonial garrison settlements on Coburg peninsular (1829-49), failed, Timorese water buffalo were released into the wild. As numbers swelled, settlers, aided by Aboriginal people, saw the potential profit that could come from hunting buffalo. Buffalo shooter Paddy Cahill (1863-1923) began working in the area in the 1890s and established a station named Oenpelli in 1910, leaving two decades later. In 1925 a Church of England Mission was established by the Rev. Alfred Dyer and his wife Mary which ran until 1975 when the community came under the Department of Aboriginal Affairs. It had a church, school, dispensary, garden and store, plus pastoral work with feral cattle and horses. Clans from the region came, including the Manilikarr clan from across East Alligator River in Kakadu, along with the Djalama, Ngalngbali, Bulurmo. The various clan groups occupy different parts of the town, laid out in proximity to their homelands. In 2001 at the request of the Council the community's name was changed to Gunbalanya (which was deemed easier to pronounce than its traditional name of Kunbarlanja).

The community has a history of being the subject of anthropological research dating back to 1912 when Baldwin Spencer visited and collected works that he gave to the Museum of Victoria. Frank Setzler from Smithsonian excavated shelters on Injalak Hill, taking human remains, that were successfully repatriated in 2012 after a decade of negotiations. Charles Mountford's "Expedition" visited in 1948 and Ronald and Catherine Berndt in 1949 and the 1950's, with work from Gunbalanya featured in their book on Arnhem Land.

From the 1950s, local Aboriginal people were encouraged by the missionaries to produce artefacts to gain supplementary income. They made string bags, carvings, didgeridoos, boomerangs, shell necklaces, baskets and bark paintings that were sold by the Anglican Church Mission Society (CMS) at their head office in Sydney until it closed in 1974. The bark paintings grew in popularity and value and from 1967 to 1978 Peter Carroll was employed by CMS to act as a point of contact between artists and the market. He bought barks from artists who received 60% of sales. In 1977 an exhibition containing 52 bark paintings toured Australia and later Europe called *Oenpelli Paintings on Bark.*

1.https://www.csiro.au/en/research/indigenous-science/indigenous-knowledge/calendars/kunwinjku Accessed 15 January 2024

Rock art near Wulk (Red Lily) Lagoon

INJALAK ARTS

On numerous occasions I sat soaking up the magical atmosphere and views across the billabong to Injalak Hill. There are the two tables you see in the photograph and another, with a simple shade structure, close to the entrance used by artists and community.

The ladies sat to the right on the ground beneath a large tree that offered shade, chatting as they expertly wove pandanus into coils that would become earrings for sale in outlets online and across the country. Family, and sometimes Balanda like me, came for a yarn.

One afternoon kids gathered here with excitement to meet and get photographs with the Brisbane Lions who had just been taken to Injalak Hill. A BBQ was prepped and the tables were filled with the means for community to make sausages sangers before the players returned to Darwin on a charter flight for an AFL game over the weekend.

The initiative for an art centre emerged from a group of artists who were screen-printing fabrics in a tin shed, having been trained by Wendy Kennedy, an adult educator based in the community. Injalak arts was established in 1989 and was initially focused on printmaking before soon expanding to represent the art being produced in the local area. In the early 1990s senior Mengerrdji Traditional Owner Donald Gumurdul conferred Djungkay (custodianship) of the rock art and cultural heritage of Injalak Hill, from which the centre takes its name, to Injalak Arts, and tours began. Injalak in Kunwinjku means a place of shelters. For a detailed description of the origins and context of Injalak Arts and Gunbalanya see Sally K. May's PhD titled *Karrikadjurren: creating community with an art centre in Indigenous Australia*, 2005 and *Injalak Hill Rock Art: Our Rock Art, Our Story, Shared Our Way*, Injalak Arts & Crafts Association, 2018.

Art style and practices

The Kunwinjku artists of Injalak are widely celebrated for their exquisite and intricate depictions of mimi figures, "x-ray" style animal paintings, ancestral beings, and creation stories. Paintings are characterised by rarrk – intricate cross-hatching techniques and fine line work applied with a Manyilk (traditional sedge brush) – and using both natural ochres and acrylic paints. Injalak artists produce carvings, bark paintings on manbordokorr (Eucalyptus tetradonta or stringy bark), painting on paper (hand-made 640 gsm Arches watercolour paper), natural fibre weavings, print making and hand-printed textiles and fabric.

Art centre management

Injalak Arts is a non-profit Aboriginal Corporation with charity status. It is overseen by a Management Committee of ten elected members that includes Elders and younger artists. There is an Art Centre Manager and four staff at the time of the visit working alongside 10-12 arts workers.

Key priorities

Cultural maintenance and economic self-determination are the two key priorities. In its constitution the Corporation aims to "support and enrich the culture of the people in this area and provide economic benefits for the residents of Gunbalanya and its outstations while being non-profit making."

Cultural tourism is well-established due to its proximity to Jabiru and Kakadu National Park. Tours of rock art sites have taken place for the past couple of decades and visitors have been a good source of direct sales for artists.

Speaking with artists and Elders they reiterated the desire to pass on Cultural knowledge to a younger generation through mentoring to younger artists and sharing knowledge with kids as well as their schoolteachers. They are working to consolidate the archive to sustain knowledge in a Keeping Place.

Opening hours

Monday to Friday, 8:30am – 5pm
Saturday, 9am – 2pm

- Injalak Arts Centre
- Store / Petrol Station
- Council Services
- School
- Sports and Social clubs
- Police Station

→ Main access road

Location

Injalak fronts onto a street at the end of a T-Junction that has the general store, service station and park across the road – a central hub of activity for the community. It is on a corner site, at the edge of the community facing Southeast towards the Adjumarllarl billabong and Mount Injalak behind. The site has flooded on occasion causing damage to the building and art work.

Injalak has the lease on two further lots to the east, one with the art centre manager's house, a donga for staff and pods designed by Troppo Architects. A relatively recent addition is the site with the unrestored former mission house.

A few years ago a paving and mosaic design was developed with the artists imbedding stories in the ground and guiding a path around the buildings.

Standing on the verandah of the new printmaking building offers views over the top of the original building to the billabong and hills in the distance.

ARCHITECTURE

The art centre encompasses the original central building that houses a gallery shop, artwork packing and processing spaces, administration, storage, an AV room and print space. Alongside now sits a raised printmaking building with the men's space underneath. The site also has a shipping container to the side where they store books, boxes, materials, furniture and the like.

The initial purpose-built space for the art centre that opened in 1989 contained a main showroom sales space with a darkroom and space for sewing machines in rooms to the side plus a screen-printing workshop with facilities for an 8m table adjoining. The building design did not allocate space for the making of fibre art and bark paintings for which the area was renowned. When the building opened in November 1989, spaces intended for packing and storage for the screen-printing were soon appropriated into workspaces for other mediums.

An addition was added in 1999 to expand the showroom / gallery.

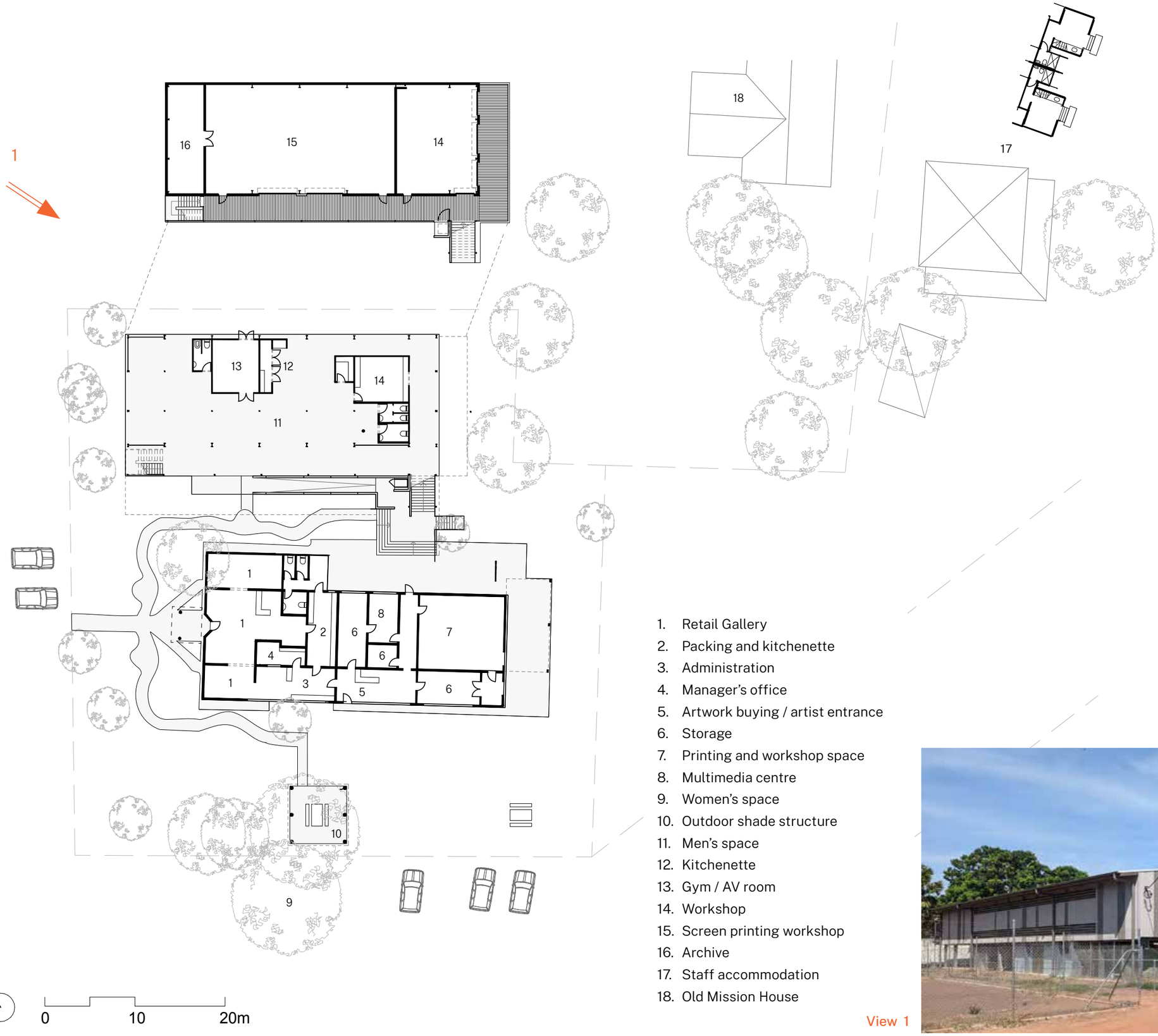
Men would sit on one side of building under the verandah facing towards Injalak Hill (an important ceremonial site) and the women, making fibre arts sat on the side looking towards the township. When the verandah was filled in for office spaces in the late 1990's, the men took over the women's space, and the women were displaced.

By the mid-2000's the art centre and staff house were in a bad condition. An ANKAAA report for the NT Arts Infrastructure Projects stated that the old print room was being used as single men's quarters and there was a single toilet for men, women and tourists. An ambitious proposal for a new building was designed by Architects Without Frontiers in 2009 that didn't go ahead and included a proposition for a cultural and language centre. Instead, basic upgrade work was done to the original building funded by ABA and managed by ANKAA, that included refurbishment of the print room and gallery space, repairs to louvres, windows and additional toilets completed about 2011.

In 2021 a new print-making building opened, raised off the ground to save it from future flooding and providing an open space for the men to work beneath. The building above is a large open space that contains two 14 metre tables with roller shutters that open onto a wide verandah on two sides. At one end is an archive and storage space, and at the other end it was envisaged a café would be run by local people, serving tourists, as well as offering a social space to the community, however this was not realised. Various architects including John Cameron, Rossi Architects and contractors contributed to the design working with the board and art centre manager, from the initial conception in 2013 to the completion of the building. Financial issues stopped construction and delayed completion of the building until 2021. It became fully operational in 2023 after my visit.

On a nearby site sits the manager's house and staff accommodation. Added in 2016, Troppo Architects, in a joint venture with Grampians Homes, delivered a pair of accommodation units (p189). Designed as flat-packed portables, they were made in Grampians factory, shipped to site and constructed with help from the local community. Connection to services remains to be resolved.

The art centre has the lease on the old mission house which had been envisaged as a women's space although its structural stability and occupation is under discussion.



1. Retail Gallery
2. Packing and kitchenette
3. Administration
4. Manager's office
5. Artwork buying / artist entrance
6. Storage
7. Printing and workshop space
8. Multimedia centre
9. Women's space
10. Outdoor shade structure
11. Men's space
12. Kitchenette
13. Gym / AV room
14. Workshop
15. Screen printing workshop
16. Archive
17. Staff accommodation
18. Old Mission House

#18. Old Mission House

#15 Screen printing workshop

View 1

Entrance through the main doors leads into the retail gallery that has a generous reception and sales desk at the centre. Artworks line the walls and are showcased in different display units, with a dedicated area for screen-printed fabrics towards the back. The gallery was closed during my visit due to COVID restrictions and work was being sold successfully online and at the Border Store at the East Alligator River. The artists I spoke to were eager to welcome visitors back to the art centre.

Design observations

The modest original building marks the main visitor entrance at the front with a small portico. To the side is entrance used by artists and staff is operationally focused. Paving and mosaics on the ground and external walls tell the stories of the artists and guide a passage around the building. Internal circulation in many cases takes place through rooms, however there is one dedicated corridor at the rear. In the new workshop building, roller shutters in the upstairs walls allow the print room to open to the surrounding balcony, assisting with air flow and connection to the outside. The archive room provided a much-needed secure space that is well managed. The space beneath is used by the men to paint and for other community activities and gatherings.

Operational observations

Male artists occupy space beneath the screen print workshop and next to the old building, which sits on the side closest to the community. It appears that the prime place to sit was towards the front of the men's space where it is possible to watch the comings and goings of the store and community. The women sit on mats beneath trees on the other side of the building where the cars park near the artist and staff entrance. I was told the women move into the men's space during the wet season for shelter. Although not open to visitors at the time, I was told that they are invariably taken on a tour that circumnavigates the building, venturing inside when appropriate – such as the screen-printing room.

Curatorial

The gallery has standard ceiling heights and no natural daylight, other than into a makeshift gallery in the enclosed verandah. There is a combination of fluorescent strip lighting and some gallery spotlights. All the walls are utilised and have panelling that offers hanging attachments for the works that are for the most part under one metre square. The work is relatively densely hung and displayed according to medium. There are very good brochures about rock art, painting and fibre arts of Injalak and notes about the artists.

Future needs or ambitions

At the time of my visit Injalak Arts had identified some key issues that they wanted to rectify and were pursuing a feasibility study and vision statement. I understand that the new printing workshop is now operational and the internal finishes have been completed.

The screen printing room, located in the original building, is also used for workshops and community gatherings.

The new screen print building sits raised alongside the original building. The men work in the undercroft beneath, that houses bathrooms, storage and an AV room. Access to the print room and the wide verandahs is via stairs and a stair lift for those with mobility issues. The large roof offers protection from the heavy rain during the wet season.

Built in 2016, the prefabricated accommodation units have a living space on the ground floor and a sleeping space above. Between the two units sits the bathrooms consolidating the services in the centre. They are naturally ventilated with screens and louvres that exposes them to the elements. They are currently not fully functioning.

BUKU-LARRNGGAY MULKA CENTRE
YIRRKALA

My visit took place 2 - 5 October 2021 with COVID caution still in the air. This was my first visit to a community, and it was a great introduction. I flew from Darwin into Gove airport with a clear view of the Bauxite mines and got a taxi to Yirrkala where I stayed in the art centre's accommodation. I bought some basic supplies in the nearby store and prepared a meal in the small kitchenette, eating it on the steps of the verandah overlooking a corner of the township. It was a lovely place to sit and absorb community life. In the evening, the sky would glow with the setting sun and young people would gather to play on the sports courts below. In the morning, I watched the comings and goings at the store. The art centre staff suggested an end of day walk to Ganarrimirri (Shady beach) avoiding a Sorry camp that had been in place for many months. A family piled out of a car and began setting up a fire pit in the sand to cook what looked like recently caught meat. Another evening I got a ride into Nhulunbuy to meet people for dinner at the Gove Boat Club and see the East Arnhem Land hub with some interesting municipal buildings.

YIRRKALA

Yirrkala, home to the Yolŋu people, is located in the north-eastern part of Arnhem Land (declared an Aboriginal Reserve in 1931) on the Gove Peninsula, which extends into the Arafura Sea. It is the ancestral lands of the Rirratjiŋu/Gumatj clans with 13 distinct clans in the community. Yolŋu Matha society is organised into two groups or moieties: Yirritja and Dhuwa. Every individual inherits the membership of a particular group, and its moiety, from their father[1].

The community is approximately 18 kilometres southeast of the town of Nhulunbuy, a substantial town servicing the region with accommodation and all the basic amenities. Yirrkala is 700km east of Darwin. Gove airport, 10km away on a sealed road, has daily flights to Darwin and Cairns. Driving into the region requires a 4WD along unsealed roads that are impassable in the wet.

Climate and Geography

Yirrkala is surrounded by stunning natural landscapes, including pristine beaches, rugged cliffs, and dense bushland. There are local bauxite mining leases nearby.

Yirrkala experiences a tropical monsoon climate, characterised by distinct wet and dry seasons. The wet season, typically from November to April, brings heavy rainfall, high humidity, and the possibility of tropical cyclones, while the dry season, from May to October, is marked by warm temperatures, lower humidity, and little to no rainfall.

Population and Amenities

The 2021 census records total population of 657, with 80% Indigenous. The community has a school (pre-school to Year 12), health clinic, community store, sport and recreation centre.

Recent History

The Methodist Church of Australasia established a mission at Yirrkala in 1935 on a Yolŋu ceremonial ground, close to a former Makassan trepang processing station. Over the following decades, members of the 13 clans that owned land in the surrounding area were gradually drawn into the mission. Friction between these different groups was an early problem. In the mid-1970s the church handed control of the mission to the Yirrkala Dhanbul Community Association, which consisted of representatives from the main clans.

In the 1970s several groups set up outstation communities on their own lands. By the 1980s there were about 10 outstations, with a total population around 200. Today all clans have at least one homeland centre, and many people live partly in Yirrkala and partly in their homelands.

Works by Yirrkala artists were some of the earliest to be marketed by the Methodist Church and contributed to Aboriginal art's wider appreciation in the contemporary international artworld. Of particular importance were a series of crayon drawings on brown paper by several Yolŋu clan groups depicting intellectual and cultural life, relationship to land, family and religion. 365 works in total were created by the artists in 1946 and 1947 under the suggestion of anthropologists Catherine and Ronald Berndt and were accompanied by detailed descriptions of the stories they were depicting.

The Yolŋu realised the potential of visual arts as a political tool to assert their right to land and sea. The Yirrkala community became well known in 1963, when landowners sent a bark petition to the Australian Government to protest the Prime Minister's announcement that a section of their land would be sold for bauxite mining. They also produced the Yirrkala Church Panels (on display at Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre) in the 1960's, the Wukidi Installation in the NT Supreme Court, Darwin and the later Saltwater Collection of Yirrkala barks of Sea Country (1997) now in the Australian National Maritime Museum.

Yirrkala is the home of the renowned bands Yothu Yindi and King Stringray and hosts music festivals that continue to proudly share Yolŋu culture, assert self-determination and political activism.

1. East Arnhem Regional Council website and Yirrmal www.eastarnhem.nt.gov.au/yirrkala-detailed (Accesss 1 Oct 2023)

Ganarrimirri (Shady beach)

Buku-Larrŋgay – the feeling on your face as it is struck by the first rays of the sun (i.e. facing east)

Mulka – a sacred but public ceremony.

BUKU-LARRNGGAY MULKA ART CENTRE

I spent my days in the art centre, absorbing the atmosphere and helping with a few tasks, including a computer model of a public art proposal and adding the silver attachments to the pandanus weavings to make earrings. The latter was a magical opportunity to appreciate the skill and beauty of the artists creations. As I sat and worked I could watch and absorb the goings on in the building and marvel at its state of constant flux and flow. *For a longer description see page 57.*

I have found that my photographs did not capture some of the details I wanted to describe so have supplemented them with stills taken from the art centres 3D VR model of the building powered by Matterport. To experience the building and the artworks virtually visit: https://yirrkala.com/

From the 1960's, Narritjin Maymuru ran a beachfront gallery selling art that now resides in major galleries and private collections. He established the market and inspired the creation of the art centre in 1976 by a group of Yolŋu artists in the old Mission health centre that had been hosting a mission run 'craft shop'. The art centre's founding coincided with the withdrawal of the mission and the growth of the Land Rights and Homeland movements. Buku-Larrŋgay means "the feeling on your face as it is struck by the first rays of the sun (i.e. facing East) and Mulka means "a sacred but public ceremony."

Buku (as it is commonly known) has developed into one of the most successful and respected art centres in the country that now entails two divisions; the Yirrkala Art Centre which represents Yolŋu artists exhibiting and selling contemporary art and The Mulka Project which acts as a digital production studio and archiving centre incorporating the museum.

Art style and practices

The art and crafts of Buku-Larrŋgay Mulka is drawn from Yirrkala and the approximately 25 homeland centres within a radius of 200km. The sacred art of the region details the spiritual forces behind the ongoing Creation and continuing identity of the fresh and saltwater country of the Miwatj region.

The centre is renowned for its larrakitj (memorial poles), nuwayak (bark paintings with ochre), yiḍaki (didgeridoo), and dharpa (wood sculptures). The artists are working inventively with found materials such as metal road signs that they are etching into with their characteristic cross-hatching. I saw a great exhibition at the Northern Centre for Contemporary Art in Darwin before my visit called ***Murrŋiny: a story of metal from the east***, that introduced me to this work and artists.

They have a print studio producing limited edition prints on their own press, integrating techniques from Japanese woodblock, etching, linocuts, screen-prints and collagraphs.

Management and Funding

Overseen by a strong board the art centre employs around 20 staff, mostly Yolŋu, with four or five balanda (non-Indigenous). The art centre manager, Will Stubbs has been in the role for almost 30 years and is imbedded within the community.

The art centre receives funding from IVAIS, ILA, NT Government for core operations and foundations such as Nelson Meers and Cotton On for specific projects. It is a registered charity.

Opening hours

Monday – Friday: 8 am – 4:30 pm
Saturday: 9 am – 12 pm

Walking back one evening from Ganarrimirri (Shady beach)

- Arts Centre
- General Store / Petrol Station
- Health and Services
- School
- Sports / Recreation
- Church
- Accommodation

→ Township entrance

Location

The art centre and accommodation are located on a slope of the township facing north, overlooking the Arafura Sea. The old Mission church sits in front, and to the side is the community store and sports recreation ground, central sites of activity for the township.

Dagayŋa Stage with performance and gathering space in front

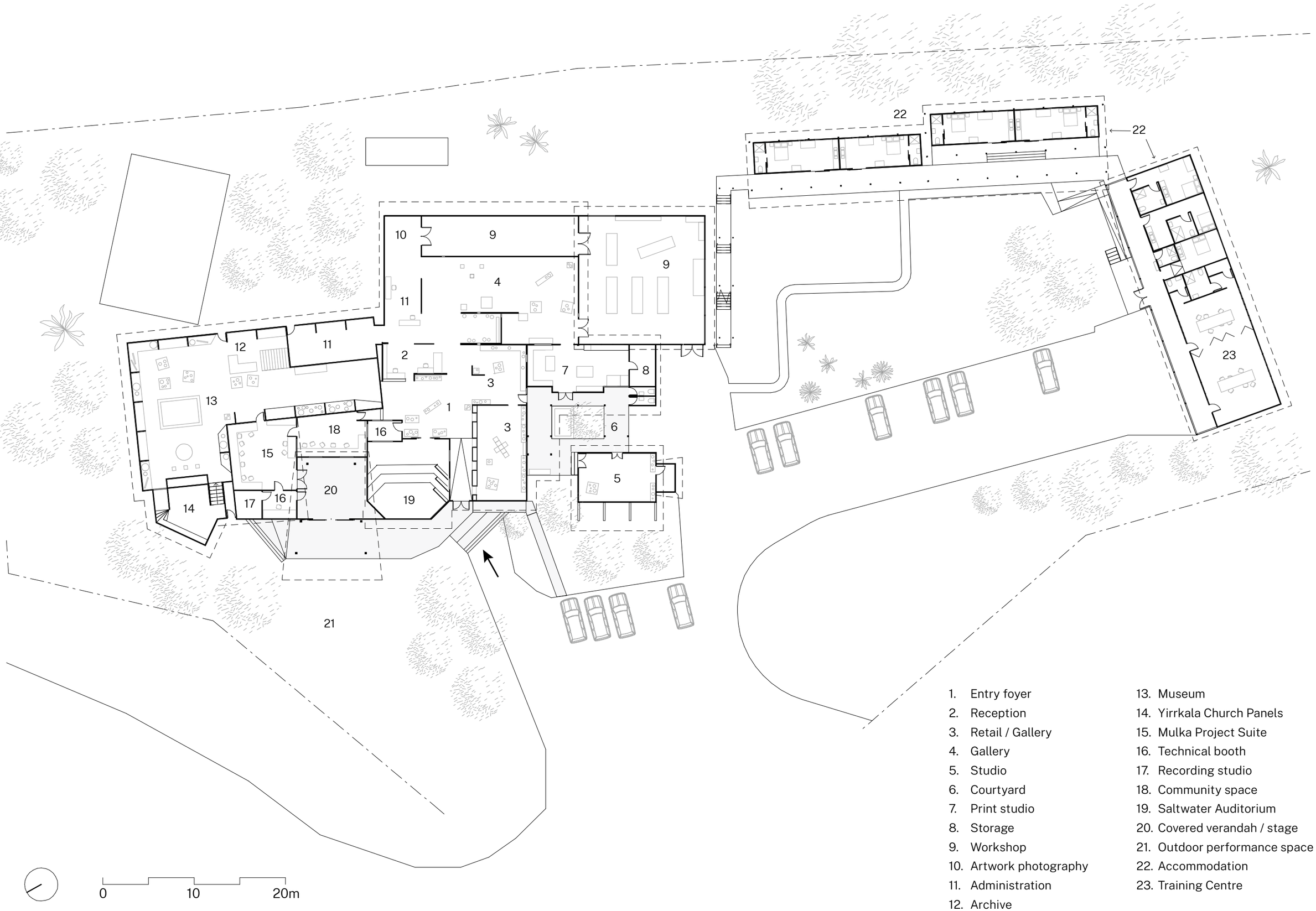
ARCHITECTURE

The art centre comprises a series of unique high-functioning spaces that come together to create the building complex. Built into a hillside it is largely inward focused with views out in only a few locations. The building has grown and developed incrementally over time in response to need and ambition and is thus experienced as a series of connected spatial conditions each for different purposes (and sometimes several).

The art centre complex has developed out from a one room hospital and maternity ward addition, built from local Cypress Pine by Yolŋu and missionaries in the 1960s. It was converted to house the art centre in 1975. In 1988, funded by a Bicentenary Grant, a new museum was opened by Gough Whitlam to house a collection from the 1970's created by Elders to illustrate clan law, along with the Message Sticks from the 1930's and the Yirrkala Church Panels. A screen print workshop and gallery were added in 1996, and in 1998 an annex was added to the museum to house the Church Panels. In 2007 a new entry was created and a digital suite called the Mulka Project was created to house and display tens of thousands of historic images and films. The Saltwater Auditorium which has amphitheatre seating and can show films and host talks, meetings and the like was also added. A new gallery with an outdoor workshop was built to the rear in 2011. A new expanded Mulka Project space was added with a music studio, and the semi-enclosed Dadaynga Stage that doubles as a rehearsal space, in 2015.
A large workshop was built onto the side of the art centre in 2019 at the same time as the Yirrkala Guest House was being developed.
The art centre took over the Commonwealth Training Centre on an adjoining site to create the accommodation. Rooms were converted in the original building and prefabricated portacabins positioned to create an L-shape around a terraced landscape. The Sea Rights Room, named as it hosted the hearing Federal Court hearing of the Sea Rights Case, can be hired for meetings. Together these buildings form a considerable cultural precinct. The work has been designed and built by numerous architects and contractors over the years.

Above Left: View from the entry foyer with the reception desk to the right and the museum beyond and auditorium to the left. A high window, enabled through a raised ceiling in the addition, brings daylight into the core of the building.
Above: View into the gallery spaces, the retail space to the right and the gallery to the left that houses larger works. Prints hanging on the wall in the print studio behind, can be glimpsed through a slot window to the left of the shelves.

Visual connections and sightlines are created throughout the art centre complex linking spaces together. Changes in floor surfaces helps define different spaces. Artworks, particularly larrakitj fill open, and circulation spaces.



1. Entry foyer
2. Reception
3. Retail / Gallery
4. Gallery
5. Studio
6. Courtyard
7. Print studio
8. Storage
9. Workshop
10. Artwork photography
11. Administration
12. Archive
13. Museum
14. Yirrkala Church Panels
15. Mulka Project Suite
16. Technical booth
17. Recording studio
18. Community space
19. Saltwater Auditorium
20. Covered verandah / stage
21. Outdoor performance space
22. Accommodation
23. Training Centre

Image: Matterport

Image: Matterport

Design strengths

The building complex has a good balance between feeling presentable and welcoming for visitors and being a very active working space for the artists. Arrival is up a ramp, into the heart of the art centre with skylights above, and a reception desk where the manager sits. The various spaces radiate off from this central core and each has a clear purpose and meets its functional requirements.

There is a good flow and sightlines through the building, which reveals itself as you move around. Artful slot windows in some of the walls create visual connections between spaces and allow oversight of what is happening in each.

There is an enclosed courtyard to the side with a small shallow pool that provides ambient cooling and reprieve. It is only accessible from within the art centre but has screens that allow views to the community. There is a bench seat with a nice view beyond the entrance to the sea. There is a small, raised gallery studio to one side of the courtyard where artists were painting in preparation for a major exhibition at the NGV. Artists occupy other spaces throughout the complex as desired.

There is an enclosed verandah with metal screens that open to connect with a gathering and performance space in front. The verandah can host workshops and act as a stage for events. The outdoor gathering space has a gentle bank that creates a subtle feeling of enclosure.

Above: High windows fill the entry foyer with light and draw the visitor in. Glass cabinets positioned along the entry sequence display works from the collection. Dark glass windows to the left provide filtered views into the auditorium.

Above right: Windows in the internal walls link the spaces, including retail gallery to print studio and between galleries.

Right: Semi-enclosed courtyard with small pool and vegetation. WC are located to the back and a small studio sits slightly elevated to the right.

Observations of operations

There is a strong internal logic that serves the functioning of the art centre, into which visitors are invited. The arrangement of spaces allows for fluid movement and exchange between artists, staff and visitors. It is a very active art centre, with several high functioning enterprises – the Mulka Project; print workshop; carving and welding workshop. Each domain had a sense of ownership by the artists.

Throughout the days I was in the building there was a frequent flow of visitors - community, families, tourists and visiting workers. People came in for a variety of reasons, including seeking respite from the heat, to sit and rest in the air-conditioning; to catch up on community news; to drop off artworks.

It was the first art centre I had visited, and when I arrived, I was unsure as to where I should or should not go, despite visitors being welcome everywhere. I was initially hesitant to cross some of the thresholds, such as into the Mulka Project space with people focused on work at computers around the periphery, or the outdoor workshop where the men were working.

Curatorial

There is a comparative sophistication to how works are placed on show for community and visitors. The wall alongside the entrance ramp has glass-fronted vitrines the depth of the wall that house art works, lit by built-in downlights and uplights, and accompanied by labels with interpretation.

The museum is a relatively basic building that is curated to reflect the Yolŋu world with two different identities, that must be kept in balance. Every person, and native species of plant and animal belong to one of two moieties – Yirritja or Dhuwa. Within the bays to one side of the museum sits the Yirritja clans and Dhuwa on the other. Two large wall charts show the complex kinship system and labels in each of the bays list moieties, language and family names.

The Church Panels are located at the end of the museum sequence on a half-level down to accommodate their height. The space is relatively intimate and not accessible for those with mobility issues.

There are two galleries, one that houses smaller works for sale, the other has larger works and is continually rotating with recent arrivals from artists being prepared for sale or exhibition – a process that visitors can witness.

Future needs and ambitions

There were plans underway, working with an architect, for a large volume gallery extension, an audio visual immersive space linked to the Mulka Project and an improved administration and photography area.

Image: Matterport

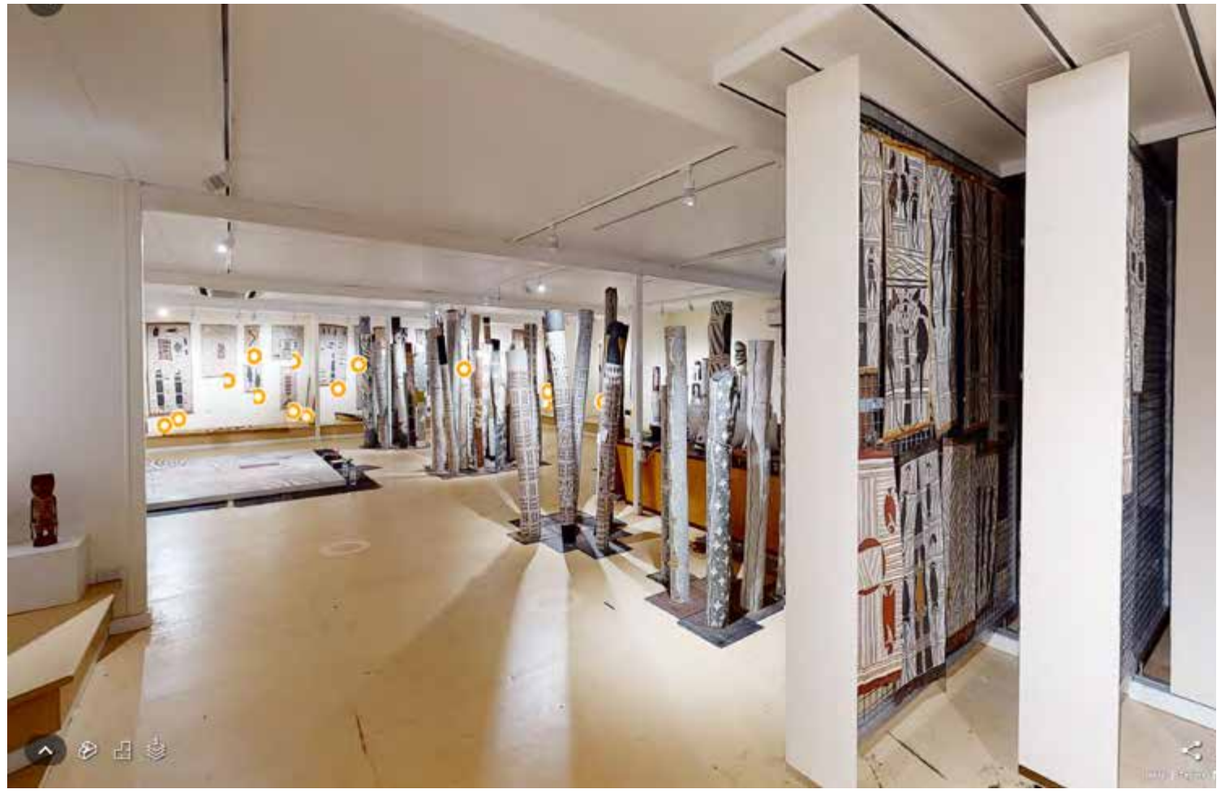


Image: Matterport

Above: Artworks in the bays are arranged according to moieties. Some of the collection is housed in sliding retractable storage units. The centre of the space is used by artists to paint.

Right: The Saltwater Auditorium plays films about Country created by artists in the Mulka Project and paintings by school children surround the base and are tiled into the floor.

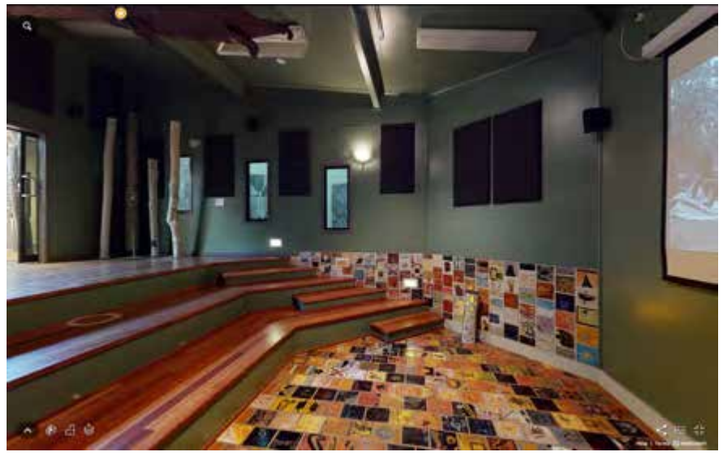


Image: Matterport

Far left: The gallery for large artworks also doubles as a packing space.

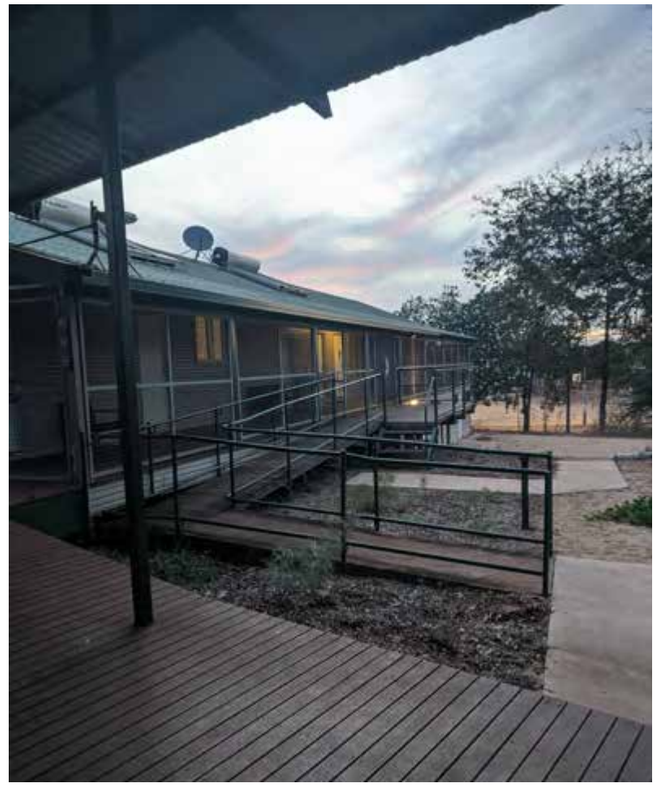
Left: Community space, adjacent to the Mulka Project suite, is filled with children after school using the computers.

The Dadaynga Stage, added in 2015, sits in an enclosed, covered verandah that can also be used to host workshops and activities. Perforated metal screens with artists designs provide security. A roof reaches out into the outdoor performance and gathering space.

Image: Matterport

Image: Matterport

Simple portacabins with a bathroom and kitchenette provide accommodation for visitors (above). These are arranged in a line connecting the art centre with further accommodation in the converted former Commonwealth Training Centre (right). Large, sloping roofs sit atop the portacabins and over a long verandah that works with the topography. I stayed in room 3, to the right of the photograph and sat on the timber stairs eating my breakfast and dinner, watching the goings-on of the community (the store sits just out of view of the photograph).



KATHERINE, BIG RIVERS

F. MIMI ARTS, KATHERINE

G. DJILPIN ARTS, WUGULARR

MIMI ARTS CENTRE

KATHERINE

The Katherine River and
the town of Katherine
Photo: Adobe Stock Images
(date unspecified)

KATHERINE

My first visit to Katherine took place between 7 and 10 June 2022. I arrived in town mid-afternoon on a Greyhound bus from Darwin. I could feel the air becoming a little drier and the landscape change as we went south. Having spent the latter part of the journey watching controlled burns of low-level bush, the colourful houses of the Kalano township caught my attention and alerted me to the fact we were about to cross the Katherine River marking the entrance to the town.

Over the next few days, I explored Katherine, getting my bearings, and meeting some local artist contacts. The town stretches north and south along the river and east along the highway. Blocks are large, streets are wide, and density is low, a condition I keenly felt as I tried to get around on foot in the heat of the day. One of the joys was an early morning walk along the river and bathe in the hot springs before tourists arrived.

I met a friendly couple who were visiting their medic daughter and looking after their granddaughter, seeing art and seeking refuge from the heat at Godinymayin Yijard Rivers Arts and Culture Centre, then at Mimi. We discussed the merits of the different spaces, especially for a toddler.

Katherine is the traditional lands of the Jawoyn, Dagoman and Wardaman people. Dagoman land stretches south of Katherine – Leach Lagoon, Upper King River to the Warlock Ponds near Mataranka. The Jawoyn are east of Katherine – from Landsdowne to the edge of Kakadu; The Wardaman westwards to Limestone Creek and the Victoria River district.

Katherine is a major town located on the banks of the Katherine River, approximately 320 kilometres southeast of Darwin, a three-hour drive on sealed roads. It is serviced by commercial flights from both Darwin and Alice Springs. Katherine is the fourth largest town in the Northern Territory, located on the junction of the Stuart Highway (the Explorer's Way, running north-south from Darwin to Adelaide) and the Victoria Highway (Savannah Way, from Cairns to Broome). It is a major tourist hub for those road-tripping across the country and draws people to visit the nearby Nitmiluk National Park (Katherine Gorge) and the local hot springs. It is part of what is known as the Big Rivers Region, encompassing Victoria Daly and Roper Gulf.

Climate and Geography

Katherine has a tropical savanna climate with distinct wet and dry seasons. The wet season typically occurs from November to April, bringing high temperatures (25-38°), high humidity, and heavy rainfall. The dry season, from May to October, is characterised by warm days (up to 35°), cooler nights (20°), and little to no rainfall. Katherine sits on the edge of the tropics and the outback. The Katherine River, which flows through the town, has a history of flooding, most significantly in 1998 when it rose 21.3m and two thirds of the community was evacuated and again in 2006 when a state of emergency was declared.

Population and *Amenities*

The 2021 census records Katherine's total population of 18,739, with an Indigenous population of 49.6% of total. Katherine has all major services and amenities of a main town including a hospital, several primary schools, high school and tertiary training, library, supermarkets and retail outlets, sports and recreation centres.

Recent history

European settlement began after the region was explored by John McDouall Stuart in 1862 and the town named after the daughter of his benefactor. The town developed with the building of the Overland Telegraph Line in 1872, connecting Adelaide to Darwin, and later Europe, opening the area for communication and trade. Gold was discovered at Mt Todd 50km north in 1889 (closed in 2000). A second settlement was established 3km downstream with the North Australian Railway from 1917 and a third from 1926 across the river where it now stands.

During World War II, Katherine played a significant role as a strategic military base for the Allied forces in the Pacific and was bombed once by the Japanese. The Tindal Air Force base remains, 15km from the town. The town grew with the construction of the Stuart Highway in the 1950s. It was the service town for the large pastoral properties of the region, raising cattle and breeding horses. More recently it has also become an important agricultural centre and a hive for tourism.

KATHERINE

Street art in Katherine commemorates the likes of Neighbour (right) painted by Jesse Bell in 2019. Katherine Regional Arts website states, Neighbour was arrested in 1911, placed in neck and hand chains and walked to the police station at Roper Bar by a policeman on horseback. At the Wilton River crossing Neighbour swam across in chains and the policeman followed. However, the horse stumbled and the policeman was swept down the river. Despite being in chains, Neighbour dived into the river and saved the policeman from drowning. The charges against Neighbour were dropped and he was awarded the Albert Medal for Bravery.[1]

Arts & Culture today

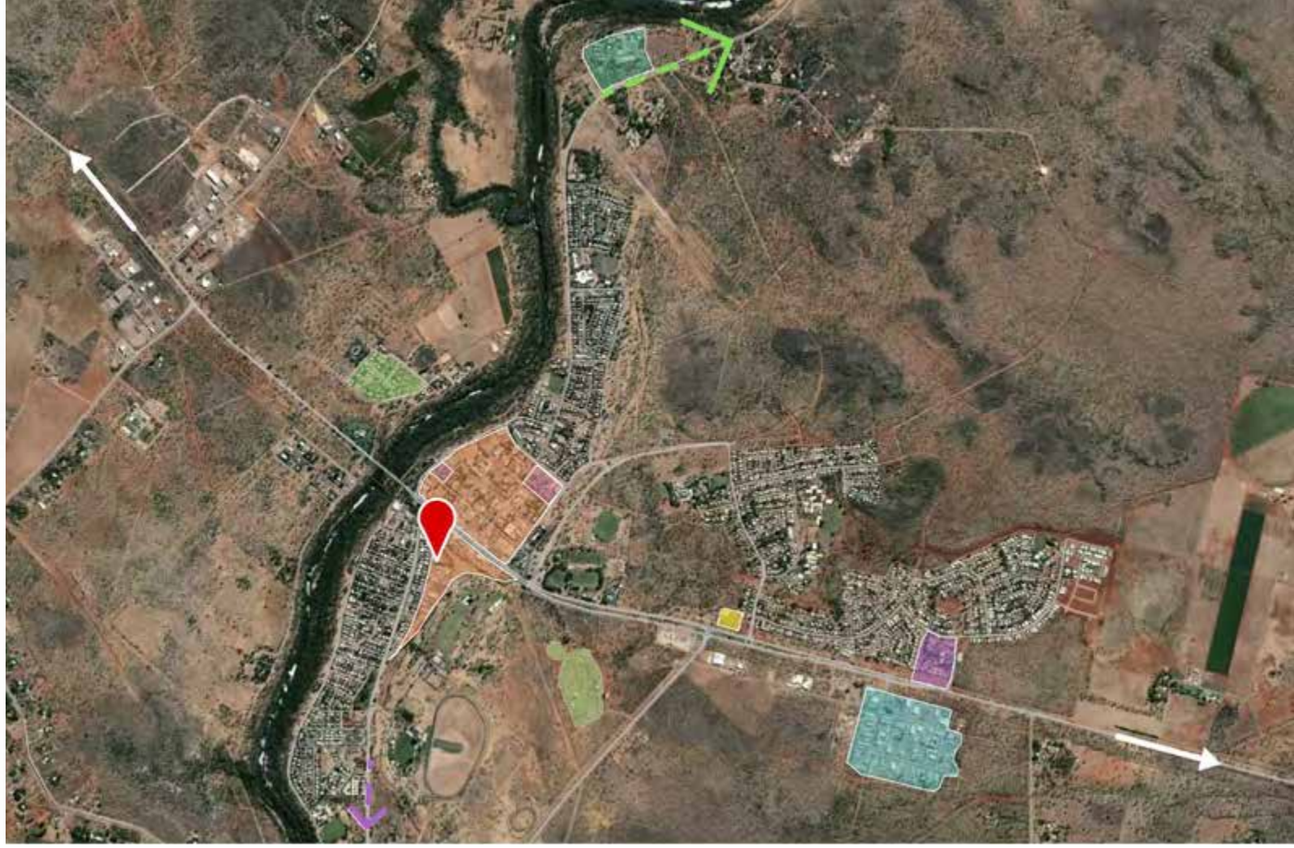
There are several arts and cultural organisations in Katherine today that promote Indigenous Culture. They support local artists and those across the wider region that spans the Savannah Way and the 'Big Rivers' (Katherine, the Roper, the Wilton, the Victoria and the Daly). Katherine Regional Arts, established in 2000, has had various iterations but now runs a program that includes a functioning arts studio with screen-printing facilities, kiln, printing press, a mobile solar cinema, a workshop program for people with disabilities, an extensive collaborative project with four Aboriginal communities, a public art project, an annual theatre production, and the annual Junk Festival.

Godinymayin Yijard Rivers Arts and Culture Centre opened in June 2012, after 10 years of planning and community consultation, includes a gallery hosting exhibitions of NT artists, shop and multi-purpose community and event spaces. Godinymayin (Godding-marn) is the name of a respected Elder who lived on the land on which the Centre is built. Yijard (I-jard) is the word used for 'big' in one of the local Aboriginal languages. It is currently undergoing an expansion and upgrade designed by Troppo Architects that will include a new outdoor amphitheatre with supporting event facilities. Planning rationalisation to the building will improve visitor engagement, operational efficiency and functionality; and support the Centre to develop new arts and cultural experiences for locals and visitors.

Top Didj Cultural Experience & Art Gallery, established in 2009 offers an opportunity to learn about the Dalabon tribe first-hand from Manuel Pamkal who shares his story and showcases traditional activities such as fire lighting, spear and boomerang throwing, and painting. The art gallery holds a portfolio of artists from the region as well as from Arnhem Land, the Kimberleys and the Central Western Desert.

Katherine has impressive street art that celebrates local people, located in sites across the town.

1. https://katherineregionalarts.org.au/2019-katherine-mural-round-up (Accessed 20 October 2023)



I was taken through the building by a board member who was working in the gallery. He described the aspiration for the art centre that had underpinned the new building and spoke of future plans for cultural tourism and further expanding their spaces.

After the art centre closed that day, we dropped one of the artists to their house in the Kalano Town Camp, then drove south to scope a beautiful riverside location they planned to take some teenagers to camp and connect with Country over the weekend. It was a serene and peaceful place.

- Mimi Arts
- Hotel and motel accommodation
- Commercial
- Administration and Health
- Cultural precinct
- Town camps
- Light industry
- Major roads

MIMI ARTS

Mimi Aboriginal Corporation started in 1978 as an Aboriginal initiative that aimed to create employment for local people, working out of a “modest demountable” in the Yulgnu yards behind the main street of Katherine. Originally it covered artists from across the Northern Territory and into Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia, but subsequently condensed to the extensive Katherine region. Mimi now covers 23 communities and smaller outstations from south of Lajamanu to north of Pine Creek and from the WA border to the Gulf of Carpentaria, taking in the Tanami Desert and Arnhem land. This cultural diversity is reflected in the artworks. There are the layered dot paintings of the desert, the cross-hatched ‘rarrk’ style of Arnhem Land and the ‘naïf’ styles of Fitzroy Crossing and the Ngukurr / Minyerri areas. Many artists are living in towns and traveling, influencing their contemporary output. Mimi primarily sells acrylic on canvas, as well carvings and fibre art. The shop retails Indigenous merchandise for the tourist market.

In its first few decades Mimi moved to various locations around town, but moved back to the yards in 1998. Initially it was very active in servicing the arts needs of communities across the region, supplying materials, and gathering works for sale. Now they rely on artists bringing in their work. In an article in ANKA’s magazine Backbone in 2002, and later in a 2009 Parliamentary Select Committee report the CEO at the time Barbara Ambjerg Pedersen describes the funding, operational and infrastructure challenges that Mimi faced over its history.

Management and priorities

Mimi is an Aboriginal community-owned and managed not-for-profit art centre. Members come from across the region and clans, with an elected board to represent them. It is a registered charity that reports to the ORIC.
On their website Mimi states their priorities as falling under the following categories:
Economic; with artists receiving an equitable share of proceeds from sales; reinvesting surpluses in resourcing regional artists; delivering high quality, authentic product to market
Social: providing supportive respectful working environment for artists; provide resources, training and encouragement to emerging artists; facilitate an interface between artists and broader community
Cultural; maintain, reinvigorate and strengthen indigenous culture through traditional and contemporary artistic expression; preserve and protect rights of IP, copyright and cultural heritage.

Opening to artists and visitors

Mondayto Friday: 8:30 am – 4:30 pm
The website states they are also available by appointment out of hours

Location and site

Mimi is located on a quiet street on the south side of town near the main junction of the Stuart and Victoria Highways and in walking distance to the main street. It backs onto the old railway track that now is a revitalised parkland. Katherine South includes a residential neighbourhood that has many of the original 1960s and 70s government issue houses along with the Katherine Country Club and the main road that leads to the Katherine Hot Spring, a popular destination for tourists and locals.

ARCHITECTURE

The art centre manager who oversaw the new building project was away during my visit and has subsequently left. I did not have the opportunity to speak to him about the design process.

I returned for a short visit on 9 June 2023 on my way from Alice Springs to Darwin. It had only recently reopened after being closed for a couple of months after a break in. The art centre was largely as it was on my first visit, the main change was growth in vegetation.

In 2021, Mimi reopened after a major upgrade by Troppo Architects. The building houses a gallery and retail space, artist studios and support spaces, art storage and preparation and administrative offices.

For many years the arts centre ran out of an old workshop and community store that used to sell supplies to communities such as flour, sugar, tea, boots etc. Although the space was in poor condition and the gallery was inadequate, the structure of the large steel shed was sound and therefore kept. The project received $2.5m from the NT Arts Trail Regional Gallery Extension Program and the tender documents stated the following scope of work:

- rectifying and upgrading existing structures and maintenance issues and increasing operating efficiencies with solar panels;
- upgrading the entry, retail, gallery, artist studios, office space and amenities to improve gallery functions, visitor experience and artist engagement - art storage, and preparation rooms

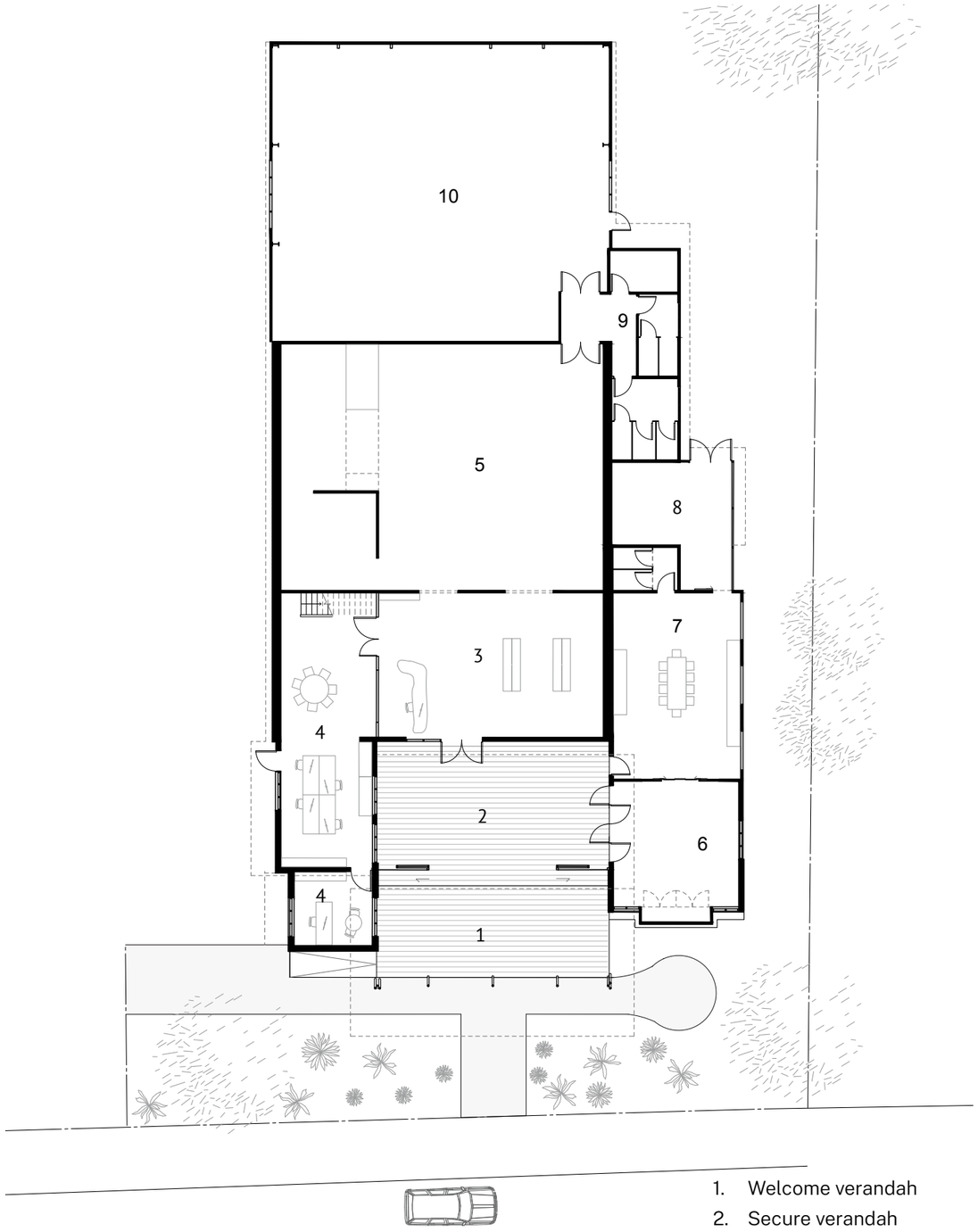
The design includes flood safety measures with the material selection able to resist submersion, electrical fittings higher on walls and storage in mezzanines. Security from theft and vandalism has been integrated into the design.

The art centre is entered through a covered portico flanked on one side by administration spaces and on the other by the artist workshops. The portico is divided by large sliding steel screens with an artists stencilled design, that create a verandah to one side and a secure outdoor room to the inside. The semi-enclosure is completed by a perforated mesh screen that sits between the top of the side walls and the floating skillion roof.

The centre of the building, entered on the main access contains a retail space with a dedicated gallery behind, envisaged to host a program of exhibitions. The gallery is subdivided with a wall and hanging rack system for paintings. A high window on either side provides subtle daylight. The retail space contains freestanding displays, with a manned counter in front of the administration and storage spaces.

The administrative wing has a relatively large art centre manager office at the front towards the street, with open plan office and amenities behind and storage above. The artist wing has a studio to the street front and a communal space with table and kitchenette behind. To the rear of the building is the large, insulated shed with a simple concrete floor.

Project Management / Engineering: HK Solutions
Architect: Troppo Architects
Construction: NJ Homes



1. Welcome verandah
2. Secure verandah
3. Retail space
4. Office and Administration
5. Gallery
6. Public art studio
7. Private studio and workshop
8. Store
9. Bathrooms
10. Existing shed / open store

2. Verandah

3. Retail space

5. Gallery

Design strengths

The building has a good street presence that is welcoming and invites visitors into the space across a series of thresholds. Simple landscaping sits in front of the raised timber deck that flows into the semi-enclosed outdoor room taking a journey past artists, through a retail space with a staff member, and into the gallery.

The semi-enclosed terrace was the stand-out space – the atmosphere was welcoming and very pleasant – with good proportions, visually engaging and thermally comfortable, being a few degrees cooler than outside with gentle breezes moving through. Metal screens with artworks filter light and create beautiful shadows throughout the day.

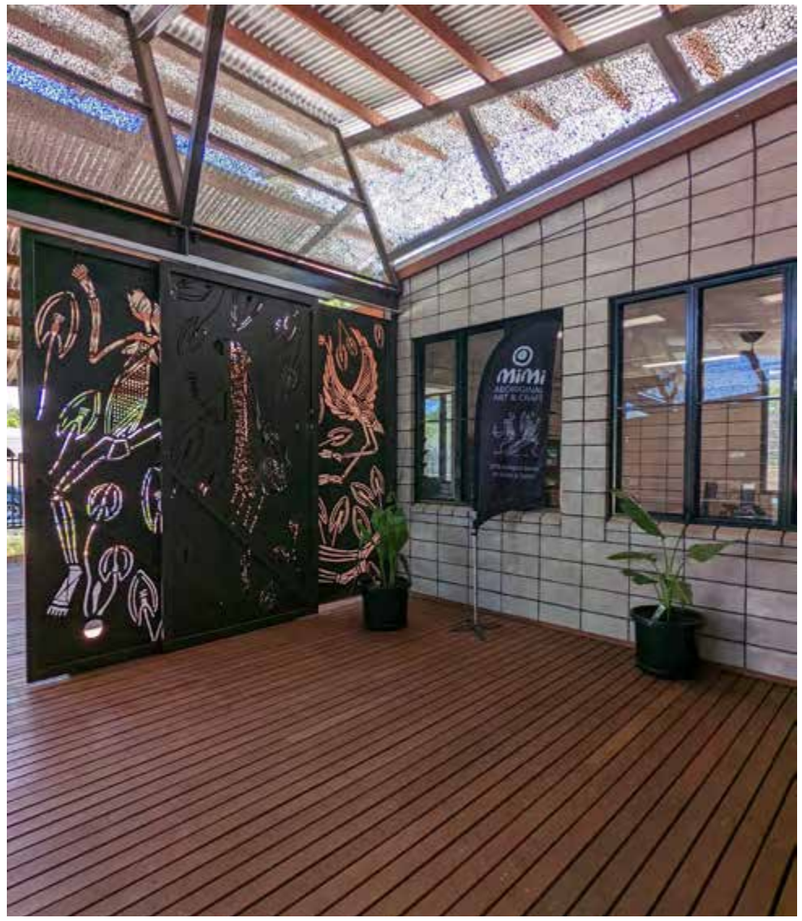
Nice design elements and good detailing were achieved within the limited scope and budget.

Observations and operations

It was reported that since opening the new spaces, there had been a strong rise in sales. I witnessed a steady stream of visits. Feedback from artists and visitors to the new space was reported to be very positive.

I understand that in the past artists would sometimes work in the cramped gallery spaces but this was always difficult and it was not a central part of the culture or operations of the centre. The new studio space for artists is very pleasant and there was someone working there on my visit, which was relatively soon after opening. The team reported that they were working to entice more artists regularly into the space. I could imagine that the central semi-enclosed space could become very animated if artists used it as a spill out from the studio.

Windows running along the entrance space make the offices – and the work taking place within them – relatively visible despite screens.



Curatorial

The gallery has good celling heights and clear walls to hang on, with the potential to present professional looking shows. Sliding racks were used effectively to showcase more works for sale. At the time of visiting there was no interpretation or background information provided on the artists or works.

Future needs or ambitions

Troppo Architects are working on a second stage to expand the cultural tourism capacity and provide further amenities for the community utilising the old workshop space. The staff member I spoke to expressed the ambition to welcome tour buses and provide a cultural experience such as didgeridoo making workshops, along with having a conference space for the community.

The material colour pallet is simple, and materials are used in their raw, prefinished state. The building is clad in a combination of coloured mild steel sheets and fibre cement panels, the former predominantly towards the front, the latter to the rear. Care has been given to how the sheet panels are arranged and meet. The metal Colorbond custom orb roof sheeting is left exposed underneath and helps to reflect light beneath.

Perforated metal screens provide security. A thick steel cut with a bold artwork is used for the sliding door panels and a thinner, finer design used above that allows dappled light into the semi-enclosed verandah.

DJILPIN ARTS
WUGULARR

Walking with Spirits Festival 2015, celebrating the stories, spirits and culture of Melkjulumbu and its people.

Image courtesy of Djilpin Arts, Photographer: Peter Eve, Monsoon Studio

Melkulumbu (Beswick Falls), one of the most sacred and celebrated places on Wugularr country, 15kms along the Waterhouse River.

Image courtesy of Djiplin Arts,

Photographer: Peter Eve

WUGULARR (BESWICK)

I arrived into Wugularr late in the afternoon, having picked up my hire car from Katherine airport and driven an hour southeast. Roadwork was taking place on the Stuart Highway and I nearly missed the turn onto the single sealed-lane Central Arnhem Road. I understood the etiquette having been a passenger before. As if in a dance, as a car approached, I drifted to the left, keeping the right wheels on the bitumen and the left on the dirt, coming back onto the road after we had passed, repeating many times as it was a busy afternoon with Barunga Festival in two days.

It was a beautiful drive, largely straight until Barunga where it took some gentle curves. The topography was mixed, sometimes flat with trees, or with rocky outcrops that gave the land definition and character. The late sun bathed everything I saw in a warm glow.

Following a sign that said Beswick I found myself on a road full of activity. I slowed the car to a walking pace, as children and dogs scurried around enjoying play. There was lively chatter from adults and yelps of delight from the kids. My first impressions was of a green and vibrant community.

The community of Wugularr (Beswick), was settled on the lands of the Bagala clan of the Jawoyn people, 118km south-east of Katherine. Along with the Jawoyn, it is home to people from the Rembarranga, Mayali, Dalabon, Marra, Rithurangu/Wagalak, Jingili/Mudburra and Jinang language groups, all connected by kinship and family ties from North, Central and West Arnhem Land and East as far as Numbulwar.

Wugularr sits on the edge of the tropics and the outback. Featuring low-lying hills and rocky outcrops the region has important waterways, including Beswick Creek and Waterhouse River, with cultural significance. The Waterhouse is supplied by freshwater springs from the north in Arnhem Land and its lake is filled with an abundance of fish and freshwater crocodiles.

The region has a tropical savanna climate. The wet season typically from November to April, brings high temperatures (25–38°), high humidity, and heavy rainfall. The river floods at this time cutting off access to the community. The dry season, from May to October, is characterised by warm days (up to 35°), cooler nights (20°), and little to no rainfall.

Population and *Amenities*

The population at the 2021 Census was 542, with 95% being Indigenous. Wugularr has a school, health clinic, service station and convenience store, licensed sports and social club, (police station 30km away), aged care centre and creche.

Recent history

Pastoralists arrived in the area in the 1870's with the name Beswick coming from the former Beswick cattle station. Employment opportunities attracted people from across the region when a tin mine was established c. 1913 at Maranboy, (40kms to the west) and closed in 1949. The government bought Beswick Station which had employed many Aboriginal stockmen in 1947. By 1954, the settlement included a school, a communal kitchen and dining room, and small 'Econo Hut' dwellings. It reverted to Indigenous ownership in 1976, with cattle production continuing under Indigenous ownership until the mid-1980s. In 1991, the Jawoyn were given Native Title to their lands.

Out of early informal beginnings Peter Apaak Jupurrula Miller and Bangardi Robert Lee (1952–2005), land rights activists initiated the Barunga Sport and Cultural Festival in 1985. The 'Barunga Statement', written on bark and presented to Prime Minister Bob Hawke in 1988, called for Aboriginal self-management, a national system of land rights, compensation for loss of lands, respect for Aboriginal identity and the granting of full civil, economic, social and cultural rights. Hawke's response was that he wished for a treaty that still has not happened.

Rich in spirit, Culture is powerful medicine, bringing healing to the community and inspiration and understanding to the visitors that we welcome to walk with us[1].

Tom E. Lewis (1958-2018), Artistic Director, Djilpin Arts

Djilpin Arts during the official opening of the arts pavilion in 2016.
Image courtesy of Djilpin Arts,
Photographer: Peter Eve

I visited Djilpin Arts on the 8 and 9 June 2022 staying two nights in the very special Djakanimba Pavilions. There was a couple camping who warmly welcomed me on arrival, evidently feeling at home. There was someone in the room adjacent to me with whom I shared the generous bathroom and verandah, but never met. More guests arrived the following night who were working at the Barunga Festival taking place over the weekend 30km down the road.

The Djilpin team were also preparing for the festival that was celebrating 30 years since the Barunga Statement. The team hosted a stall in the art market and were clearly seasoned professionals. They were carefully packing efficient display systems and works to sell; paintings, prints, fibre-art including Dragonflies that signal the dry season, spears, Mako's / didgeridoos and textiles with beautiful prints – I was especially fond of one with dilly bags. There was anticipation in the air. Young boys were practicing their bungul, traditional ceremonial dance, that I would see performed 2 days later at the festival alongside the Red Flag Dancers from Numbulwar. Elders and artists dropped in to coordinate and check on plans. Due to the festival, there was unusually only one artist working while I was there carving. A Yolgnu man from Donydji, he too was also looking forward to the festival and playing footy for the Beswick Bears (who won!).

DJILPIN ARTS

In 2002 acclaimed actor, musician and Murrungun, Wandarrang man, Balang Tom. E. Lewis (1958-2018) returned to the Northern Territory and founded Djilpin Arts to "maintain, develop and promote local art and culture." Valuing and sustaining Cultural knowledge systems underpins all Djilpin's actions: doing so with a spirit that also invites visitors to walk together to experience and understand Country.

From 2002 to 2017 the *Walking with Spirits Festival* was an annual cultural celebration presented in partnership with the Australian Shakespeare Company. Held 15 kilometres from the community at the spectacular sacred site of Malkgulumbu (Beswick Falls), it included concerts and traditional corroboree from several Arnhem Land languages together with songs and stories told in dance, music and puppetry. As Balang stated:

> The land is our church and everything in it is one – the dancers not only represent, but enter into the spirits of the animals, plants and seasons.

In 2004 a digital media program was established, working with the young to creates films about Culture for Community. Ghunmarn Culture Centre, opened in 2007, includes a museum and retail space. It is the Keeping Place for the Blanasi Collection, called *Gunwinjgu* (*The Company of People*), a permanent showcase of culturally significant art works in the West Arnhem painting style curated by the late Elder and didgeridoo master, David Blanasi.

Djilpin artists engage with many cultural forms that include dance, art, ceremony, music and other contemporary mediums for maintaining cultural knowledge. The Bagala are Billabong people who would traditionally use red and yellow ochre but now work with acrylic on canvas. They are also known for carving particularly spears and Mako (didgeridoo), and fibre art.

Djilpin Arts opened another gallery in the centre of Katherine in 2012 and subsequently relocated to the Shed in Katherine East in 2020. In the spirit of walking together and sharing culture, Djilpin offers tours to the sacred Malkgulumbu (Beswick Falls) and surrounding Country along with cultural workshops such as weaving. They have accommodation and camping facilities for visitors onsite and also host performances and cultural events.

Management and priorities

There is a strong board who lead with the support of Fleur Parry, Balang's widow. A team of arts workers maintain and sustain the gallery, museum and accommodation with the support of two art centre co-ordinators. Their priority is to continue Culture and provide jobs for the community, especially through cultural tourism and through making and selling art.

Opening to artists and visitors

Monday – Friday: 9 am – 3 pm
Visitors can stay onsite overnight with a shared kitchen accessed with a key.

1. Djilpin Arts, *The Company of People* by Fleur Parry, Backbone, ANKAAA Arts, Volume 14: Issue 1, August 2014

Djilpin Arts

Djilpin Djakanimba Pavilions

General Store

Health Clinic

School

Social club

Road into Wugularr

Location and site

The Djilpin arts precinct is located to one side of the community and although not far from the social club and council administration, felt relatively secluded. The precinct establishes zones of activity across its L-shaped site. The performance space and cultural centre are towards the community and main road. The accommodation sits behind amongst some trees and the camping is further on looking out to open bush.

There are houses in relatively close proximity and those to one side are separated from the accommodation by a row of large trees. As can be seen on the map there are many walking paths showing desire lines across the community. Likewise people walk through Djilpin as a shortcut to the houses and sites further out.

This is the first view I had of Djilpin Arts. The back of the temporary performance stage offers a billboard to the community and arriving visitors. Large rocks dot the edges of many of the roads in the community, here they mark the edge of the cultural precinct.

On my first night I walked the short distance to the social club, which was buzzing with people and activity, to get a pizza. Needing some food supplies to cook my dinner in the communal kitchen the following day, I drove the short distance to the community store which sits on the other side of town next to the school.


Chunmarn Culture
Centre

He [Tom E. Lewis] saw the pavilions as being like magic kicked up in the dust. The way he described Country was like a church, and that's the way you need to treat the place that you are going to build on. I think we can all learn from that profound connection with land and place[1].

— Tania Dennis,
Insideout Architects

1. Stephen Russell, *Context is everything in design – three architects on embracing Indigenous culture in design*, Australian Design Review, 10 February 2022.

ARCHITECTURE

Djilpin Arts has created the Ghunmarn Cultural Precinct with a series of permanent buildings and temporary structures that become the stage set for festivals and cultural events. It has been built to a masterplan conceived between Insideout Architects and Djilpin Arts and developed in stages.

The Ghunmarn Culture Centre inhabits what was originally a house that was significantly rebuilt and extended after a flood of 1998. A major renovation funded by the Ian Thorpe Foundation opened in 2007. The 2-storey building, painted a deep ochre red, has a strong street presence with its steep roof that shades the men's carving space, one of the first things seen on approach. A gallery of contemporary works occupies the ground floor and the Blanasi Collection is upstairs. To the rear is a large, shaded verandah on which artists, community and visitors gather.

From the verandah a ramp leads up to the arts pavilion, with a retail gallery, a café kitchen (used by artists and staff), a camp kitchen, toilets and a laundry servicing the accommodation. This is the second stage of the project. The first was the Djakanimba Pavilions, four interconnected pavilions that work as both event hosting spaces and accommodation for visitors that opened in 2012. Again, these are prefabricated pavilions of light-weight construction, raised above the ground to the 100-year flood level. They are planned so the four rooms can operate independently or together, with a bathroom shared between two, accessed from a verandah. They all have fold down beds so the spaces can be used for other activities. The central two rooms are separated by a retractable wall, that when opened creates a large space to convene meetings, workshops events or exhibitions, or can be used as one large room for family accommodation.

Insideout Architects worked alongside the Djilpin Arts - the director, manager, artists, Wugularr builders and arts workers. With:
Stark Consulting (QS)
Glynn Tucker Consulting Engineers (Structural and Civil Engineers)
GHD Darwin (Service engineers)
Probuild NT (Builder, Stage 1)
Murray River North (Builder, Stage 2)
Axis Arts (Education and Business Development)
Blue Print Sculpture

Funding

In a statement to Parliament on art centres in 2015, Fleur Parry said: "Over more than a decade, Djilpin Arts has put $3 million into physical infrastructure—a culture centre… with award-winning accommodation, so that we can host visitors and try to increase our own revenue streams…. There is a new building going up as we speak, which will complete that infrastructure picture[2]."

Procurement and design process

Tania Dennis of Insideout Architects grew up in Katherine on Jawoyn Country and knew Tom E. Lewis from school days. In an Australian Design Review article[3] she said of the design process, "We sorted things out by walking around, talking about stuff and remixing things if they didn't work, just being able to see the project through their eyes." And of Lewis who taught her the importance of dancing to honour the earth and ancestors and to take away worries.

2. Hearing of the Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee, 29/10/2015, *Impact of the 2014 and 2015 Commonwealth budget decisions on the arts*
3. Russell *Context is everything in design*

1. Ghunmarn Culture Centre
2. Men's carving space
3. Coffee machine
4. Covered verandah
5. Retail Gallery
6. Kitchen
7. Bathroom
8. Laundry
9. Camp kitchen
10. Djakanimba Pavilions
11. Accommodation unit
12. Shelter
13. Camping
14. Stage
15. Shipping container

1

2

3

Design strengths

To a first-time visitor and outsider, it felt a very strong and cohesive cultural precinct deeply connected to Country. The siting of the buildings worked with the landscape and topography and created a feeling of flow across the site and connection with the surroundings. Distances between buildings and structures felt appropriate, maintaining connection while not encroaching on the different functions. During the days of my visit, I could always find places to sit with good air movement and thermal comfort.

The pavilions are raised on stilts to mitigate flood risks which also creates a positive sense of continuity and physical connection to the ground plane. It is easy to see who moves across the site and the activities taking place, creating social connection, and enabling oversight. The elevation provided greater air-movement within the structures and made the accommodation feel safe. I wondered about people with mobility and access requirements. Services such as plumbing were also exposed rather than buried in the ground, likely making upkeep and maintenance simple.

The pavilion form and construction express modesty with subtle design flare. The sloping roofs provide good sun and rain cover and lead the eye towards the sky, and the shining stars at night when sitting on the verandah. The pavilions are very well planned, incorporating indoor and outdoor spaces. They are resolved to enable flexibility and allow them to operate in different modes and configurations. The outer pavilions have two entrances, from the shared balcony or direct from the staircase, so they could be subdivided in the future (there is no retractable wall in place currently). All the spaces are generous

in scale and volume. There is an efficiency of means within the design and construction – there are no frills – an exemplar of good, not flashy design.

Across the site there were numerous very pleasant semi-enclosed and shaded places to inhabit, often slightly raised with good breezes providing relief from the heat. Sitting on the verandah behind the Cultural Centre was a delight.

One could also feel the creativity and cultural pride of the community across the site, with artworks imbedded into structures such as the performance space, fences, balustrades and cladding columns.

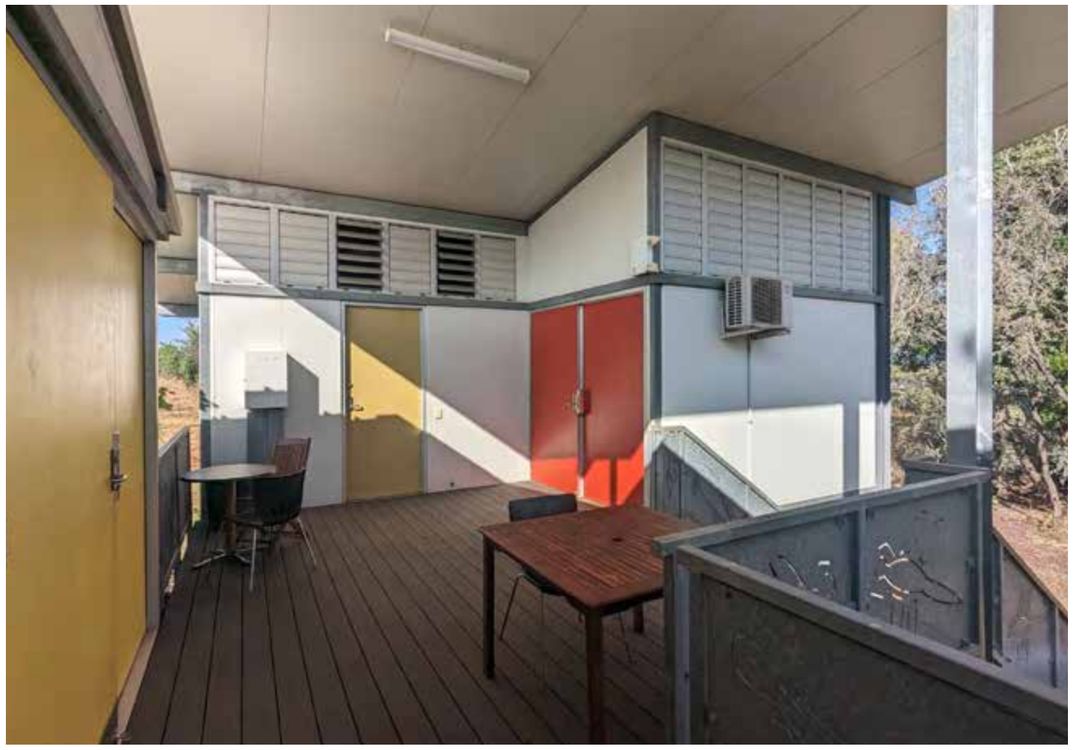
The pavilions touch the ground lightly, held up on very delicate columns that effortlessly prop floor and roofs. The roofs intersect but there is breathing space between each sleeping pavilion. Balastraded stairs stretch into the landscape. The whole composition could be likened to an elegant dance.

Observations and operations

There was a positive feeling of coming together and cross-cultural connections, enabled both spatially and in operations and attitudes. Visitors, me included, felt welcome and moved freely across the site and into the various spaces, none of which were intimidating. Artists and art workers were working outside and around the site, and it was easy to chat and appreciate what was being done.

The accommodation was well supplied and managed – it was clean, the walls have artworks and merchandise that can be purchased from the gallery. Supplies such as tea and coffee and soaps made by the community, are also available for purchase. Facilities had been well planned, with an onsite laundry to service the accommodation and a shared kitchenette that was efficient and could be closed with a roller shutter.

There was the possibility for natural ventilation in most of the spaces with air-conditioning used only when required. I experienced sound spill between the two rooms in the central pavilion with the retractable wall, reducing a sense of privacy, but felt a part of being in a remote community.



The tree canopies and sky are always in view through high windows that bring light in and let breezes pass through.

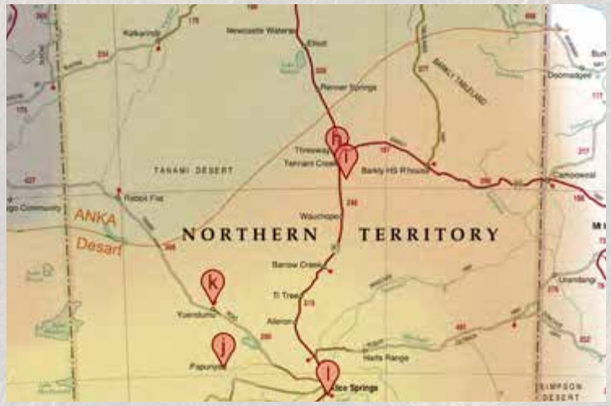
Sitting on this verandah, at this long table was one of my favourite places to be. There was a cool breeze and the space fluctuated constantly with life and energy throughout the day. A place for a yarn, to make, to rest; Elders, artists, community, visitors. A quality coffee was served from a machine that sat to the right of the image. The low gentle sloping roof gave a feeling of protection and framed the surrounding landscape. There were views across the precinct – to the stage in one direction, the arts and accommodation pavilions in the other. I wandered over and stood on the stage looking back imagining what it would have been liked filled with people, music and dance – I could sense the joy.

Children played, running and finding delight everywhere; ramps, stairs, stages and grassy slopes. When exhaustion hit, they would sit watching devices or draw, finding peace too, on the verandahs.

TENNANT CREEK, BARKLY

H. NYINKKA NYUNYU ART AND CULTURAL CENTRE

I. BARKLY REGIONAL ARTS



‘This is a region where many dreamings criss-cross the country….”

Nyinkka Nyunyu Art and Cultural Centre website

TENNANT CREEK, BARKLY REGION

I arrived in Tennant Creek at midnight on the Greyhound bus from Alice Springs and was dropped by a community transport shuttle to my cabin in the caravan park. The next day I picked up a car and explored the town that stretched either side of the highway, coming across some curious pyramid shaped buildings and some interesting examples of regional government architecture. After visiting the art centres I drove to the nearby old mine, now a tourist site with industrial machinery looking almost romantic in the dusk light. A lookout afforded views over town in one direction and low hills, spotted with trees in the other.

The next day when I watched an artist at Wutunugurra, Barkly Arts, the terrain and places I had seen and travelled over, came to life. Over the course of the day, she painted the landscape with the changing seasons. The painting transformed with time imbedded in its layers and I was given a glimpse of the extraordinary connection to Country.
I stayed in Tennant Creek 5 – 7 June 2023.

The Barkly Region covers an area of around 322,700 square kilometres with 16 language groups. These include Waramungu, Warlpiri, Alyawarr, Kaytetye, Warlmanpa, Wakaya, Mudburra, Wambaya, Jingili, Kudanji, Ngarnga, Bingbinga, Garrawa, Yanyuwa, Waanyi and Mara. The region spans from the Roper Gulf in the north, east to the Queensland border, and the Central Desert in the south and south-west.

The hub for the region, Tennant Creek, located approximately 1000km south of Darwin and 500km north of Alice Springs, is the seventh largest town in the Northern Territory. It is on the traditional lands of the Patta Warumungu people who were the first Indigenous group in Australia to negotiate a Consent Determination and Indigenous Land Use Agreement, which recognised their Native Title rights and interests within the town.

Tennant Creek is located on the Stuart Highway, the arterial road that runs from Adelaide to Darwin following the old telegraph line, with well-known tourist attractions including Karlu Karlu (Devils Marbles), Kunjarra (The Pebbles), Mary Ann Dam and Battery Hill Mining Centre.

Climate and Geography

The region has a hot semi-arid climate, with hot and dry summers (daytime temperatures often exceeding 40°C). Winters are milder but still warm during the day, with cooler nights. Of the relatively low average annual rainfall, 87% occurs from November to March.

There is significant geographical variation across the region. The Barkly tableland, much of which is black soils plains, is a semi-arid savanna with Mitchell grass the dominant species. Warumungu lands covers three or four different kinds of country, from mangkurru (plains), to wangarri (hills) and purnukurr (swamp country).

Population and *Amenities*

The 2021 census records the Barkly region’s total population as 5,287, with 62.5% Indigenous. Tennant Creek’s population numbers 3,080, with 55.4%, Indigenous.

Amenities, beyond basic supplies and services, are limited across remote communities in the Barkly Region. Members of community travel to Tennant Creek or other centres for most services. As the main town on the Stuart Highway connecting Alice Springs and Darwin, Tennant Creek has good amenities for locals and visitors including hotels, motels, and caravan parks; a few restaurants and cafes: a supermarket and convenience store. There are government services and a regional hospital and specialist clinics (including dialysis unit), family centre; primary and secondary school; post office, bank and retail stores, plus a petrol station and mechanics. There is a Visitor Information Centre, public library, sports fields, swimming pool, together with police, fire, and ambulance services.

Above: The Battery Hill Gold Mining & Heritage Centre

Right: Tennant Creek from the air looking south
https://www.australias.guide/nt/location/tennant-creek/

TENNANT CREEK, BARKLY REGION

Recent history

Tennant Creek has a strong Indigenous culture and a settler gold mining and pastoral history. European exploration and settlement began in the late 19th century after John McDouall Stuart passed through the region during his journey to cross the Australian continent in 1860. His route created a corridor for the white settler through the centre of the continent that the Explorer's Way and Ghan train now travel. Stuart named Tennant Creek after his financier John Tennant, and a repeater station for the Overland Telegraph Line was established in the 1870s that still stands today – one of the four remaining stations in the country. By the 1890's about 100 Aboriginal people were living at the station and it was named an Aboriginal Reserve.

The station remained isolated until gold was discovered in the area in the 1930s, opening the rich Tennant gold field that marked the start of Australia's last great Gold Rush prompting a rapid population growth of miners and settlers. During World War II, the Australian Army set up a hospital camp nearby and the RAAF utilised the airfield as an emergency landing ground. The town continued to grow as an important transportation hub and service centre for the mining industry. "Battery Hill" which overlooks the town of Tennant Creek is the site of one of the last two operating ten-head stamp batteries, a government-owned ore crushing machine. It is now a tourist attraction.

This colonial history is marked in the town, with statues, monuments and the built legacies now turned to tourist attractions. The stories of the Warumungu people and the other Indigenous groups for whom it is now home - the Warlpiri, Alyawarr, Kaytetye Kaiditch, Luritja and Wambaya – are finally gaining due prominence with the Nyinkka Nyunyu Art and Cultural Centre and other initiatives. To understand Tennant Creek's wrestle with its' colonial heritage see "Uncomfortable Truths From A Town To A Nation" by Dean Ashenden[1].

Julalikari Arts was established in 1994 in what was colloquially called the "Pink Palace" – a name derived from its pink painted concrete block construction. The Pink Palace was originally built as a hostel for stockmen and their families, by Mary Ward in the early 1970's and became Mulga town camp. She bequeathed the building to the community and a group of women set up the Julalikari Council CDEP Women's Art and Craft Centre. They placed a strong emphasis on training, employment, governance, children's welfare, arts skills, administrative skills and business practice. It was a meeting place for Aboriginal women to gather and paint traditional and contemporary artwork. A child-care centre was also established as part of the precinct.

Tennant Creek now has Nyinkka Nyunyu Art and Cultural Centre, Barkly Regional Arts which has studios in Wutunugurra (Epenarra), Owairtilla (Canteen Creek), Kulumindini (Elliott), and Mungkarta (McLaren Creek). Arlpwe Art Centre, on Kaytetye Country is in Ali Curung, 100km south of Tennant Creek.

1. https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/uncomfortable-truths-from-a-town-to-a-nation Accessed 20 September 2023

Airport

Darwin

Alice Springs

- Arts and Cultural Centres
- Accommodation
- Commercial
- Public services
- Town Camps

→ Main Road in and out

Locations

The Stuart Highway connects Darwin to Alice Springs and on to Adelaide in South Australia and is the main artery around which Tennant Creek is built. Traffic is slowed as it travels through the centre of town with the street lined with businesses and local services. A few motels sit along or close to this route, with camping / caravan parks further out. There are some light industrial spaces and medical facilities to the west of the highway and to the east, the main residential area, with schools and council chambers and facilities to the north. The town camps sit on the edges. There are significant cultural sites all around.

Nyinkka Nyunyu Arts Centre (1) is located at the southern end of Tennant Creek on the Stuart Highway (the main town activity is a little further north). The building is set back from the road and is fenced at the front, with a large sign standing above it. Due to its location, a little outside the main strip of shops and businesses, there is little pedestrian traffic. The site can also be accessed from a rear road which is the entrance used by the local community to the main building and for those in the know visiting the café.

Barkly Regional Arts (2) occupies a council building on the southeast edge of town which makes it feel peripheral to the activities of the town and is deemed to be affecting visitation. This may also be a result of limited signage from the main street and its wider presence within the publicity for the town and the local area. Looking at the Tennant Creek Streetscape Masterplan (May 2020), by Bennet Design and Mode, I noted that Barkly Regional Arts did not feature as one of the sites within the wayfinding destinations, other than the Desert Harmony Festival as a cultural initiative, although they were seen as ‘Key Influencers’ and asked to contribute to the report.

NYINKKA NYUNYU ART AND CULTURAL CENTRE
TENNANT CREEK

This is a region where many dreamings criss-cross the country, one of the important ones is the Jalawarla (black nose python) and our people had many big ceremonies for this one. There are the two butterfly sisters, the two bush coconut women (the Kantaji women's) and the flying fox man (pitangu) the group of dancing women, the moon man who was chasing them.

Our precinct is on the site of the Nyinkka. The crow was in love with Nyinkka and it is a torrid love story but it is here that she emerged and here her spirit returned and is there for eternity.

- Nyinkka Nyunyu Art and Cultural Centre website

NYINKKA NYUNYU ART AND CULTURAL CENTRE

I stayed in Tennant Creek from 5 – 7 June 2022, visiting Nyinkka Nyunyu Art and Cultural Centre twice, staying a half day on one occasion and a couple of hours on the other. The key community members and artists, plus the manager were away at the time but I was able to speak to a relatively new staff member, who had grown up in Tennant Creek and cafe staff. I had extensive conversations with both the project leads from Susan Dugdale Architects and Freeman Ryan Designs prior to visiting about the plans and impressive design consultation process for the new works and upgrades.

In 1995 the Warumungu Community initiated the development of the Nyinkka Nyunyu Art and Cultural Centre (NNACC), which opened in 2003 and is owned and run by the Julalikari Council Aboriginal Corporation. It is located on a sacred site and home of the powerful ancestral being Nyinkka (the spikey tailed goanna) and Wirnkarra (dreaming). The primary ambition of the Community was to protect the sacred site, recognise Warumungu ownership and custodianship of the land and to tell their story. They also wanted to create a place to share knowledge between Elders and the young; to create employment for Community; and to educate visitors.

Nyinkka Nyunyu ACC is a place for the Warumungu to tell their stories and practice Culture. The sacred rocks where the Nyinkka resides, lies at the heart of the precinct, that includes mens' and womens' dance circles, plus fire pits for cooking and smoking ceremonies. The Cultural Centre hosts a permanent exhibition that presents the Warumungu view of the local history, knowledge of Country and Culture. The interpretive display that includes photographs, oral stories, and artefacts is presented in four key themes that resulted from extensive consultation with the Traditional Owners. These are bush tucker and resources, Country, Language, History and Punttu (or family). There are also temporary art exhibitions and a retail space that sit alongside studios and administration spaces for Community. The Nyinkka Nyunyu Art and Cultural Centre hosts major cultural events as well as being open year-round, with cultural tours of the site also on offer.

Connected to the NCCAA are 'The Tennant Creek Brio' who featured in the 22nd Biennale of Sydney (2020). They were founded out of the Tennant Creek Men's art program started in 2016 as an art therapy/outreach program set up by Anyinginyi Health Aboriginal Corp. The group, a mix of fringe dwellers and cultural leaders have continued to work together forming the unique and cutting-edge artists collective as well as developing their individual works. As the website states: "Their work pushes conventions, drawing on imagery and traditions from the Wirnkarra (Dreaming), the Old Testament and mythic iconography from around the world. Their action paintings and performance represent the enthusiasm and dedication of the collective as they continue to develop a cathartic visual language fuelled by the complexities of life in Tennant Creek".

For a detailed insight into the Nyinkka Nyunyu Art and Cultural Centre see: Kim Christen's article *Following the Nyinkka: Relations of Respect and Obligations to Act in the Collaborative Work of Aboriginal Cultural Centers*. Museum Anthropology, September 2007, Vol 30, No. 2, 101-124.

Opening times

Tuesday — Friday: 9am – 3:30pm (café 7am – 2pm)
Saturday: 10am – 2pm (café 8am – 2pm)

Left: From the centre of the site, looking towards the main building, its curved form is evident. The museum and gallery on the left wrap into the entrance court at the centre.

Below: Standing alongside the museum looking back towards the retail space and the site entrance in the distance.

ARCHITECTURE

The Nyinkka Nyunyu Art and Cultural Centre was designed by Tangentyere Design, completed in 2003. The buildings are placed carefully in the landscape and paths suggest a journey through the site from the entrance, passing the Cultural Centre, moving across a dry creek, then alongside the café to the sacred site and performance spaces.

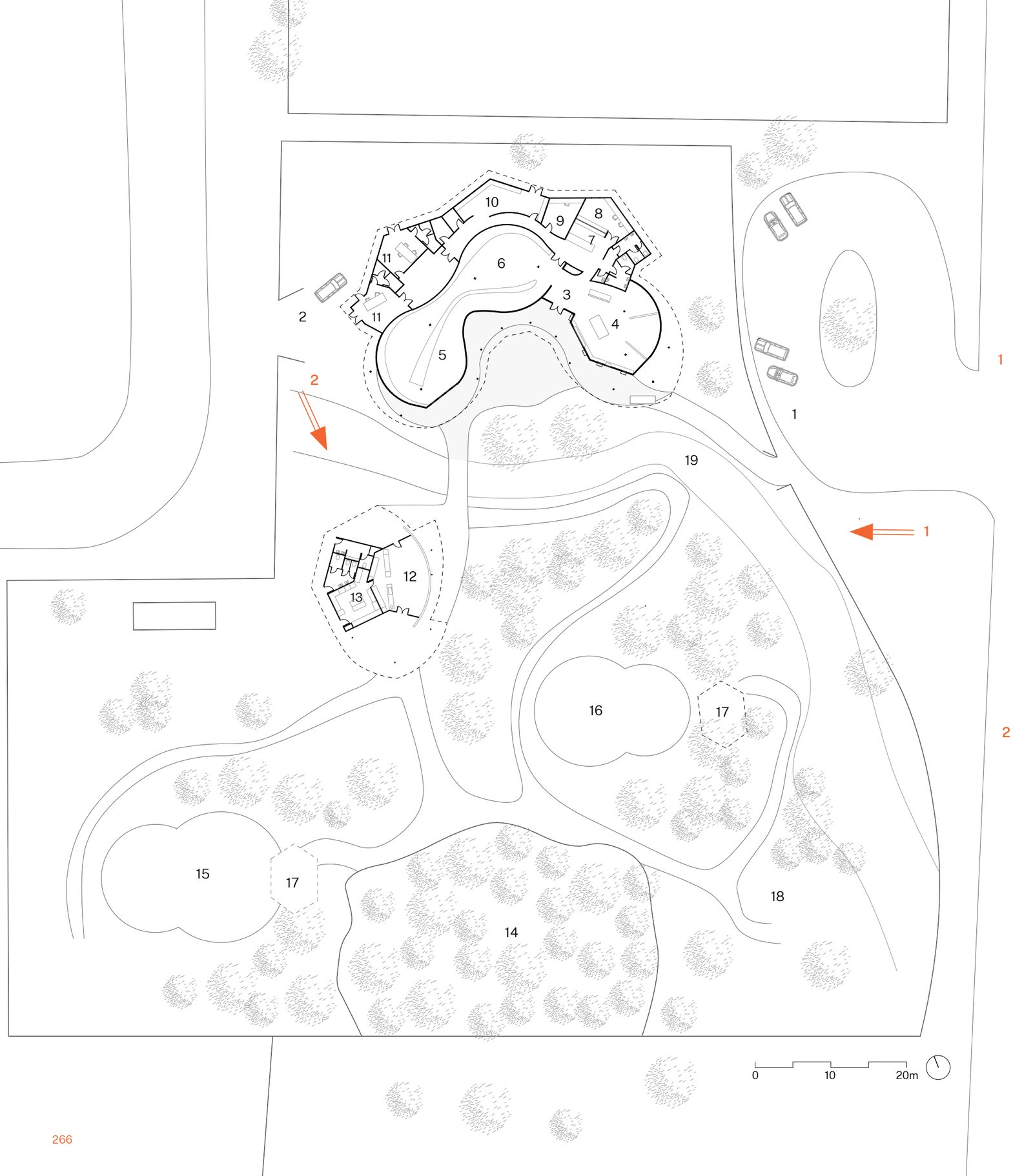
At the request of the Warumungu, the main building form is an abstraction of the Nyinkka, the spiky tailed goanna. It contains a museum and exhibition space; retail; offices and spaces for the community. The building takes on a radial shape with the body and rounded form wrapping around a welcoming entrance courtyard for visitors. To the north side, the building in plan has a jaggered form housing the studio spaces and amenities for the community. The roof follows the radial shape with angled planes that lift to offer generous ceiling heights internally and at a couple of key places, high windows bring in light and offer views of the sky. The roof extends to form a surrounding canopy that lifts towards the site entrance. The café building, following a similar architectural language was added in 2004. The building façade is a combination of pressed earth bricks, corrugated metal, and in one place metal louvres, all running in horizontal bands.

Mparntwe / Alice Springs-based architects, Tangentyere Design worked alongside landscape architect Catherine Pirrie and ethnobotanist Fiona Walsh. The interpretative display design and production management was by X Squared Design. The building was constructed using pressed earth bricks manufactured by local Indigenous people through Julalikari's Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) and was funded with NT Art trail money for infrastructure.

The building had some repair work done in 2019 but a major refurbishment and the construction of an additional building is imminent.

Procurement and design process

The project had exceptional community engagement, first started by Elizabeth Tregenza in the 1990s. She developed trust and relationships with Warumunga Elders to established the early vision and purpose for the centre. Tangentyere Design (Sue Dugdale) was brought on to develop the physical layout for the site and to design the buildings. Andrew Broffman and Steven Lumb of Tangentyere Design reiterated the ongoing consultation process, involving more than 80 Warumungu Traditional Owners, establishing Warumungu approval of developments, maximising employment and training opportunities and reinforced Warumungu ownership of the project. They were involved in the planning and approvals process during the development of the design for the Stage 1 and Stage 2 buildings as well as the development of the exhibition display and landscaping.



1. Visitor car park
2. Community and staff car park
3. Entry foyer and visitor information
4. Retail space
5. Museum
6. Gallery
7. Packing area
8. Manager's office
9. Digital archive
10. Administration
11. Workshop / studio spaces
12. Café and seating
13. Café commercial kitchen
14. Nyinkka Sacred Site
15. Women's dance ground
16. Men's dance ground
17. Dance preparation structure
18. Cooking fire and bough shed
19. Bush garden and seasonal waterway

Design strengths

There is a strong sense of connection to Country and Warumungu identity across the precinct, buildings, operations and programming. The building has architectural distinction and ambition with an appropriate scale to the sacred site. The building acts to draw and direct a visitor, taking an arced journey towards the sacred Nyinkka. The horizontal banding of the façade creates a connection to the ground plane and the horizon in the distance. Shadows cast by the roof edge onto the ground create a dynamic pattern, suggesting movement and liveliness.

The building is welcoming with its raised roof prow towards the entrance gate; windows on approach providing views into the gallery retail space; the “welcome” sign in multiple languages above the door and the information desk on arrival manned by a member of staff. There is a logic to the arrival with the interpretative exhibition to one side and the retail space to the other. The café and its outlook connect with the landscape to create a very pleasant environment to spend time. The building has held up well given the environment and climatic conditions.

Observations

There was a clear distinction between the spaces for Community, visitors and tourists, including separate entrances. During my visits there was an intermittent flow of what seemed to be out of town-visitors – some appearing to come primarily for the café and stopping in briefly (or not) to look at the exhibition or buy souvenirs. Locals and community also came and went, making various enquiries or actions.

The café was not especially busy although it had a few tourists along with some locals who gathered for lunch or stopped by to pick up a coffee. The café is operated by Julalikari who also run a local catering business. The manager said they anticipated the patronage numbers would increase when the café was relocated into a new building fronting the Stuart Highway making it more visible.

It was evident from conversations I had with a number of people in Tennant Creek, that the Cultural Centre provides an important place for the town to cohere during times like NAIDOC Week, where up to 1,000 people were reported to attend events. It also reportedly hosted the local school children.

Curatorial

The Nyinkka Nyunyu precinct integrates spatial storytelling and interpretation to convey the depth and richness of Warumungu knowledges and culture. Plans to update and enrich the interpretive presentations amplifying the voices and wisdom of the Warumungu look very positive. There may be opportunities to further connect the narratives within the exhibition across the site, to assure the journey for the visitor starts on entering the precinct. Tours by Warumungu guides, are no doubt the most enlightening way to experience Nyinkka Nyunyu.

Left: Looking towards the entrance gate, the projecting windows articulate the façade and provide views into the retail and gallery space. The prow of the roof, reaching towards the entrance is held up by elegant slanting columns.

Below: The roof of the café building, with its simple detailing, provides a canopy that protects from the sun and rain, and opens up towards the landscape and sacred site. I found it a very pleasant space to sit with a gentle breeze and lovely outlook.

The café building is divided with public spaces to the right and service spaces to the left. The roof is held up by a simple truss that makes it appear to float.

The entrance lobby is generous and spatially dynamic. The main interpretative exhibition sits to the left, the entrance to the Community spaces in the middle and the main information and sales desk leading into the retail space to the right.

The windows with their deep reveals frame the surrounding landscape and provide places for artworks and merchandise. The ceiling appears to extend seamlessly from inside to out due to good careful detailing. In the future upgrade plans this space will be used as an AV introduction to the permanent exhibition and the windows will be filled in.

The workshop spaces occupy five-sided rooms in the jagged plan offering two glass-louvre walls to the outside. The north facing glass allowed in a lot of direct sunlight light and the rooms were bright but hot on my visit.

Future needs and ambitions

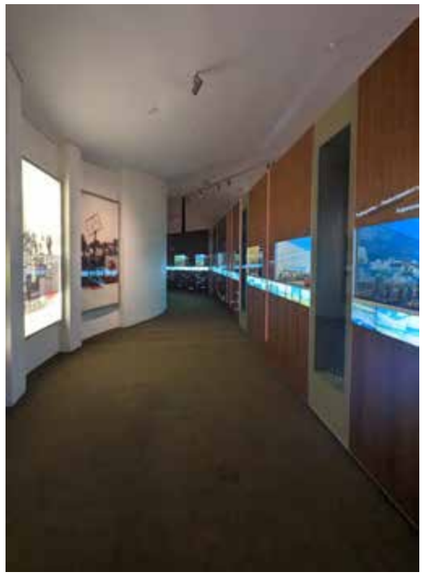
The NNACC has found that the current building has limitations for their future ambitions and are currently embarking on a building project designed by Mparntwe / Alice Springs architects, Susan Dugdale & Associates and Sydney-based Freeman Ryan Design. The brief was to double the footprint with more front and back of house spaces; to improve visitor interface; create a street presence for the building encouraging people to frequent the café; and to be able to house repatriated works. A strong collaborative process has taken place between the client and designers, particularly in developing the curatorial and interpretative aspects of the upgrade across the site.

On July 15, 2023, The National Indigenous Times, announced the release of the construction tender for the $10 million upgrade of the Nyinkka Nyunyu with stated features:

- a new exhibition space incorporating technology to capture visitors' imaginations, drawing them back to times when the nyinkka forged tracks through the landscape.
- truth telling exhibition from a Warumungu perspective of Australia's collective past, the history of contact and its impacts on Warumungu land, culture and people.
- museum and exhibition space that showcases important traditional cultural objects and practices, along with the dynamic contemporary art of Warumungu artists and the Barkly region.
- a new café and art gallery retail space featuring a story corridor that leads visitors onto the site.
- commercial kitchen, flexible spaces for meetings and events, and outdoor sitting decks with views across the site in the cultural centre.
- new outside loop path, walkways, and a viewing platform for the sacred site supported by cultural interpretation signage in Warumungu and English.
- landscaped design featuring local native plants including bush foods; and performance areas for arts and cultural performances, festivals and events.

The project is led by the NNACC steering committee and Traditional Owners in consultation with the Julalikari Council Aboriginal Corporation Board, staff and stakeholders.

Above: Current view from gate looking left towards the men's performance space. The new building is proposed to sit to the left with a café and gallery to the street. There will also be a landscape upgrade to the site and the current permanent exhibition (right) will be redone and updated.



Visualisation of the proposed new entrance building onto the Stuart Highway to house a café, welcome desk and gallery by Susan Dugdale Architects. Dugdale developed the original concept designs for the NNACC while working at Tangentyere Design. The new building follows the same architectural language to create a coherent precinct.

BARKLY REGIONAL ARTS
TENNANT CREEK

BARKLY REGIONAL ARTS

I visited Barkly Regional Arts Tennant Creek hub for a day as artists painted, staff worked, and visitors came and went. I spent time talking to both the Operations and Artistic Directors who have since left.

I spent a further day in the small remote community of Wutunugurra, driving the 3 hours with the artistic director. On arrival we did a lap of the community getting the word out that we had arrived ready for a busy day and collecting artists as we went. They were preparing for an exhibition at Coconut Studios in Darwin. There was excited artist chat about the upcoming trip and an Instagram post was created that turned a featured painting 3D. At the same time an artist-educator led a workshop to paint flattened metal tins collected around the community. A few weeks later I had the pleasure of lending a hand with the exhibition install in Darwin and attending the opening with the artists who had travelled for the occasion.

Barkly Regional Arts (BRA) was founded in 1996 as a networking and resource organisation for the communities comprising the sixteen language groups of the Barkly Region. From their Tennant Creek hub, the organisation does outreach to remote communities producing art, music and events that tell the stories of the Barkly. Their flagship event is the Desert Harmony Festival, held in Tennant Creek in July each year.

The Artists of the Barkly collective is a sub-set of the main organisation and represents over fifty Aboriginal artists living in five remote communities across the region: Tennant Creek, Wutunugurra (Epenarra), Owairtilla (Canteen Creek), Kulumindini (Elliott), and Mungkarta (McLaren Creek) with art centres of various scales in each.

The Artists of the Barkly use contemporary mediums to celebrate and preserve ancient cultures and languages. They primarily produce acrylic paintings on canvas, plus some pottery and weaving. The breadth and variety of work reflects the region's cultural diversity. They also initiated and oversaw some street art projects in Tennant Creek.

Management structure and funding

BRA is overseen by a board made up of Indigenous and non-Indigenous members. At the time of visiting, they had an Operations Director who oversaw a staff of 15 across visual arts, music, events and operations, arts workers, and community liaison officers. Responsible for The Artists of Barkly, there was an Artistic Director, Outreach Coordinator, Studio facilitator and arts workers – one in Kulumindini and Owairtilla, and two in Wutunugurra. The organisational structure has subsequently been slightly amended.

BRA receives funding from four National and State Government bodies that allows for a strong operational and staffing team, ongoing artist development and programming.

Key priorities

To collaborate with remote Indigenous communities to foster access (resource - materials, equipment and safe, comfortable space), development (career-long for artists) and recognition of arts in the Barkly (providing local, national and international platforms).

While sales are mostly through art fairs, exhibitions, and online, they do welcome and encourage visitors to their Tennant Creek Studio.

Opening times

Tennant Creek studio is open to visitors,
Monday – Friday: 8.30 am – 4.30 pm
Weekends: by appointment

The studios at the outstations are not open to the public and have different open hours for artists dependent on resources.

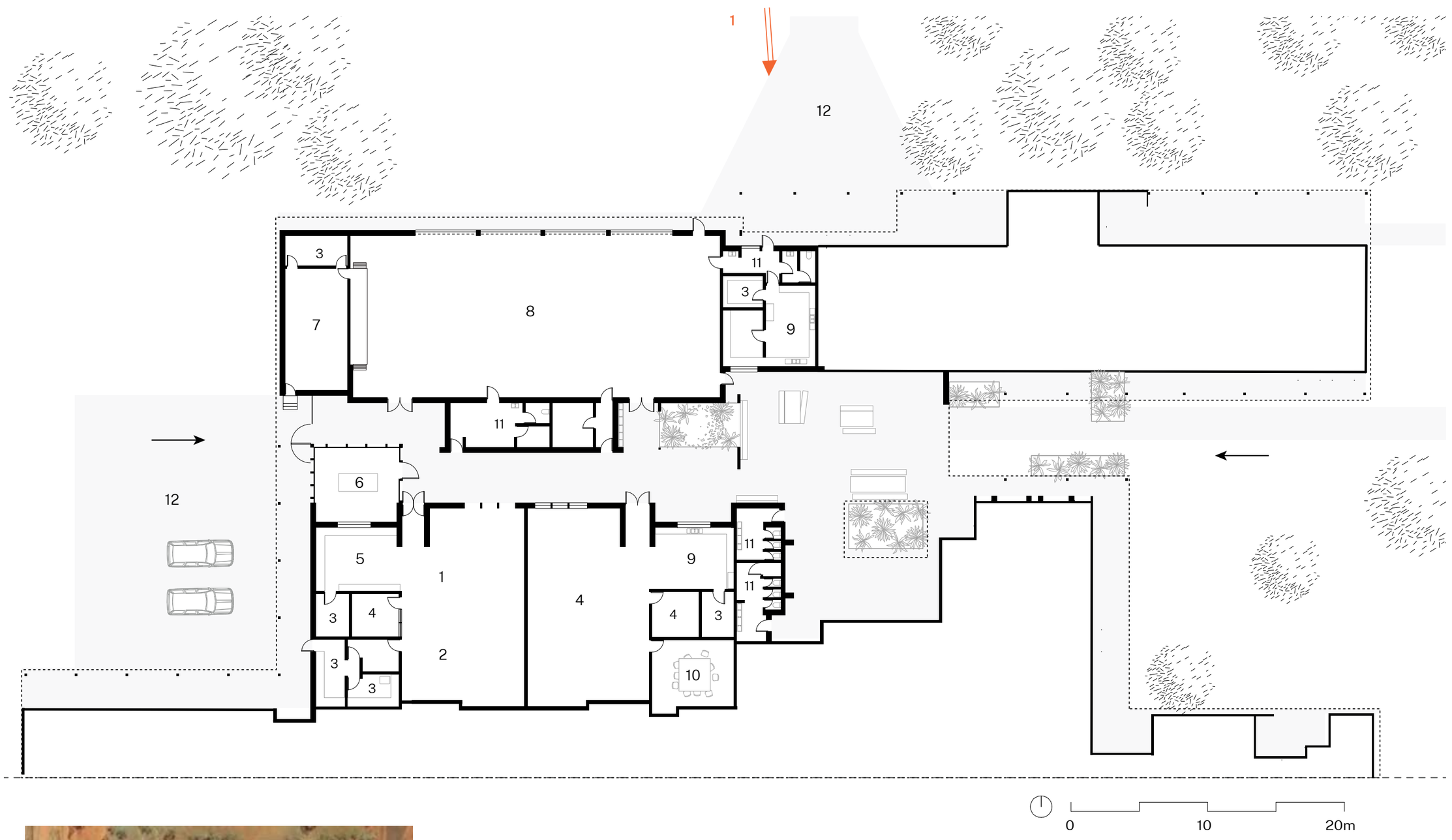
Left: The main entrance to the Karguru Centre that houses various entities including the Department of Education, Charles Darwin University Office and Batchelor Institute. Barkly Regional Arts is located in a series of spaces towards the back of the complex, accessed via a central semi-outdoor passage. The artist studio and gallery is located in a former classroom (below).

ARCHITECTURE

Barkly Regional Arts rents a series of spaces towards the rear of the former Karguru Primary School which was transferred to a TAFE facility in 1992 and is now operated by the Department of Education. Other tenants in the complex include Barkly Education, Charles Darwin University Office, Batchelor Institute and Top End Group Training. The building, which was built and opened in 1976, appears to be a standard Government Arid Area school.

Barkly Regional Arts occupies about a quarter of the whole complex, in spaces located in two wings of the building with a central semi-outdoor spine between. To one side sits the art studio and gallery in one space and the BRA offices in another. They are both within low-ceilinged spaces with a window into the semi-enclosed corridor with no direct daylight. The ceiling is a novel design that distributes light evenly across the space. There is an art prep room and workshop that were facilities formerly used by Bachelor College. To the other side of the corridor is the music and events spaces – within a larger shed space that looks like it may have been the sports and assembly hall. At one end they have created a recording studio, in what looks like the backstage area. The hall has a sawtooth roof that allows light in and roller shutters that open out to a large yard which is where they host the Desert Harmony Festival.

The street frontage to the complex has an institutional appearance (above) and the entrance to Barkly Regional Arts (right) – both offices and gallery – is through a semi-enclosed passage. Because of the direction I drove to approach the site, I took an earlier turnoff following a sign that led me around the back of the building to a carpark that gave more direct access to Barkly Arts.



1. Artist studio
2. Gallery and retail
3. Storage
4. Offices
5. Art prep room
6. Workshop
7. Recording studio
8. Event space
9. Catering kitchen
10. Meeting room
11. Bathrooms
12. Carparks

1

#6

The former sports assembly hall provides a large versatile space for BRA, primarily utilised by the music and events team. It stores music equipment and gear for camping and going bush. With its high ceiling, steel trusses and sawtooth roof letting light in, it was a pleasant space to be in. The roller shutter doors running the length of the space allow vehicle and loading access plus open to the outdoor space that hosts the Desert Harmony Festival.

Design

The precinct has some nice design elements, with good semi-enclosed passages and courtyards that would be further enhanced if they were better landscaped and activated. The presence of both arts and music venues and facilities alongside one another felt like it had programming potential especially for the young.

The studio, display and administration spaces are adequate while not inspiring. Primary limitations are no access to natural daylight in the studio, gallery or offices. The slatted ceiling in the studio / exhibition space is inventive and provides very good even lighting across the space, although it is a little low.

Architecturally the most interesting space is the sports / assembly hall which currently houses the event and music storage with the large roller doors which can be opened for ease for deliveries.

Observations

Artists come in daily to work in the studio with a small number of visitors dropping in. Artists seemed focused – sitting on the ground or at the table working – and visitors could speak to them easily if they wished. The spaces have an institutional-feel that may be offputting to artists. The “Pink Palace” has a strong legacy in the community and is what people associate as the art centre. Artists refer to the Pink Palace when they reflect on their creative practice. Although I didn’t visit the Pink Palace, the Town Camp location would make it feel and operate very differently from the current site. For the artists Karguru Centre has strong associations to its former use as many attended the Primary School or their children did.

The Karguru Centre was very quiet when I was there on a Monday – the main activity and people I saw moving about were from Barkly Regional Arts. I imagined the potential to create a stronger and unique arts precinct in the existing premises with local support. I wondered if taking a creative approach might work – making it a project for artists or youth to build/ make interventions. Currently, as tenants BRA are limited with what they can do including with things such as signage.

Future ambitions

The location of the arts centre has been a point of discussion amongst the board and staff, with a desire to relocate to the main street, either adjacent to Nyinkka Nyunyu or at the north end of town. Visual artists from both Tennant Creek and other studios have reportedly expressed a keen desire for BRA to have a Main Street space because it increases their visibility (including local sales) and makes it more accessible for community members.

There is a change in floor surface that helps to define the studio and gallery, that is usefully blurred by artists sitting on round floor mats to create a hybrid space. The innovative ceiling lighting provides even illumination throughout the space.

WUTUNUGURRA, (EPENARRA)

Wutunugurra is the traditional land of the Alyawarr people. It is located southeast of Tennant Creek, on the western side of the Frew River on a Community Living Area within the Epenarra pastoral station. An art centre was established there c. 2008 in a caravan known as the “silver bullet”, it then moved to a demountable originally set up by World Vision Australia. An extension was built onto the demountable which opened in 2021. The demountable has two rooms, one with a kitchenette the other a bathroom, and is raised on brick piers above the ground. A simple concrete block space is attached. An internal disabled ramp allows access to the bathroom. There is no roof overhang to speak of and windows are standard issue with security grills without any shading. A paint sink is located outside.

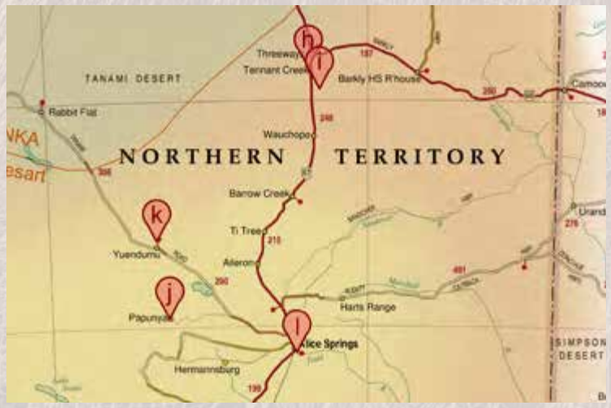
The size of the structure is adequate and the painting of one wall of the demountable by the artists makes the interior bright and more pleasant. Airconditioning made the space comfortable to work in.

The worn dirt track shows the path used by the community to the reach the general store which is nearby. While I was there many people passed by.

Moveable tables and mats provide spaces to work in the open space, although there is no ability for gender segregation or to work under cover outside. The accessible ramp runs the length of the space (right of interior photograph) leading to the toilet through the orange door. Domestic sliding doors open into the dirt and prove hard to roll.

CENTRAL DESERT

J. PAPUNYA TJUPI, PAPUNYA
K. WARLUKURLANGU ARTISTS, YUENDUMU
L. TANGENTYERE ARTISTS, MPARNTWE, ALICE SPRINGS



PAPUNYA TJUPI ARTS

PAPUNYA

PAPUNYA

I sat in the back of an NT Music 'troopie" appreciating the expertise with which the driver navigated the unsealed road we were travelling. She hit the right speed over the patches of corrugation caused by rain over the wet season and picked a line that avoided the diverts, making the drive as smooth as it could be. The MacDonald Ranges were off to our left for most of the journey. It was the 23 September 2022 and I was travelling from Mparntwe / Alice Springs to help at the Bush Bands Homegrown event before staying on to spend a few days at Papunya Tjupi art centre.

We arrived at the Papunya store and it was a hive of activity from which it felt all things spun off. Outside community sat or milled around – Elders, children and dogs scurrying, full cars and trucks pulled up, often with music pumping, greetings and news being shared. Inside shopping trolleys were filled with food for households; arms were laden with drinks or ice-creams to ease the days heat; hot lunch served in take away containers from the counter; transactions were done – later I would get my donga key here as they ran the accommodation.

Most of the people the team were looking for were there already or soon arrived. There was much chatter about the weekend of music that lay ahead and plans were being made for the set up. This was the home of the Warumpi Band whose songs 'Blackfella/ Whitefella" and 'My Island Home" had filled the airways of the 1980's and 90's, and who are the subject of a film and now theatre production. Sammy Butcher, the main surviving member of the band, was a strong presence along with the next generation of musical talent.

Our accommodation was a series of portacabins with bedrooms and bathrooms arranged around an open communal space all covered by a large shading roof. While we made dinner the sound of singing from the Lutheran church group was clearly audible. After dark we lent a hand to set up sound equipment on the basketball court for a series of gigs by local bands. One of Sammy's grandchildren who was about 9 or 10 years old, played at the drum-kit during sound check as though he had been born with the sticks in his hand. News of the music starting, seemed to spread and people and cars emerged out of the darkness of the desert. Lying in a swag on the floor I could hear the music playing until almost dawn-break.

The next day the team was out early to set up for Bush Bands, trying to get as much done before the heat of the day made action and outside work gruelling. The Warumpi stage built a few years ago with its large mural sits adjacent to the oval and basketball court. The musicians – some old legends, others, the new stars – came for sound checks and I got a preview of what was to come later that night. Mid-afternoon I escaped the heat and joined a gathering of all ages to watch Geelong play the Sydney Swans in the AFL Grand Final on a large TV in the Maku Shed, a community space.

From about 6pm the crowds started to arrive, slowly at first and then in numbers, many driving from communities across the Western Desert. A roster of bands would play until midnight, ranging from rock music to reggae that got the young crowd twerking with impressive vigour. The energy and enthusiasm was infectious and would remain in the air for many days.

PAPUNYA

Papunya, known locally as Warumpi, is now home mainly to Luritja and Pintubi speakers along with Warlpiri, Arrernte, Anmatyerr and Kukatja. Warumpi derives from the Luritja word for a “honey-ant dreaming site”, Warumpinya, which lies nearby. Papunya sits on the eastern fringe of the Tanami Desert, 250km northwest of Alice Springs/Mparntwe. It is accessed via either the Larapinta and Namatjira Drive Tourist Route or via the Tanami Road. Both routes involve a sealed road for a portion, and then a 1-1.5-hour drive on an unsealed road.

Climate and Geography

Located in almost the geographical centre of the country, Papunya has a semi-arid climate with a low average rainfall and high summer temperatures and prone to drought. In the summer wet season, temperatures can exceed 40°C with milder winters of temperatures in the 20°C’s during the day and dropping below 10°C at night. The wet season can have high rainfall and thunderstorms. With the arid and semi-arid landscape, the terrain includes vast stretches of red desert, rocky outcrops, and sparse vegetation.

Population and Amenities

The government settlement once reportedly had over 1800 Western Desert inhabitants, the 2021 census records Papunya’s total population as 542, with 95% Indigenous. The community now has a school, general store, health clinic (and dialysis unit), recreation hall, sports facilities and oval.

Recent History

Pintupi and Luritja people were forced off their traditional land in the 1930s and moved into Lutheran settlements at Hermannsburg (Ntaria) and Haasts Bluff, with government ration depots. As poor water supply threatened Haasts Bluff, a bore was drilled at Papunya in 1959 and many of the residents were moved. With the controversial policy of assimilation in place, Papunya had amongst other things a communal dining room to teach ‘acceptable eating habits’ and kitchen and related hygiene duties. It also had an extensive citrus garden.

Seen from the air, Papunya’s looks like a traditional sand drawing, the town laid out in the form of the Honey Ant ceremonial ground. The main community and administration buildings are grouped in the centre, with housing located in surrounding semi-circular arrangements. The plan was conceived and executed by community during a rarer period of self-determination, along with major buildings on a scale not seen in other communities of the time.

Capturing the distinctive landscape, Albert Namatjira painted his last works at and around Papunya before his death in 1959. The presence of the famous artist encouraged others and by 1971 there were many of the now famous artists working – Kaapa Tjampitjinpa; Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri; Mick Namarari Tjapaltjarri; Turkey Toslon Tjupurrula; Uta Uta Tjangala; Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri; Billy Stockman Tjapaltjarri; Long Jack Phillipus Tjakamarra; Johnny Wangkula Tjupurrula. With the support of Geoffrey Barden, who introduced ‘Western art materials’, the artists, Elders from the various language groups, and another 20 or so who didn’t become famous, established Papunya Tula Artists. It was the first Aboriginal-owned collective dedicated to the production of works for a commercial market and launched the now renowned Western Desert Art Movement. As Vivien Johnson says in her book *Streets of Papunya*, the artists fuse elements of geography (dreaming sites); history (events in the Ancestral past) and ceremony (ritual enactments of events) into one visual image. The distinctive brilliance of the paintings firmly asserted Aboriginal art’s place in contemporary art.

In 1981 there was an exodus of the Pintupi west to their homelands, first to Kintore (Walungurru) and later farther west at Kiwirrkura, where the artists and the company continue to flourish. After Papunya Tula had officially departed in the early 90’s, Warumpi Arts was established in Alice Springs by the Papunya Community Council in 1994. It represented artists from the community who continued to paint, including women, who were coming to the fore, but it closed in 2004. When the MacDonnell Shire took over administration of the town (which coincided with the NT ‘intervention’) in 2007, the street names of Papunya were changed to those of the famous artists.

PAPUNYA TJUPI

When I arrived at Papunya Tjupi first thing on Monday morning, I discovered that the art centre had to close unexpectedly for the day. I had a quick look around then sat at the store and had a yarn with some locals about the impromptu gigs I had heard playing the night before. I spent the afternoon in my donga reading Vivien Johnson's Streets of Papunya, *the important legacy of this place and people coming alive. Camp dogs and the occasional person wandered through the otherwise empty accommodation cluster that sat to the edge of town and felt eerily isolated and foreign for someone not used to desert communities.*

The next morning I walked to a small hill I was told I was allowed to visit. I had a view back over the township and the MacDonald Ranges in the distance gaining a perspective on this vast landscape. The following day the artists returned and I saw the art centre in action. I witnessed a gathering of Elders and artists coming together to discuss plans and what they wanted to do. Agreements were reached and the mood lifted, laughing returning.

In October 2005 the Papunya artists approached Professor Vivien Johnson who had long been involved with the community and had a post at the College of Fine Arts (COFA), University of NSW, to help them establish a community-based art centre in Papunya. 25 artists signed the paperwork to become the founding directors of the company which was formally established in 2007. The name was suggested by Sammy Butcher (of Warumpi Band fame) and was also the name of his current band. With the help of UNSW and sales from exhibitions, they initially rented various Department of Education houses as a space to gather and work and for art centre managers to live. The Papunya Council then bequeathed the Old Garage which became the art centres' home.

The artists have established their own identity based on the legacy of their famous forefathers. As Papunya Tjupi states, the art centre is not only about producing art – protected from commercial exploitation – and having a building. Central to Papunya Tjupi is the understanding that painting is an important part of Culture and connection to Country, and that the teaching and passing of knowledge is what keeps the community's future strong.

For further details of the history of Papunya, the Western Desert art movement and the establishment of Papunya Tjupi see Vivien Johnson's book *Streets of Papunya: The reinvention of Papunya painting*, 2016

Art Style and Practices

Papunya Tjupi currently consists of 150 artists from Papunya and surrounding outstations, who are renowned for their strong line-work and for continuously developing new ways to tell the old stories. They produce acrylic paintings on canvas, prints, punu (wood work), baskets and jewellery.

Opening to artists and visitors

Monday to Thursday: 9 am – 5 pm
Fridays and Weekends: by appointment

Location

Behind store, with the school and church to one side and the medical centre and council offices to the other. From what I witnessed there was not a lot of people passing by the front due to its positioning.

- Papunya Tjupi
- Stores / Petrol station
- Council services
- School
- Sports and Recreation
- Police station
- Accommodation


GALLERY

Left: The large open studio workshop, with internal windows to the office and the art preparation space. The kitchenette sits to the right. Furniture can be arranged as desired.

Below: View of the front of the building, with the steel artist door to the left and visitor entrance to the far right near the tree. Artists sit beneath the shade structures and paint when the weather allows.

ARCHITECTURE

In 2009 Papunya Tjupi moved into the former community garage and workshop. It was one of the original concrete block buildings constructed in 1958/59 by an Indigenous and non-Indigenous workforce that included some of the fathers of the Papunya Tjupi artists and the original Papunya Tula art movement. It first operated as the community store then as a garage but in recent years had become a 'snake infested asbestos ruin' as Vivien Johnson said in her book *Streets of Papunya*. She reports it was without natural light, air conditioning, running water, power, toilets and had not been painted since it was first built. Initially the art centre could only afford to paint inside, and pressure hose the grease off the floor. Over the following four or five years the building was renovated in stages as money became available, installing windows and skylights; inside and outside toilets; an office, gallery and workspace for stretching canvas; a kitchenette and internal fit outs of shelving and storage. Externally a covered verandah was added and a fence around the site.

The art centre site now comprises the main arts studio in the original building and to the rear, a stand-alone toilet block and a demountable housing the men's space with a covered verandah. A paved area with shade cloth above, located between the building and street provides a space for artists to work. Adjacent, is a place to sit beneath the eucalyptus trees. The building works have been achieved with funding from ABA and various other grants.

1. Main Studio
2. Art preparation room
3. Office
4. Retail gallery
5. Covered outdoor working space
6. Toilets
7. Men’s Shed
8. Shipping container storage

#2.
Art preparation room

7.
Men’s Shed

#4.
Retail gallery

Design observations

The large shed has been spatially divided with the gallery to one end and offices and art preparation room to the other. All have windows into the central working space maintaining visual connectivity. The central open-plan studio space feels relatively large and generous with good ceiling heights. It contains moveable furniture that can be reconfigured as needed. The shed aesthetic with exposed trusses is complemented with simple detailing around doors, storage units and the kitchenette. In keeping the fit-out and furniture primarily use black steel and black laminated plywood, that appears to function well. The gentle slope in the ceiling has been used to gain additional storage with two large racks attached above the windows on the taller wall. One holds boxes with art supplies, the other camping equipment for bush trips. Under one, is a rug with chairs, desk and a bookshelf, creating a mini-library and reference space.

There is a clear entrance marked for artists into the main studio space and one for visitors into the gallery. There are spaces to sit and work or commune in front of each. The gallery has a bathroom for visitors and a kitchenette which could be used to provide refreshments if desired. The gallery has white walls and a picture rail, down-lights, and a couple of spotlights.

Observations of operations

The building is airconditioned. The main central space has many activities happening in it simultaneously. Artists paint on the floor or at tables, with family and community also congregating or visiting. There was no music when I was visiting just a gentle hum of chatter. The kitchenette is well used with people coming and going to make coffee or prepare food throughout the day. Artworks are photographed against one of the blank walls.

The art preparation space was neat with racks for wooden frames and two tables for preparing the canvases. One had a roll of canvas attached on a raised bar to make it easy to stretch onto a frame. The other was used for priming the canvas. There was shelving against one wall with large pots of paint that were mixed into smaller pots, placed in baskets labelled for each artist, and available for them on shelves in the main studio.

Left: Artist entrance clearly marked by a sign on the front fence, with a similar one for visitors.

Below: Verandah to the Men's shed with ramp access. Paintings featured on a few of the buildings and car body parts in the art centre precinct.

Above and right: The main studio space is used for multiple activities including painting and artwork photography. Furniture and floor mats create zones of activity.

Far page above: The retail gallery has paintings hung on the wall and laid out on tables for visitors to go through. Supplies for packing and mounting are stored beneath. A visitor kitchenette is located to the back of the space.
Far page right: artists gather outside to discuss art centre business.

WARLUKURLANGU ARTISTS
YUENDUMU

YUENDUMU

I spent three days at Warlukurlangu from 29 May to 1 June 2023. One evening the assistant art manager took me for a walk through Yuendumu. She is a Warlpiri speaker having spent her early childhood in Nyrripi and had a good eye for architecture. Amongst the unforgivably inadequate housing there were a few ambitious buildings – some early innovative housing upgraded by Tangentyere Design (although now occupied by non-Indigenous workers); a swimming pool, youth centre and sports hall designed by Brendan Meney 2009 -14. It was a beautiful early evening and kids were playing basketball and running around eager to say hello and ask who we were. We walked over to the 'memory house" out of respect for teenager Kumanjayi Walker who was fatally shot by police in 2019. Standing beneath the majestic gum tree – ngaripi – outside his grandmothers house was a sobering reminder of the strength of the community in the face of grave injustices.

Yuendumu is home to the Warlpiri and located on the edge of the Tanami Desert 290km northwest from Alice Springs along the now sealed Tanami Highway. It is the largest community in Central Australia apart from Alice Springs. Most people are Warlpiri speakers, but there are also Anmatyerre, Luritja, Kukatja and Pintubi speakers. The Warlpiri are divided into eight skin groups. The Warlpiri call the area "Yurtumu", connected to "Yurntumulya', which means dreaming woman.

Climate and Geography

The landscape around the community of Yuendumu is covered with spinifex grassland, acacia shrubland, mulga and bloodwood eucalyptus on deep red desert earth. It has a semi-arid climate, with temperatures over 40°C in the summer months (December – February) which is also the time of rain. In winter (June – August) while days can be warmer, temperatures can drop below zero at night.

Population and *Amenities*

The population is 740 (including outstations) with 83.4% Indigenous, as recorded in the 2021 census. There are two community stores; a police station; a school - kindergarten to senior; Aged care facility; Purple House dialysis unit; three sports ovals, four basketball courts, a swimming pool and the Mt Theo Youth Centre.

Recent history

Cattle stations, then mines were established on the land of the Warlpiri in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. There was resistance by the Warlpiri, with conflict and reprisals that included the Coniston Massacre in 1928 that took place 70km east of where Yuendumu is located.

Yuendumu Native Settlement was established at Mount Doreen in 1946 as a government ration depot. A Baptist mission was established the following year and saw the construction of mission buildings, and an aerodrome. Early on traditional tribal feuds emerged between the 400 Warlpiri living in the settlement and a separate reserve [sic] was established at Hooker Creek. In 1978 control of Yuendumu and the reserve land was handed back to the Warlpiri.

In 1983 Paddy Japaljarri Stewart (who had been involved in painting the murals at the Papunya School in the 1970s) and Paddy Japaljarri Sims, were instrumental together with other senior men in the painting of renowned Yuendumu school doors, now in the South Australian Museum collection. The Elders created a set of 36 kuruwarri (ancestral designs) painted in acrylics on the doors to teach young Warlpiri their true Jukurrpa (Dreamings). For more details see *Behind the doors : an art history from Yuendumu* by Philip Jones, with Warlukurlangu Artists, South Australian Museum in association with Wakefield Press, 2014.

The Granites Mine Affected Area Aboriginal Corporation (GMAAAC) provides a significant income stream for community development programs – the funds (shared between nine Tanami communities) are to compensate for the social impacts of the Granites gold mines. A number of community initiatives have been established to support the health and social well-being of the inhabitants.

WARLUKURLANGU ARTISTS

Following the painting of the Yuendumu doors, Paddy Japaljarri Stewart and Paddy Japaljarri Sims with other senior leaders including Darby Jampinjnpa Ross, Jack Jakamarra Ross, Samson Japaljarri Martin and senior women including Uni Nampijinpa Martin, Dolly Nampijinpa Daniels, Rosie Nangala Fleming and Maggie Napangardi Watson founded the Warlukurlangu art centre in 1985. It was the first cooperative to involve both sexes and was incorporated in 1986.

Warlukurlangu means 'belonging to fire' in Warlpiri and is named after a fire dreaming site west of Yuendumu. From the outset cultural maintenance was the predominant driver for the art centre, whose leaders were also leaders of the men's and women's ceremonies, when there was still a very active ceremonial life in Yuendumu. Warlukurlangu Artists also supports artists from the neighbouring Warlpiri outstations of Yuelumu and Nyirripi. The latter has where a small art centre with staff accommodation.

The artists have become recognised for their bold colours with an unrestricted palette. A distinctive early feature was the use of traditional iconography.

The artists painted Jukurrpa (dreaming story), ensuring appropriate Warlpiri relationships of kirda (owners) and kurdugurlu (guardians) were followed and the images reflected the social and cultural obligations present in ceremonies and community life. The kurawarri, the iconographic elements of a painting that held the story, were painted first and scrutinized by others for their adherence to Jukurrpa. In 1989, international interest in both the Yuendumu community and Australian Aboriginal art exploded when six Yuendumu artists were invited to exhibit a large ground painting as part of the exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* at the Pompidou Centre in Paris.

Today the artists, over 600, produce work across a range of styles primarily using acrylic on canvas for a tourist market. A recent initiative has seen artists painting on cut-out metal dogs, kangaroos and other animals made in the Alice Springs prison.

Warlukurlangu provides artworks for fund-raising to projects such as the Yuendumu Community Swimming Pool, Kurdu Kurdukurlangu Childcare Centre and Shalom Gamaroda Scholarship Fund which supports Indigenous students studying for medical and health related degrees at University of NSW. Art-sales funds also support special projects to improve the health and well-being of the community.

Warlukurlangu established a widely respected dog health program in Yuendumu, initiated and run by the assistant manager Gloria Morales. They assure dogs, important to Aboriginal people, are fed, the sick or abandoned are cared for, and vets are brought to sterilise and treat them for diseases. The program extends to Nyirripi and Mt Allan.

Warlukurlangu undertook the restoration of the Yuendumu Men's Museum, located near the entrance to the town, that reopened in 2015. Initially envisioned as a social club the men decided that they needed a museum to store important objects and record ancient artworks from Jukurrpa sites. The building, completed in 1971 used stone quarried by local Warlpiri men from the hills above Yuendumu. The central space held ground mosaics with objects in cases and cupboards in two side spaces. Soon after opening, murals were painted around the walls by groups of Warlpiri men who were custodians for each Jukurrpa. The museum was looked after and managed by senior Warlpiri artist Darby Jampijinpa Ross until he retired in his 80's and objects were moved and the building fell into disrepair.

Art centre management

Warlukurlangu Artists Aboriginal Corporation is directed by an Executive Committee of men and women representing Yuendumu community's skin groups. There is a manager, two deputy managers, five staff, a rotation of volunteers and several arts workers. Warlukurlangu Artists is supported through the Indigenous Visual Arts Industry Support and currently has a turnover of c. $5 million through sales from galleries across the country, online and licensing agreements.

Key priorities

Maintaining Culture including organising bush trips to Country; making art; economic returns to the artists and community through art sales (including licensing) and other initiatives; enabling artists to travel within Australia and abroad to share their culture and experience new places.

On my evening walk I looked to the sky and saw the galahs on the overhead electricity wires and thought of the bright birds (often Budgerigar's) that I had seen Karen Napaljarri Barnes painting that day and smiled.

- Warlukurlangu Artists
- Store / Petrol station
- Council services / Administration / Health
- School
- Sports / Recreation and social clubs
- Police station
- Church

→ Main access road

Opening hours

Tuesday – Thursday: 9:30 am – 4 pm
Monday and Friday: Close to artists for processing and book-keeping. Visitors can email or call from the gates to be let in to see and purchase art work.
Weekends are by appointment

Location

One of the roads from the Tanami Highway passes the Yuendumu Men's Museum. Warlukurlangu Artists sits towards the edge of the town, but within close walking distance to one of the community stores and other amenities. It is well signposted from the Highway and can be found relatively easily. There is ample parking for community, visitors, including buses.

ARCHITECTURE

The art centre site includes a main building with outdoor covered working spaces with low walls towards the entrance. A storage shed sits behind and is connected to the main building by roofs that provide a sheltered place to work. There is volunteer and staff accommodation in two dongas and a caravan, arranged around a tree on an adjoining lot that has its own entrance gate from another road. The art centre site is fenced and spans a block with a gate to each street that, if opened, would allow travel through the site. Low curving walls define the entrance to the building and form part of the site landscaping.

The main art centre building opened in 2005 with subsequent additions made. The initial building converted an old brick house to a gallery, workshop and store. A concrete block extension was added for administration and preparation spaces, with covered verandahs to one side. As the production of the art centre increased a new gallery was added.

The previous gallery was converted to retail and packing space, and the kitchenette was expanded. Further covered spaces were added, the storage shed site acquired, and landscaping developed. The initial building was designed by The Centre for Appropriate Technology which was established in Alice Springs in 1980 to research, design, develop and teach appropriate technologies and deliver technical training to Indigenous people living in remote communities. The subsequent additions have been designed and constructed by Alice-Springs based builder, theatre designer (and writer) Michael Watts.

One of the art centre managers, who has been part of the briefing and design process for the building projects over the past 20 years, describes the building layout as a response to the production of artworks and the steps involved.

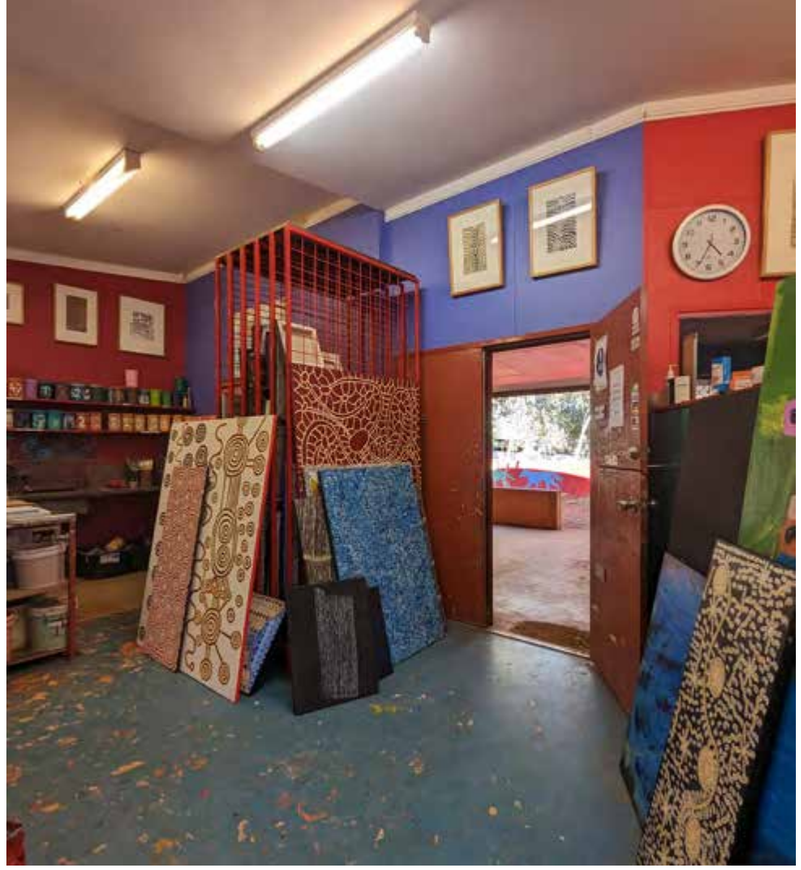
The art centre owns two further houses for staff a short distance away in the community – one which they funded and built themselves. They also built an art centre building in Nyirripi, that adjoins an existing house converted for occupation by a staff member running the art centre. The one room concrete block art centre building has one end enclosed in a steel cage to lock up equipment and has caged verandahs around that enables visual connection but contains entry and exit through single points.

1. Gallery and studio
2. Art sales, processing and packing
3. Storage
4. Administration
5. Kitchenette
6. Paint mixing and prepping
7. Artist sales
8. Semi-enclosed outdoor working space
9. Covered outdoor working space
10. Storage shed
11. Staff and volunteer accommodation
12. Air-conditioning units
13. Main entrance gate
14. Staff entrance gate

1

2

3



Left: The main entry door brings artists, community and visitors into the space where the artist sales desk is located and artworks are processed. To the left is the paint mixing space.

Below: the retail and packing space with gallery in the distance with a space for canvases to come off their frames ready for sale.

Colour is used throughout the building to define spaces and creates a distinct interior.

Design observations

The building is intentionally modest in form, materials and expression. The new gallery is clad in corrugated iron sheets that creates distinction from the rest of the building and is a pleasant visual complement to the gum trees. Internally the gallery has a section with a lower ceiling running alongside the original brick building, defining its length. The main volume of the space has narrow long windows beneath the roofline lifting the eye and spreading light across the ceiling. Colour on walls has been used both inside and out to define spaces and guide the eye. There is efficient, bespoke storage that has been well thought through, with a correlating system for managing it. The covered space between the main building and storage shed works well and has a pleasant flow and scale. The angle in the plan of the main building, creates a fulcrum in the operational centre and provides a sense of containment to the outdoor space to one side and openness to the other. The exposed rafters provide a dramatic effect and lift the eye while also providing storage for spears (right). The design is evidently security conscious with the height and size of windows carefully considered, plus screens / security measures added around doors and windows.

Observations of operations and use

Most artists are women, who I am told arrange themselves around the building akin to their spatial location in the town. During my visit, which was in the cooler winter, some artists sat at tables on the grass between the building and the fence in the sun and possibly to seek some solitude and distance from others.

The initial design had designated visitor parking and an entrance into the gallery from the far side of the site. Now parking and entrance is from a single side, with everybody entering the operational hub of the art centre with the desk for money business, paint mixing and administration space. Gaps in the low verandah wall are the only things that demarcate the entrance. All doors, except the two from either side of the building into the operational hub, are locked and not in use. Moving through the building therefore takes place through the hub and a single passage in and out. As a result, this space can get busy and be tight to move both people and artworks. The male and female toilets are entered through the same door that is visible from the main entry.

Artists work around the building in covered and semi-enclosed spaces.

Rainwater tanks collect water from roofs.

The newest gallery addition has high windows running its length beneath the eaves. There is an entrance (although the door and grill is closed) between the new gallery and the original building that could be used in the future.

Warlukurlangu undertook the restoration of the Yuendumu Men's Museum that reopened in 2015. The building, located near the entrance to the town, was completed in 1971 and is built from stone quarried by local Warlpiri men from the hills above Yuendumu. The museum contains murals telling sacred stories that cannot be shown. Light is brought into the space via skylights, the most dramatic down the back wall (below).

Left top: The art centre in the outstation of Nyirripi which was built c.2020. It is wrapped in a verandah with security mesh around it.

Left: Staff and volunteer accommodation is in demountables and a converted silver bullet train carriage. Verandahs and landscaping link them together and create communal spaces.

TANGENTYERE ARTISTS
MPARNTWE / ALICE SPRINGS

MPARNTWE / ALICE SPRINGS

I spent time in Mparntwe on two occasions; in September 2022 and June 2023. Days were warm and sunny, but nights were chilly and I had to rug up especially on the initial trip. On my first afternoon I made my way up ANZAC Hill to get a sense of 'Alice's" topography. The mountains hug and contain the gridded town that stretches along the Todd River, on my visits, a wide, dry, sandy expanse. As the mountains glowed orange with the setting sun, I was struck by the beauty of the place. Over preceding days, I explored the town on a bike, visiting the cluster of art centres and galleries and discovering a few nice buildings. Riding along residential streets I admired the prevalent elaborate iron fence designs.

I was told about a brilliant graphic novel The long Weekend in Alice Springs, *adapted by Joshua Santospirito from an essay on the Jungian concept of the cultural complex by Craig San Roque. I caught some amazing music at the Desert festival, including young First Nations female songwriters who were part of a 'Desert Divas" program. The love of the desert was palpable in the artists, architects and creatives I met. The town was also a launching pad for my trips east and west into Arrernte Country, and for the 5-hour bus trip to Uluru and Kata Tjuta.*

Mparntwe, Alice Springs is the traditional lands of the Arrernte people. It is in the geographic centre of Australia, approximately halfway between Darwin and Adelaide, 1500km to each. It has an airport with flights to most capitals across the country. It is a gateway to many sites in "the Red Centre", including the Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park and Kings Canyon.

The town sits in the shadow of the MacDonnell Ranges, a series of ancient mountain ranges that stretch east and west. Arrernte creation stories tell of their formation by caterpillar beings Ayepearenye, Ntyarlke and Utnerrengatye. In and around Alice Springs there are over 100 Aboriginal sacred sites. The Todd River runs through the town. It is most often dry, but subject to occasional flooding. Alice Springs has an arid desert climate, characterised by hot summers and mild winters, with temperature extremes ranging from daytime highs over 40°C to cold nights with temperatures in the single figures. The tourist season is from April to November.

Population and *Amenities*

The population was 25,912 with 20.6% Indigenous in the 2021 census. Alice Springs is the main service town in Central Australia with hospitals, primary and secondary schools, tertiary training, a library, supermarkets, retail outlets, sports centres, a casino, and arts venues. It has extensive tourist accommodation from hotels to youth hostels.

Recent history

European arrival came to the centre with Scottish explorer John McDouall Stuart in 1862 who was establishing a route from the south of the continent to the north. The Telegraph Station (near a waterhole that was named Alice Springs), was established in 1871 bringing pastoralists to the red centre. The discovery of alluvial gold at Arltunga, 100 kilometres east, in 1887 saw a more established European settlement called Stuart, that was renamed Alice Springs in 1933. Supplies were transported to settlers – pastoralists and miners – across the desert by camel trains operated by Afghan cameleers (known as 'Ghan's) until the train and motor vehicles replaced them. The European population stayed small until 1929, when the train line was extended north from Oodnadatta to reach Stuart, linking the centre with Adelaide. The link to Darwin opened in 2004 with the launch of the luxury passenger train, The Ghan. During World War II Alice Springs became a major staging camp and later the wartime capital of the NT, temporarily swelling its population and notoriety. The town has continued to grow and is now a well-established centre. It attracts visitors from across the world, with tourism one of the main industries.

Aboriginal people come from across the central desert to Alice Springs for services or to reside for longer periods of time. They generally live in Town Camps in the suburbs, at Amoonguna to the south or on outstations in surrounding Aboriginal lands.

There are a variety of arts venues from public institutions to commercial galleries and artist run initiatives. The Araluen Cultural Precinct has seven registered Aboriginal sites and trees of significance, including the 300-year old Corkwood Tree which the Araluen Arts Centre is built around. The Arts Centre with four galleries and a theatre, presents an annual program of exhibitions, live performances, films, and events. The Araluen Art Collection is one of the most important Indigenous collections in the country.

There are several Aboriginal owned galleries and art centres. Papunya Tula, the home of the Western Desert art movement has a gallery, as does Tjanpi Desert Weavers, a women's social enterprise, selling Tjanpi baskets, sculptures, jewellery, books and merchandise. Iltja Ntjarra (Many Hands), home of the Namatjira watercolour artists, has a gallery and a studio for Western Arrernte artists. The Bindi Mwerre Anthurre Artists' studio and gallery provides space for Indigenous artists living with a disability.

Town Camps art centres include Yarrenyty Arltere Artists in Larapinta Valley (Alice Springs west) established in 2000 and Ewyenper Atwatye a textile enterprise in Hidden Valley (Alice Springs East) set up in 2005. Tjutangku Tjukurrpa is the social enterprise of Waltja with profits supporting women from across the region who are temporarily in Alice Springs.

TANGENTYERE ARTISTS

I visited Tangentyere Artists on my second visit to Alice Springs as it was closed to visitors on my first. It was afternoon, and I spent time in the gallery – enjoying both the artwork and the space. The art centre manager gave me a tour of the building describing how it worked as we walked inside and out. The artists were sitting at tables in the studio space, painting in what seemed like quiet contemplation, and I was reluctant to disturb them with questions. At 3pm they finished, and got into a minivan parked at the artist entrance, that would deliver them home.

Established in 2005, Tangentyere Artists is an Aboriginal owned, not-for-profit enterprise for Town Camp Artists. It was formed in the wake of the closure of Jukurrpa Artists, Warumpi and Sandover Arts, art centres previously operating in Alice Springs. Irrkerlanyte Arts and Ngurratjuta Iltja Ntjarra were servicing a limited number of Town Camp families.

Tangentyere Artists was established to combat the prevalence of carpetbaggers and provide career development opportunities to artists. Today, Tangentyere Artists is the central hub for arts activities across the Town Camps, including the Yarrenyty Arltere Artists, located at Larapinta Valley Town Camp. It also welcomes Aboriginal artists visiting from remote communities, providing a space for them to work.

In 2020, the online store Town Camp Designs was created to support young artists.

Art Style and Practices

Tangentyere Artists are renowned for figurative paintings, diversity of mark making, rich colour palettes and embracing traditional and contemporary Aboriginal art making. The practice extends to short animations. Town Camp artists communicate stories about their families, identity and everyday lives. As stated on their website, their contemporary art practice aims to show the everyday experience of Aboriginal people in Central Australia and through this work Tangentyere Artists have become part of the national conversation on reconciliation.

Opening to artists and visitors

Opening hours to artists c. 9am – 3pm.
Visitor hours are Monday to Friday 10am to 4pm, and Saturdays 10am – 2pm (with some recent variations).

Location

Tangentyere Artists is in a light industrial area of Alice Springs, across the street from Tangentyere Council. The Council provides support and offers services for Aboriginal people. Tjanpi Desert Weavers, Iltja Ntjarra (Many Hands), and the Bindi Mwerre Anthurre Artists' studio are all nearby, creating a cultural destination for visitors and promoted through local tourist bodies.

- Art Centres
- Commercial
- Administration and Health
- Araluen Cultural Precinct
- Town Camps
- Light industry
- Accommodation


NO PUBLIC ENTRY
DELIVERIES ACCEPTED
ARTIST ONLY ENTRANCE
GALLERY ENTRANCE
OPEN TO VISITORS
655 YNJ

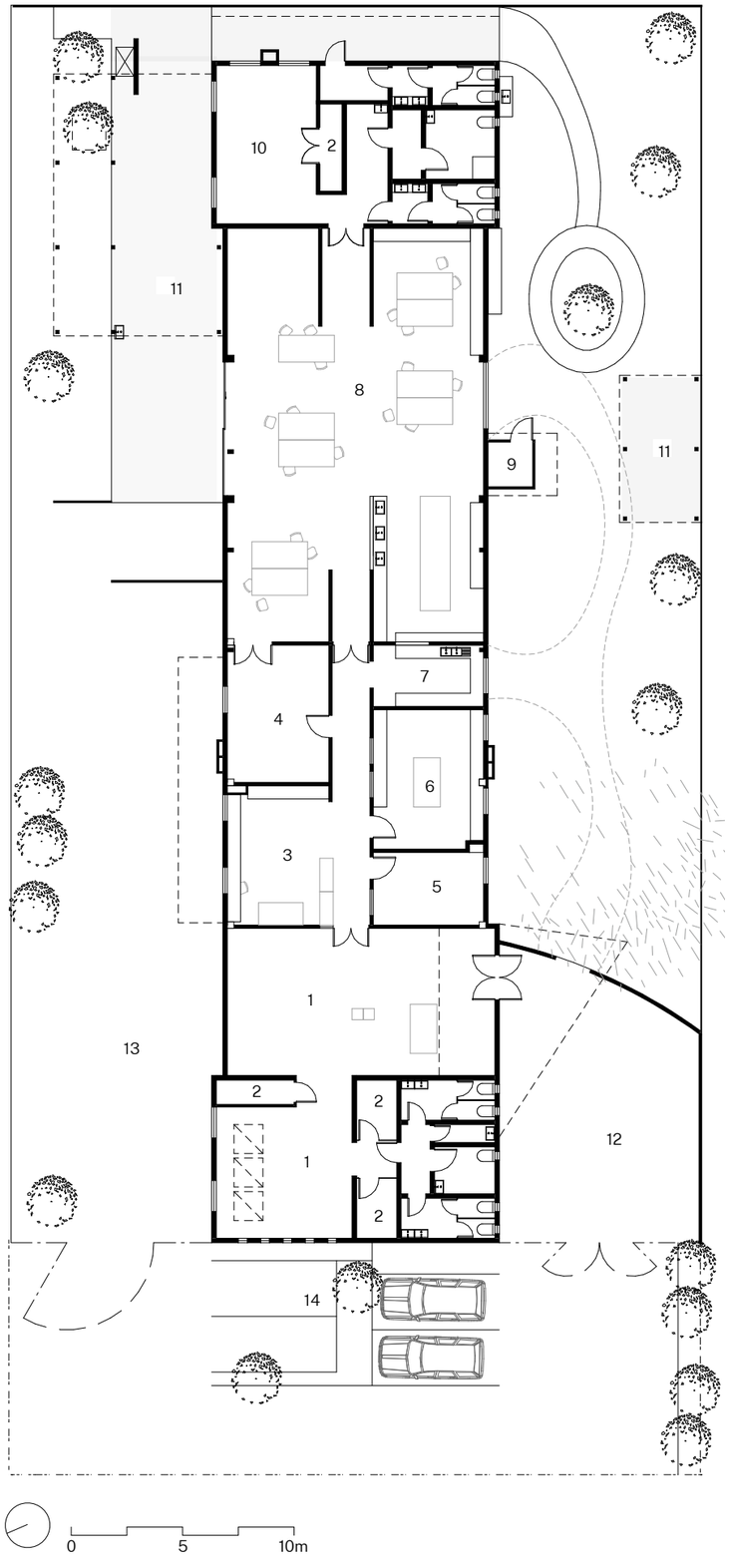
Artist studio left and artist entrance right. Red highlights are used throughout including the studio flooring and doors. Drainpipes and awnings articulate the warehouse shed, and the brick building to the street frontage is painted red with the Tangentyere logo.

ARCHITECTURE

The art centre occupies a building that was refurbished in 2014 by Tangentyere Designs. The original long, rectilinear structure set back from the street had a small brick building that housed a store to the front and a steel framed warehouse shed to the back. Both were in reasonable condition. The front was converted to a gallery, with the artist studio to the back and administration between. Visitors enter the gallery from one side, and artists enter the studio from the other with gates to the street clearly demarking both (seen on previous page).

Visitor arrival is into a double height gallery space that can also host events, connecting to another smaller gallery with square windows and a skylight. The gallery presents well, with professional hanging systems and lighting tracks. There is storage and visitor restrooms.

A central corridor runs through the administration linking the gallery and studio with an open plan office to one side and two rooms to the other. The studio is a large open space with ramps located centrally at either end, one to the administration, and the other to the canvas stretching space and artists bathrooms. These passages are semi-enclosed and create alcoves to either side. One of these has desks along one wall for staff, another has paint mixing and preparation. Large tables that artists paint at, are arranged along the length of the space. Large sliding doors connect with outdoor spaces on either side of the building. One has the artists entrance with a covered workspace to the back and parking to the front. On the other side is a fully fenced space with a shade structure, fire pit and an outdoor kiln, all added after the original refurbishment.



1. Gallery
2. Storage
3. Open plan administration
4. Workshop and meeting space
5. Office
6. Retail
7. Kitchen
8. Artist studio
9. Kiln
10. Art preparation and packing
11. Covered outdoor working space
12. Visitor entry courtyard
13. Artist entrance with parking
14. Visitor parking

1. Gallery

#6. Retail

#11. Outdoor space to the south

Design and operations observations

The building contains three zones of use – artist spaces; administration; and gallery. The thresholds between each are marked by doors and changes in floor surface. There are discrete spaces for artists and visitors, each with their own entrance. The configuration of the building and its operation result in artists and visitors not readily mixing. Visitors are given access to the artist studio by special invitation and tour only.

There is a pleasant arrival sequence for both artists and visitors. Artists are generally collected from Town Camps around Mparntwe and brought to the art centre in a minivan that parks to the side of the building. There are low structures at the back of the driveway that create thresholds and define the entrance. They also provide a level of privacy for artists working outside.

Visitors park at the front of the building and enter on the other side. A curved Corten steel barrier runs from the side boundary to the building containing the entry court and guiding the visitor to the gallery door. A steel canopy, with a plywood soffit marks the entrance, and extends from outside, into the gallery volume, creating a sense of a lobby beneath. Keeping dust off it might be a challenge.

The building is set back from the street with car parking and trees in front, but has presence via a large mural of the Tangentyere logo painted by the artists. Other murals around the building add cultural presence, colour and interest. The outdoor spaces are shaded by trees and canopies, and are pleasant to be in. Further shading may be advantageous for working outdoors in the desert climate.

As an urban art centre, the building recieves more visitors than remote locations and hosts public events and exhibition openings. The design and management of the building reflects these factors.

The main gallery with its generous ceiling height (approximately three metres) and high windows, feels light and airy. The adjoining gallery in the original brick building feels more intimate and has small

square windows that need to be factored in when hanging paintings. Skylights to one side make the space feel larger and shift focus from the storage and visitor bathrooms on the other side. Helpfully the bathrooms have a vestibule and are not entered directly from the gallery.

During my visit, women were working inside and a man was painting outside to the rear of the site. The semi-enclosed ramps into the studio create a pleasant entry passage and give some spatial definition to the otherwise open plan.

The retail space, selling paintings, printed t-shirts and tea towels, occupies one of the rooms within the administration zone with its open plan office, bringing visitors closer to the operations of the art centre. The main corridor through the administration leading to the artist studio is hung with artworks and feels like an extension of the gallery.

There is a simple, raw material palette. The exterior uses a combination of corrugated iron and polycarbonate sheets. Care has been taken with detailing, especially around the entries.

Looking from the main gallery space towards the entrance (left). The canopy creates a space of containment on arrival and is the datum for the picture hanging rail around the gallery. The main gallery space can host events and different types of exhibitions. The plywood soffit gives a warm ambience to the threshold between inside and out (below). It is raised above the steel fence separating the visitor entrance court from the artists outdoor space behind.

Left: The kitchen, located in the administration zone has a serving window and counter into the artist studio as well as opening to the outside.

Above: Outdoor shelters work around existing trees, and murals wrap boundary fences.

Below: A structure with openings is built around the ramps at either end of the artist studio, creating a sense of arrival and spaces of containment within the long shed. To the left of the photograph is the paint mixing and preparation space, to the far right are artists lockers.

Left: The original warehouse building is clad in corrugated iron and polycarbonate sheets that let diffused light into the studio. The simple material palette is aesthetically pleasing.

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