

UTS SUBMISSION FOR AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY: REVIVE

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This new National Cultural Policy is a valuable opportunity to not only focus the Federal Government's leadership on profound challenges and opportunities but also use its power to ensure our unique cultural assets are able to compete and excel on a global stage

To do this, we propose that an expanded role for pillar 1, First Nations First, as a cross-cutting platform for recalibrating the policy more broadly across all pillars. In doing so, we argue the next iteration of the NCP can achieve two vital recalibrations:

1. A movement from funding "bricks and mortar" infrastructure to investments in activating country as an infrastructure that promotes an understanding that 'starts and ends with Country. ... Everything is part of a continuum, an endless flow of life and ideas emanating from Country'¹, supporting funding for cultural activities that can have long-lasting economic, environmental and social benefits to the sector and beyond;
2. In turn, in recognising the continuum of country, we advocate for an expansion of the NCP's focus to a more comprehensive and wholistic framework encompassing all forms of cultural and arts activity in Australia.

In so doing, we believe that our First Nations culture can not only be protected, enhanced and celebrated but also be a unique driver of Australia's economic growth – centred through sustainable practices that will make us world-leading in fostering a strong relationship amongst country, creative technologies, creative infrastructure and creative people.

Who we are

Recognised globally for our commitment to positive social impact, UTS ranks among the world's top 100 universities and stands out as a leading partner in building a sustainable future. We work with our partners across the globe to create meaningful change, connecting you with subject matter experts and cutting-edge facilities so together we can tackle the world's big challenges. We contribute to communities in a distinctively UTS way, pairing academic excellence with our collaborative, impact driven approach and a commitment to diversity, social justice, and the self-determination of First Nations peoples.

First Nations First

Revive positioned *First Nations First* as the leading pillar of Australia's National Cultural Policy and recognised that for First Nations peoples "culture is the sum of all things" including language, songlines, sacred sites, stories and traditional knowledge.

Despite this positioning, there remains a significant gap in how the policy engages with Country and the relationship between cultural arts and performance and spatial design disciplines such as architecture, landscape architecture, and urban design. The policy acknowledges visual art, performance, collecting institutions and creative expression, but remains silent on the built (and natural) environment and the role spatial practice plays in shaping contemporary cultural life, identity, truth-telling and relationships to and with Country. As we move towards an era of the spatial internet, where the ability to overlay cultural expression, data and personalised experiences across our landscapes, the omission of these disciplines will become a grave lacuna in our support for the cultural economy.

¹ Page, A. McDermott, P. *Design: Building on Country*, 2021.

Country is inseparable from architecture, landscape(s), making, ceremony and cultural practice. It is as spatial as it is artistic, cultural and technical. Built form, waterways, public space, planting, material are not separate from culture but living expressions.

- A future National Cultural Policy cannot meaningfully position *First Nations First* without a robust national ICIP framework and supporting legislation. While there is current commitment toward federal ICIP reform, Australian law still does not adequately recognise or protect Indigenous knowledge systems, cultural expressions, Country, stories, symbols, language or cultural authority. In practice, protection currently relies largely on individual ethics, goodwill and the creative adaptation of existing legal frameworks. If culture is to sit at the centre of national policy, then the protection of First Nations cultural knowledge, authorship, authority and custodianship must sit at the centre of national law.
- To recognise diverse forms of cultural expression and support pathways for First Nations leadership, the NCP must explicitly include Indigenous-led spatial practice and Designing/Connecting with Country methodologies as core cultural practice, not adjacent.
- Architecture cannot be understood separately from art and culture. For First Nations Peoples, buildings, landscapes, objects, making, ceremony, ecological systems, waterways and cultural practices are interconnected expressions of Country. Art is architecture; architecture is landscape; landscape is cultural practice. Policy frameworks must move beyond siloed understandings of culture and recognise these relationships holistically.

We must therefore recognise that Designing with Country is not simply a design methodology, but a nation-shaping cultural framework with profound implications for environmental repair, truth-telling, education, housing, infrastructure, community wellbeing and Australia's future cultural identity and as such can inform each of the following Four Pillars in the framework.

Recommendations

- Include design and spatial design disciplines within the policy remit and definition of culture adopted by the NCP.
- Commission a series of sandpits that utilise the public infrastructure of university research labs, GLAM sector collections and indigenous-owned businesses to work on machine-readable fair compensation and transparency approaches to working with indigenous IP through Generative AI. These should start with simulations and work with Australian AI Developers to test market scalability of sandpit ideas.

A Place for Every Story & Strong Cultural Infrastructure

Embracing First Nations practices, which are story-telling practices situated in place, allows this second pillar to properly manifest.

The NSW Government Architect's Connecting with Country Framework is an exemplar in this regard and has become nationally influential and has reshaped design practice within NSW through sustained advocacy by Aboriginal practitioners, communities and allies. This work should be recognised as one of the most important contemporary cultural policy and design shifts in the country.

The success of the Connecting with Country Framework also reveals a structural fragility. Much of this work currently relies on continual advocacy, immense cultural labour (and load) and an unsustainable burden placed on a relatively small number of Indigenous practitioners and local Aboriginal communities who are repeatedly asked to educate, review, advise and carry cultural responsibility across projects. A National Designing/Connecting with Country Policy will therefore support the centrality of Place in our national cultural discourse and policy framework by foregrounding First Nations thinking and culture.

To do so will recognise the value of place, placemaking and the experience economy in the role of growing the Australian economy through our cultural and creative sectors. Frontier Economics

research showed that experience spending overtook spending on possessions back in 2005.² According to *Allied Market Research*, this sector is valued at \$5.2tn globally.³ For Australia the opportunity is clear: to leverage our unique indigenous cultures to ensure that experience is intimately connected to place – connecting to country to grow artistic practice that is informed by our world-leading practice in spatial design. In Sydney the value of this can be seen through the work of Placemaking NSW, adding \$3.8bn to our economy, 40,200 jobs and contributing to 0.5% of NSW Gross State Production in 2023-24 through The Rocks, Darling Harbour and Barangaroo initiatives.⁴ The value of these investments however is continually renewed and expanded through the role they play in the experience economy, with festivals like Vivid, Biennale and Sydney Film Festival drawing on these infrastructure to facilitate opportunities for artists and businesses. The economic impact and benefits of designing with Country are immediately evident in the success of the Sydney Fish Market – Sydney’s most popular new cultural destination that mixes fisheries activity with cultural experience centred through principles of designing with country informed by the NSW Framework.

Moreover, such developments speak to the role of the NCP in providing greater leadership in the way in which cultural infrastructure is strengthened, defined and broadened. A First Nations First approach expands the horizon of this pillar which at present sees much of the discussion around infrastructure focused on major institutions and large-scale capital investment. Investment in cultural infrastructure should be balanced alongside sustained investment in students, academics, practitioners, businesses, and (importantly) communities, recognising that buildings and institutions alone cannot achieve long-term cultural impact without parallel investment in the First Nations capacity, leadership and cultural practice required to activate, guide and sustain them, and following this, the broader cohort of creative practitioners in Australia. We should be investing in cultural practices as a capacity building exercise that will result in sophisticated institutions, rather than investing in “bricks and mortar” institutions that lack the capacity to realise their goals. Significantly stronger policy levers and incentives in this space could better leverage and direct private investments around construction and planning which too often build buildings rather than create opportunities: adopting an approach that understands country as cultural infrastructure that underpins all cultural activity may enable us to better support cultural practice as infrastructure as well as bricks and mortar.

Recommendations:

- A future National Cultural Policy should support the development of a national Designing/Connecting with Country Framework, supported through ICIP protections, procurement reform, cultural authority protocols and legislation – modelled on the NSW Government’s framework. Designing with Country should become embedded and mandated across all publicly funded projects nationally, rather than remaining dependent on individual states, institutions or advocates.
- Commission an impact study on the Sydney Fish Market and comparable infrastructure in each state to capture the value-add of public infrastructure that is designed with country in to explore the value created through First Nations led placemaking and experience economy connected.
- Promote an understanding of cultural infrastructure that is based in the continuum of Country: leveraging private investment that is connected to planning permissions to invest in more than bricks and mortar and support the cultural infrastructure of First Nations practice. This should include early outreach, scholarships, mentoring, paid placements, culturally safe education environments and long-term career support. This conversation must extend beyond traditional arts sectors and explicitly include Indigenous spatial practitioners, whose work increasingly sits at the centre of public projects, infrastructure, housing, planning and environmental futures.

² <https://www.londonandpartners.com/newsroom/news-and-communications/how-londons-booming-experience-economy-is-driving-new-inward-investment>

³ <https://holba.london/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/HOLBA-The-Experience-Economy-Report-250203.pdf>

⁴ Placemaking NSW, 2024, *Year in Review*.