



TOWARDS A NEW NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY



Australian Government, Office for the Arts

ROYAL AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS

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ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

The Royal Australian Institute of Architects (Institute) is the peak body for the architectural profession in Australia. It is an independent, national member organisation with around 13,500 members across Australia and overseas.

The Institute exists to advance the interests of members, their professional standards and contemporary practice, and expand and advocate the value of architects and architecture to the sustainable growth of our communities, economy and culture.

The Institute actively works to maintain and improve the quality of our built environment by promoting better, responsible and environmental design.

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- + At the time of this submission the National President is Adam Haddow FRAIA.
 - + The Chief Executive Officer is Cameron Bruhn Hon. FRAIA.

CONTACT DETAILS

Australian Institute of Architects


The Royal Australian Institute of Architects recognises the unceded sovereign lands and rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Peoples of these lands and waters.

This recognition generates acknowledgement and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Countries, Cultures and Communities, and their ways of being, knowing and doing.

Caring for Country practices including architecture and place shaping have existed on this continent since time immemorial.

The Institute recognises a professional commitment to engage and act meaningfully through reciprocal partnership and relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Together we will support and develop the emergence of new possibilities for our shared future.

TOWARDS A NEW NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY

Executive Summary

The Royal Australian Institute of Architects (the Institute) supports the development of a new National Cultural Policy built on the five enduring pillars established by Revive: First Nations First; A Place for Every Story; Centrality of the Artist; Strong Cultural Infrastructure; and Engaging the Audience.

The Institute submits that the next policy should explicitly recognise architecture not only as a cultural practice, but as a delivery system for national cultural, economic, environmental and social outcomes. The built environment is a primary setting through which cultural participation occurs at scale, and it directly shapes identity, access, inclusion and civic life.

Architecture is one of the most public and enduring expressions of culture. It frames the places where Australians encounter art, heritage, education, ceremony and community, while also enabling broader government priorities including productivity, sustainability, social cohesion and regional development.

Recent national data demonstrates architecture's established contribution to the creative economy. Architecture services contribute approximately \$6.3 billion to Australia's GDP (2023–24), as measured through the Australian Government's Cultural and Creative Activity satellite accounts. The sector also supports tens of thousands of jobs and is characterised by a high proportion of small and medium enterprises. Despite this, architecture's broader role in shaping economic productivity, innovation and place-based outcomes remains under-recognised in cultural policy settings.

The next policy provides an opportunity to move beyond a narrow institutional framing of culture. Culture is not only produced in venues and programs—it is experienced through the design, quality and accessibility of the everyday places where people live, gather and participate in cultural life.

The Institute's key asks

- Recognise architecture explicitly within the Commonwealth's definition of cultural and creative practice.
- Position the built environment as a delivery system for cultural participation, identity and public value.
- Embed design quality, cultural value and whole-of-life public benefit into Commonwealth-supported cultural infrastructure.
- Use procurement and commissioning as levers to improve cultural outcomes and broaden participation.
- Strengthen First Nations leadership in architecture, placemaking and Country-centred design.
- Recognise architects as creative workers and strengthen pathways for early-career, regional and interdisciplinary practice.
- Promote adaptive reuse, heritage renewal and place-based design as living cultural practice.

- Invest in public engagement with architecture through exhibitions, education, open programs and cultural diplomacy.

1. Introduction

The Institute welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the next National Cultural Policy. The Institute represents the architectural profession nationally and advocates for design quality, public value, cultural stewardship and the long-term resilience of the built environment.

The Institute supports the Government's decision to build the next policy around the Revive pillars. These provide a strong and contemporary framework for cultural policy and are highly relevant to architecture.

However, architecture has often sat at the edge of cultural policy discussions despite its central role in shaping national identity, creative practice, heritage and civic life. This submission argues that architecture should be recognised more explicitly, not only as a cultural discipline, but as a core mechanism through which cultural policy outcomes are delivered.

Cultural outcomes are shaped not only through arts programs and institutions, but through the planning, housing, infrastructure and climate policy settings that determine the quality of the built environment. Recognising this relationship enables a more integrated and effective cultural policy.

The Institute also notes that architecture already operates within Australia's national cultural framework through established partnerships and programs, including collaboration with Creative Australia in the international promotion of Australian architecture. The next policy should build on these foundations and recognise architecture as a contributor to Australia's cultural identity, creative economy and cultural diplomacy.

There is also an opportunity to strengthen national design leadership and coordination in this area through more explicit recognition of architecture within federal cultural and policy frameworks.

2. The Institute's policy case for architecture

Architecture is a cultural practice that precedes and extends beyond procurement and construction. It interprets history, responds to climate and landscape, reflects social values and shapes collective life over generations.

Australians experience architecture daily—in civic buildings, libraries, schools, galleries, theatres, memorials, housing, streets, public spaces and heritage places. These environments are not neutral containers for culture, they actively shape who participates, how stories are expressed and how communities connect.

Cultural participation depends in part on the design, accessibility, adaptability and dignity of the places in which it occurs. Without attention to design quality, cultural investment risks diminishing its own intended public value.

Architecture contributes directly and indirectly to the national economy. It supports employment, industry activity and exports, and underpins broader economic outcomes through tourism, productivity, innovation and place-based economic development. Well-designed places attract investment, support visitation and strengthen long-term economic resilience.

Architecture also operates within a broader creative ecosystem that spans the arts, craft, design disciplines and emerging creative technologies. Its design-led processes integrate and amplify these practices, acting as a platform for collaboration, cultural production and innovation. This interconnected role remains under-recognised and underutilised within current policy settings.

Despite these contributions, architecture is often understood narrowly as a service to construction rather than as part of the nation's cultural and creative capability. Recognising it as both a creative discipline and a system-level enabler of cultural outcomes would better align cultural policy with contemporary practice.

Through its design-led process, architecture plays a critical role in shaping future thinking—capturing social aspirations, testing new ideas and giving form to cultural, environmental and civic change. It is both a reflective and generative practice, capable of translating collective ambition into built form.

Environmental stewardship is also a cultural responsibility. Climate-responsive design reflects intergenerational responsibility and care for Country, embedding sustainability within the cultural life of place.

3. Response to the five enduring pillars

3.1 First Nations First

The Institute strongly supports the continuing centrality of First Nations culture and leadership within national cultural policy. For architecture, this requires more than acknowledgement or symbolic inclusion. It requires enabling structures that support cultural authority, early engagement and Country-centred design practice.

The policy should strengthen planning, design and procurement so First Nations voices shape projects from inception. This includes recognition of Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property, culturally informed briefing processes and pathways for First Nations practitioners to lead work across civic, cultural and community projects.

Built form is a visible expression of whose stories are valued. Cultural policy should ensure First Nations stories, languages and cultural relationships to place are embedded in the design of the public realm.

3.2 A Place for Every Story

Architecture gives material expression to local stories—reflecting climate, landscape, memory, migration and everyday life. It is one of the clearest forms of place-based cultural practice.

A culturally confident nation is shaped not only through major institutions, but through neighbourhood libraries, regional galleries, community facilities, housing, streetscapes and everyday public places.

These settings should be recognised as core cultural infrastructure. Ensuring equitable access to high-quality design across regional, outer metropolitan and remote communities is a matter of cultural inclusion and national cohesion.

3.3 Centrality of the Artist

The policy's focus on the artist as worker should extend to architects and designers as creative practitioners operating at the intersection of creativity, civic responsibility and delivery.

The Institute encourages recognition of architects within the wider creative workforce and investment in pathways that support early-career development, design research, interdisciplinary collaboration, exhibition and public-interest practice.

Policy settings should enable structured collaboration between architects, artists, designers and makers from project inception, recognising that integrated practice strengthens cultural outcomes. Architecture often plays a curatorial role within this ecosystem, bringing together diverse creative disciplines to shape coherent cultural and civic outcomes.

A stronger cultural policy for architecture should also recognise design authorship and ensure appropriate attribution, acknowledging the creative contribution of architects within procurement and delivery environments where authorship can otherwise be diluted.

Architecture has a broader role as a cultural and civic leader. Strengthening recognition of architects as creative practitioners creates an opportunity to restore their contribution to national conversations about identity, place and the future, and to more fully utilise design as a tool for cultural and social leadership.

3.4 Strong Cultural Infrastructure

Cultural infrastructure should be understood as a network of places and settings that enable cultural participation over time, not solely as major institutions or capital projects.

This includes housing, public realm, civic infrastructure and everyday environments where culture is experienced.

Commonwealth investment in cultural infrastructure should be guided by design quality, accessibility, sustainability, adaptability and long-term public value.

Procurement and commissioning are critical policy levers shaping participation, collaboration and cultural outcomes. Poorly structured procurement can exclude emerging and diverse practitioners, while well-designed processes can broaden participation and elevate public ambition and pride.

For nationally significant projects, design excellence processes, including open or invited design competitions, should be encouraged where appropriate to improve quality, transparency and civic value.

Adaptive reuse and heritage renewal should also be recognised as core cultural strategies, sustaining the continuity of place while enabling contemporary use.

3.5 Engaging the Audience

Architecture engages the public daily, often without structured interpretation and participation frameworks.

There is significant opportunity to strengthen public understanding of the built environment through exhibitions, open programs, education initiatives, digital archives, and cultural tourism.

In addition, architecture contributes to cultural diplomacy, shaping how Australia represents itself and engages internationally. Existing partnerships supporting international representation—including at global exhibitions and biennales—demonstrate Australia’s architectural presence on the world stage. Continued support will strengthen this contribution.

4. Recommendations

The Institute recommends that the Australian Government adopt the following positions:

- 1. Recognise architecture as a core cultural discipline and delivery mechanism**
Include architecture within the Commonwealth’s definition of cultural and creative practice and recognise the built environment as a primary mechanism for delivering cultural, economic, environmental and social outcomes.
- 2. Embed design quality through procurement and commissioning**
Require Commonwealth-supported projects to demonstrate design quality, accessibility, sustainability and whole-of-life public value through procurement and commissioning models that prioritise design excellence, including design competitions where appropriate.
- 3. Expand the definition of cultural infrastructure**
Recognise housing, public realm, civic buildings and everyday infrastructure as core cultural settings and embed design quality across this broader national cultural network.
- 4. Enable First Nations design leadership**
Strengthen funding, procurement and project-development to support First Nations cultural authority, leadership and Country-centred design approaches.
- 5. Strengthen the architectural workforce**
Recognise architects as part of the creative workforce and support pathways for early-career, regional and interdisciplinary practice.
- 6. Improve cultural equity through place-based investment**
Prioritise design quality in regional, outer metropolitan and community settings to ensure equitable access to cultural participation.
- 7. Support adaptive reuse and heritage as living cultural infrastructure**
Embed adaptive reuse and heritage renewal within cultural policy to sustain the ongoing cultural and civic value of existing places.

8. Expand public engagement and international representation of Australian architecture

Invest in public education, exhibitions and programs, and strengthen partnerships that support national and international representation of Australian architecture.

5. Conclusion

Culture is not only performed, exhibited, or collected. It is also built, inhabited, and experienced through place.

Architecture is one of Australia's most enduring cultural expressions. It shapes identity, memory, civic life and aspiration, and plays a central role in enabling cultural participation across the nation.

A strong national cultural policy must therefore recognise the built environment as a cultural system in its own right, and architecture as a discipline essential to delivering cultural, social, environmental and economic outcomes.

The Institute urges the Australian Government to explicitly recognise architecture within the next National Cultural Policy and to use the policy as a platform for stronger design quality, deeper cultural stewardship and broader public engagement with the built environment.

The Institute would be pleased to provide implementation guidance on these recommendations and contribute relevant expertise to inform the development of the next National Cultural Policy.

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