First Nations Urban Housing Design Guide: Considerations

City Infrastructure

Cities Institute Agenda Setting

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CITY INFRASTRUCTURE

Background

Housing is one of the social determinants of health. Most people aspire to have a safe, comfortable secure place to call 'home' – for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders living within an urban context this aspiration is generally much the same as non-Indigenous peoples.

The on-going effects of colonization mean a large proportion of First Nations peoples live in overcrowded conditions in social housing developments: many are homeless; many too who are living in social housing live in stock that requires repairs and maintenance or upgrading. The possibility of ever owning their own home is generally out of reach and therefore people consider the house where they are living will be their family home.

There is a need for specific housing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that supports physical and psychological health as well as social, cultural and spiritual wellbeing. This is supported by the new National Agreement on Closing the Gap released in 2020 which identifies in Outcome 9, a need for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to *"secure appropriate, affordable housing that is aligned with their priorities and need".*[1]

The need for specific and culturally appropriate housing for Aboriginal people is summarised in the work of the Indigenous Infrastructure and Sustainable Housing Alliance, in partnership with the NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment, which identifies the following key issues[2]:

> a much higher proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live in overcrowded and public housing

> only 42% own their own home compared with 65% of non-Indigenous households

> housing shortages are predicted to increase to 90,901 dwellings across Australia by 2031, of which 65,000 are in NSW

> The four main areas contributing to housing problems for Aboriginal people include: overcrowding, ageing housing stock, poor quality construction and maintenance and inappropriate standardised designs which do not reflect Aboriginal cultural values and family structures.

Purpose

The purpose of this report is to explore the issues associated with developing a First Nations Urban Housing Design Guidelines for NSW. This work will assist urban First Nations3 Communities access possible funding that has recently been dedicated to social and affordable housing by the Federal Government through its Housing Australia Future Fund (HAFF) and is in line with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, Outcome 9(a) so that more and more appropriate housing in urban areas are built.[4]

1 https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/targets

2 https://www.uts.edu.au/news/tech-design/aboriginal-housing-policies-must-be-based-community-needs

3 The terms First Nations peoples, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and Indigenous peoples are used interchangeably in this document. In NSW, First Nations peoples are generally referred to by their Nation or by using only Aboriginal people.

4 The work focusses on the NSW context as it is being written on Gadigal Country of the Eora Nation and it is in NSW that the majority of my experience of Aboriginal housing has been gained.

Acknowledgement of Stakeholders

The Institute would like to thank those who contributed their time and insights to this project, in particular Professor Gillian Barlow.

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Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Bidjigal, the Traditional Custodians of the land on which the Cities Institute is located, and pay our respects to Elders, past and present.

Context

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021 Census, 812,728 people identified as being Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders, representing 3.4% of the total Australian population. These people made up 352,041 First Nations households and represent 3.8% of all households in Australia (ABS 2022b).

For NSW, there are 278,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (again 3.4% of the total NSW population) – which means a third of the total Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population lives in NSW. Of these people (2021 Census) 90,000 or roughly one third live in the Greater Sydney region. The majority of these Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live in the Central Coast LGA (6.1%), with the next largest percentage in Blacktown LGA (4.2%) and 3.9% in Penrith LGA.

LGA	Aboriginal population	Homeless (First Nations)	Unoccupied dwellings	Social Housing	Unmet Housing Need
Blacktown	3.0%	5.1%	4.7%	7.7%	7.5%
Central Coast	4.9%	15.5%	9.5%	3.7%	8.5%
Penrith	5.0%	9.0%	4.9%	5.3%	7.6%
Wollongong	3.2%	15.2%	6.1%	8.6%	6.4%

Table 1. (Information has been gathered from the dashboards prepared by CHIA and Homelessness NSW. Neither the Social Housing figure or the unmet housing need figure separates the need into that of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population.)

These are of course not the only locations where First Nations peoples live but it shows there is a very large population of First Nations peoples in urban areas. Despite this, these Communities continuously miss out on funding, with the assumption that since they dwell in a 'modern' city none of the housing issues, (such as poor quality housing, overcrowding, inappropriate housing, homelessness) that affect regional and remote First Nations communities will affect them.

The table above shows the complexity of the housing and homelessness needs in urban regions. Each of these LGAs have quite different demographics as well as their housing being distinct for the area.

What should guide any housing design and housing procurement in these urban locations to ensure that the housing is culturally appropriate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and improves their lifestyle?

It is difficult to provide a lot of detail without knowing what type of housing has been asked for. Unlike remote housing, and to a certain extent regional housing, urban housing has different typologies such as townhouses, apartments, or standalone dwellings - each with its differences and expectations.

Here is a breakdown of the types of dwelling First Nations peoples are living in across Australia:

> 80% (281,729 dwellings) separate houses
> 11% (38,396) semi-detached, row or terrace houses, or townhouses
> 8% (27,919) flats or apartments (ABS 2022b).

Much of the housing is owned and operated by an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Housing Organisation (ATSICCHO) which may have its own guidelines and there is a preference for ATSICCHO owned housing over other providers.

This document aims to provide architects, designers and project managers with some important considerations for designing and building First Nations urban housing and suggest where more exploration and research is needed.

There are scant specifics since the typology of housing will have its own that will need to be understood through briefing with the local Community for whom the housing is being provided.

Current Guidelines

There are statutory Federal, State and Local Government guidelines with which all housing must comply - whether it is social or affordable. These include:

> National Construction Code (NCC)
> Local Development Control Plans
> Local Environmental Plans
> Connection with Country, July 2023
> Indigenous Design Charter
> Funding guidelines
> Any relevant Reconciliation Action Plans
> NSW Aboriginal Procurement Policy, 2021
> Livable Housing Design, 2022
> National Indigenous Housing Guide

Of these, it is possible the Connection with Country, July 2023 and the Indigenous Design Charter are not known and it is recommended every designer and/or developer considering working with First Nations communities on any project is familiar with them. They have steps to follow to ensure that the First Nations Community is fully consulted and involved in any project.

Process and Product

The process of designing and delivering First Nations housing is as important as the actual product. How the housing is developed – crucially ensuring that the local First Nations community is included in that process through listening to what they say, their consultation and engagement - will assist in ensuring that the housing can be culturally appropriate and accepted by the Community.

There are three pieces that assist in this:

1. Connection with Community
2. Connection with Country
3. Employment and Training

Connection with Community

As noted in the Connection with Country (CwC) document (p.30) it is vital from the outset of the project that the local Aboriginal Community is engaged in the entire process, is consulted and understands the process.

It is worthwhile researching the site and location before commencing so there is a broad understanding of the place where the project will be.

Given the housing is for Aboriginal people, the project will require HIGH community involvement (CwC, p. 31) and extensive collaboration with the local Aboriginal Community will be anticipated.

It might be worth considering establishing a Reference Group made up of the following groups:

> Traditional Custodians/Owners
> Local Aboriginal Land Council
> Elders Groups
> Significant Elders
> Local Youth groups
> Local Aboriginal Medical Service
> Other interested First Nations peoples

Although having a reference group may seem overly complicated for the project, it will assist significantly in ensuring that all parties are included in the process and have an opportunity to be engaged throughout and local issues and protocols are addressed.

Ways of working together are outlined on CwC, p.31

How do you identify who the best people to talk with are?

The following gives you some key people or groups to use as a beginning point. Always ask with whom to talk and make sure no key group or individual has been left out.

LOCAL ABORIGINAL LAND COUNCIL (LALC)

In NSW, the Land Councils as a non-statutory body were established in 1977, not as many believe out of the Aboriginal Land Rights Act, 1983, as a specialist Aboriginal lobby on land rights. While the current legislation bears little resemblance to the original 1983 Act, the core principles are the same. (Refer https://alc.org.au/our-history/ for more information on this.)

TRADITIONAL CUSTODIANS/OWNERS

Traditional Custodians are the original Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander peoples who inhabited an area. Not all Traditional Custodians are part of the Land Council system, which is a colonial system superimposed over the Country and there are often disputes around this.

From https://anusa.com.au/pageassets/life/clubs/ACKNOWLEDGEMENT-OF-COUNTRY-1.pdf : Custodians' reminds of the ongoing obligation to look after country, and that Aboriginal people don't own the land, but it owns them. 'Owner' reminds that their land was never formally ceded to anyone and of Australia's history of denying ownership and Aboriginal people's sovereignty over their lands.

ELDERS

An Aboriginal (or Torres Strait Islander) Elder is someone who has gained recognition as a custodian of knowledge and lore, and who has permission to disclose knowledge and beliefs. In some instances, Aboriginal people above a certain age will refer to themselves as Elders but age is not necessarily an indicator of an Elder.

Connection with Country

There is extensive discussion on connecting with Country in CwC (p38)- and this document should be explored before starting any design work and/or discussions with the Aboriginal Community. Country is a vital concept for understanding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing.

From CwC, p.20:

> *Country encompasses everything. It includes both living and non-living elements within the landscape, including Earth, Water and Sky Country, as well as people, animals, plants and the stories that connect them."*

Before embarking on any work, get to know the Country and move from a human-centred approach to a Country-centred one.

CwC has many ways to discover and understand Country – from walking on Country to mapping now and as it was and being with people who know the its stories.

Crucially, LISTEN – not only with the ears!

Employment and training

The NSW policy document, Aboriginal Procurement Policy (APP), January 2021 outlines what is required of building projects in NSW for Aboriginal employment and training. APP targets Government projects valued at over $7.5M but it is recommended that all Aboriginal housing projects should use these as a guide and should ensure that wherever possible local Aboriginal peoples are trained and employed to be a part of their project.

It is important to start on any employment and training plan from the outstart. There may be suitable people to employ but they may need to have their certificates and training updated or additional training needed. By exploring what local Aboriginal businesses products and techniques are around, the project can be designed to maximise their use and any necessary processes to do this are commenced.

If there are no available or appropriate tradespeople, consider further ways that local Aboriginal people might be included in the project - perhaps there are people who would be interested in becoming project managers or designers and they could be mentored throughout the project – maybe it would be possible to talk at the local school or TAFE and interest Aboriginal students in careers in the construction and/or design industries.

For whom?

No doubt the client, the number of bedrooms and the type of housing will have been determined – keep in mind that many Aboriginal families will see this as their forever house and will expect to live there and 'age-in-place'. This means:

1. the number so people living in the house may vary over time as more family members live there and that during specific periods extended family will stay – often for long lengths of time.
2. The house may need to be adapted in the future to accommodate them and the house should be adaptable. Refer https://www.abcb.gov.au/sites/default/files/resources/2023/livable-housing-design-20230406.pdf
3. Consider the possibility of making the house design flexible - perhaps with a dining room that has double doors on it so it can be opened up to an adjoining living room – but can as easily be shut when additional family members or friends are staying: make bathrooms flexible so as many people as possible can use it at the one time and still maintain their privacy
4. Make sure the size of the house is double checked with the client - Elders do not **always** want to have family and friends staying with them and can prefer a smaller place - a family house may be for an extended family.

Mobility

It is possible people will relocate according to seasons and/or Sorry Business and family commitments and therefore it is worth considering how this might be incorporated into the planning of the house.

Perhaps a box room (a small room with shelving where items can be stored while living somewhere else and which can be locked might be one option for dealing with leaving a house for an extended time and so other family members might live there) is worthwhile or at least a way to open up and then close sections of the house.

Sustainability

Recent changes to the NCC include the introduction of a new minimum 7-star rating or equivalent, as well as an annual energy use budget for the entire home, including major fixed appliances, solar and batteries, for all houses being included.

There is good information at https://www.yourhome.gov.au/ and most people are aware of the importance of ensuring their housing is environmentally sustainable and that it has low energy running costs.

Remember to consider carefully the orientation of the house – placing those rooms where people may not spend a lot of time on the western side and it is not so important such as a laundry or bathrooms for example. Even so, ensure the rooms on the western side are well protected from the hot summer sun with wide overhanging eaves and planting to protect them from the afternoon sun. Remember too that the afternoon sun is low in the sky so it can also assist in the keeping the house cool b having window up higher.

Make sure materials and appliances are selected with this in mind and appreciate that the household may not only have minimal expendable budget to maintain these but that they are also at different times likely to be used by the extended family – make selections for low running costs and long life.

Two important examples are:

> Induction cook tops: while an induction stove top may be the most energy efficient of the stove tops at present, they require special expensive pots and pans and an Aboriginal family may not have these nor be able to afford them.
> Hot water system: An electric reclaim heat pump hot water system will work well in urban areas where the water quality is good and there are suitably qualified plumbers available to maintain them as required. These can be difficult in remote and regional areas because they may not have access to people who have had experience working with them and the water quality is not always suitable. Solar powered systems are also suitable in the urban areas although because the number of people in a household may vary considerably, the water tank may need to be sized to suit the largest number of people who may live in a house and this means more water than might generally be used most of the time will be heated and stored.

Make sure 2700 high floor to ceiling rather than 2400 so that ceiling fans can be installed without people having any fear of hurting themselves on the fan's blades.

Thermal mass

Thermal mass refers to the ability of building materials to store heat. Materials with thermal mass have an ability to absorb heat, store it and then later release it.

Reverse brick veneer is often suggested for construction and this works well for thermal mass but can be a preference for brick houses, so check first before going ahead!

Colours

Use light colours where possible for rooves and walls.

Maintenance and on-going costs

Always select materials and finishes that have minimal on-going maintenance. Housing is likely to be managed by a Community Housing Organisation who will want to keep their overheads low so as to keep rents low as well.

Expectations/Aspirations

Housing is one of the social determinants of health. Most people aspire to have a safe, comfortable secure place to call "home' – for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders living within an urban context this aspiration is generally much the same as non-Indigenous peoples.

Temporary v Forever

The on-going affects of colonization mean a large proportion of First Nations peoples live in overcrowded conditions in social housing developments: many are homeless; many too who are living in social housing live in stock that requires repairs and maintenance or upgrading. The possibility of ever owning their own home is generally out of reach and therefore people consider the house where they are living will be their family home.

It is well known that First Nations peoples prefer to live in a house owned and managed by an ATSICCHO so it is good to know about the ownership and management of a house and discuss perhaps how the tenant might in the future own it.

What is the difference between First Nations' urban housing and remote/regional/very remote housing?

Design

There have been a number of documents that outline best practice for designing First Nations housing in remote and very remote areas. There are of course substantial difference between urban and remote as has been pointed out, however some of the principles can be used at least for testing what people want and for forming a brief.

The following is quoted from a AHURI final report:

Design objectives for NSW

Seven objectives define the key considerations in the design of the built environment.

Better fit
contextual, local and of its place

Better performance
sustainable, adaptable and durable

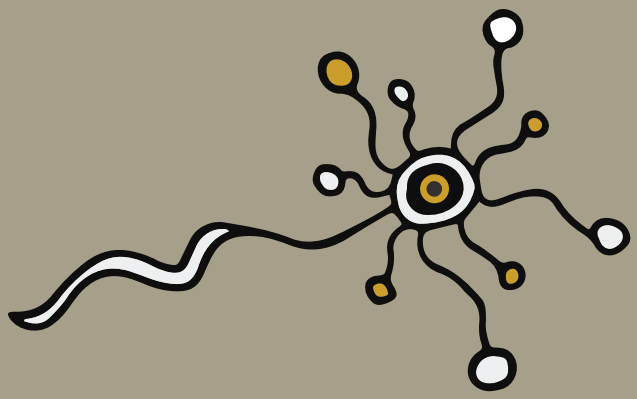
Better for community
inclusive, connected and diverse

Better for people
safe, comfortable and liveable

Better working
functional, efficient and fit for purpose

Better value
creating and adding value

Better look and feel
engaging, inviting and attractive



GANSW

Cover: Goat Island
Sydney.

Best practice principles

Household make-up

A careful study is made of the composition of the householders who will be using a house, over what period of time and according to what season.

Particular attention is paid to extended family, age, gender and disability issues among possible residents, so that:

- there are flexible facilities for sleeping, feeding and ablutions for up to four times the number of regular residents
- internal circulation and functional relationships between spaces and space needs are accommodated, e.g. through appropriate size, location and number of wet areas, bedrooms, kitchen spaces, storage requiremenwts, verandah areas, etc.
- access to external services and emergency escapes are facilitated.

Flexible accommodation is provided for visitors through, for example, larger living room spaces, semi-enclosed, wide verandahs, etc. Additional external toilets and showers are available to avoid overuse of toilets, showers, septic systems, etc.

External design

Decisions about the form and structure of the dwelling are decided as result of a balanced consideration of: design responses to environmental and climatic conditions; patterns of construction and maintenance costs; locally available materials and skills; opportunities for local employment and skills development; possibilities for modularisation, extensions, etc.; and household composition. These considerations will determine, for example, whether houses are high or low set, built on a concrete slab or a raised timber floor, are built from cement block, mud brick or with steel or timber light-frame construction and cladding.

Houses are sited and oriented appropriately with respect to: the direction of 'country'; family and kinship groupings and possible clustering; sightlines; views; breezes and solar aspect; and in relation to local services and resources.

The number of doorways are appropriate to the number of people living in a house, with doors and windows positioned to allow natural ventilation and breezes, as appropriate to local climatic conditions.

The location of verandahs, external cooking space/s yard spaces, perimeter fences, etc. takes account of health and safety requirements and social protocols.

Sturdy construction of wide roof overhangs to verandahs helps manage roof storm-water overflows and avoid rain penetration, and harvest water.

External site planning facilitates the use of outside cooking/hearth areas, with well-drained and shaded structures for outside entertaining.

An extra toilet/hand basin is provided in the yard for emergency and visitor use.

Secure gates (through appropriate specification of hinge selection and fixings) ensure privacy and security of verandahs and yard spaces.

Fencing is provided around houses to provide definition of boundaries to domiciliary spaces and to limit entry of unwanted dogs, cars and people to private yard spaces.

Provision is made in external areas for the storage of additional bedding, tools, machinery and vehicles, as appropriate.

Landscaping provides a mix of shade areas, gardens and open space for gatherings or for children to play.

It is important to note two things:

1. Since this is referring to remote and/or very remote housing, there is likely to be a much larger site area. Urban housing may not be able to provide all the amenities written here – it is encouraged though for the designer/architect to talk to the housing tenant to work out their priorities.
2. The external landscaping is as important to the house itself and will contribute to both the sustainability of the house and to the enjoyment of it by the occupiers!

Briefing notes

Considerations

For NSW, there are 278,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (again 3.4% of the total NSW population) – which means a third of the total Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population lives in NSW. Of these people (2021 Census) 90,000 or roughly one third live in the Greater Sydney region. The majority of these Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live in the Central Coast LGA (6.1%), with the next largest percentage in Blacktown LGA (4.2%) and 3.9% in Penrith LGA.

Despite a very large population of First Nations peoples in urban areas, communities continuously miss out on funding, with the assumption that since they dwell in a 'modern' city none of the housing issues, (such as poor quality housing, overcrowding, inappropriate housing, homelessness) that affect regional and remote First Nations communities will affect them.

Housing is one of the social determinants of health. Most people aspire to have a safe, comfortable secure place to call "home' – for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders living within an urban context this aspiration is generally much the same as non-Indigenous peoples.

There are statutory Federal, State and Local Government guidelines with which all housing must comply - whether it is social or affordable.

The process of designing and delivering First Nations housing is as important as the actual product. How the housing is developed – crucially ensuring that the local First Nations community is included in that process through listening to what they say, their consultation and engagement - will assist in ensuring that the housing can be culturally appropriate and accepted by the Community.

Country is a vital concept for understanding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing. "Country encompasses everything. It includes both living and non-living elements within the landscape, including Earth, Water and Sky Country, as well as people, animals, plants and the stories that connect them." (GANSW Connecting with Country Framework, p.20)

The NSW policy document, Aboriginal Procurement Policy (APP), January 2021 outlines what is required of building projects in NSW for Aboriginal employment and training.

The number so people living in the house may vary over time as more family members live there and that during specific periods extended family will stay – often for long lengths of time.

The house may need to be adapted in the future to accommodate them and the house should be adaptable.

Most people are aware of the importance of ensuring their housing is environmentally sustainable and that it has low energy running costs.

Recommendations

Ensure from the outset of the project that the local Aboriginal Community is engaged in the entire process, is consulted and understands the process.

Explore the Connecting with Country Framework before starting any design work and/or discussions with the Aboriginal Community.

Before embarking on any work, get to know the Country and move from a human-centred approach to a Country-centred one.

Start on any employment and training plan from the outstart. If there are no available or appropriate tradespeople, consider further ways that local Aboriginal people might be included in the project.

Make the house design flexible - perhaps with a dining room that has double doors on it so it can be opened up to an adjoining living room – but can as easily be shut when additional family members or friends are staying: make bathrooms flexible so as many people as possible can use it at the one time and still maintain their privacy

Make sure the size of the house is double checked with the client.

Use passive design principles, including floor to ceiling heights to enable ceiling fans.

Make sure material and appliance selections are for low running costs and long life.

Design flexible facilities for sleeping, feeding and ablutions for more than the number of regular residents.

Conclusion and next steps

Urban housing for Aboriginal peoples has been largely ignored with housing programs targeting at very remote and remote places so there is little information or programmes that have been done for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in urban regions. This therefore leaves a large unmet need in urban area and more details as to the size of this need to be explored.

The NSW Aboriginal Housing Office (AHO), Homelessness NSW and Community Housing Industry Association NSW (CHIA) should be interviewed and these issues discussed with them to tease out the issues involved and what they have planned for urban areas.

From the 2021 Census there is a breakdown of housing types where First Nations peoples live with 80% in separate dwelling: 11% in semi-detached, row or terrace houses or townhouses and 85 living in flats or apartments. It would be useful to have this figure further broken into regional and urban areas although it seems to be obvious that semi-detached houses and apartments are more likely in urban areas. It would also be useful for future statistics to be sourced in as much detail as the 2006 Community Housing and Infrastructure Needs Survey (CHINS). Priority Reform Four of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap is “Shared access to data and information at a regional level” and there are constant requests for data in appropriate forms for Communities to use.

A survey and case studies of First Nations urban houses, good apartments and townhouses would be useful as well as Elders Housing and specialist housing including Accessible Housing and Youth Housing.

Approaching the relevant Councils and determining whether they have any vacant land which might be suitable for developing First Nations urban housing as a test case and applying for funding, working with the relevant Aboriginal Community and designing the housing.

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About Cities Institute

We unite world class research with a real world approach, engaging with academia, industry, government and community groups to shape policy and pioneer meaningful change in our cities. We lead with deep experience in design methods, sustainable architecture and healthy urban and strategic planning.

Academic thinking grounds our practical initiatives in robust research. We connect those with insights with those that shape and deliver city outcomes, ensuring a practical application for policy, change and impact that ultimately benefits the communities around us.

Collaborate with us

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In the spirit of reconciliation, the UNSW Cities Institute acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and their connections to land, waters and community. This publication was prepared by the UNSW Cities Institute. February 2024.

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