

IN ABSENCE



A temporary public artwork and pavilion lamenting the destruction and systemic erasure of Aboriginal knowledge, culture and industry

A 9-m high by 10-m wide cylindrical form located in the Grollo Equiset Garden at the National Gallery of Victoria, the pavilion was clad in rough-sawn Tasmanian ash hardwood and dark-stained to appear charred.

Image: Ben Hosking.

Quick facts

Project type:
Public art – temporary pavilion

Location:
Naarm / Melbourne, Victoria

Aboriginal language landscape group:
Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung and Bunurong Boon Wurrung (Kulin Nation)

Project time frame:
2019–2020

Client:
National Gallery of Victoria

Project scale:
79 m²

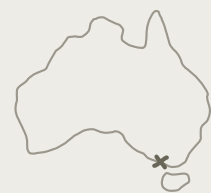
Project team:
Artist
Yhonne Scarce

Architecture
Edition Office
Builder
CBD Contracting Group
Structural Engineer
Farrar D

Plant selection
Zena Cumpston

Awards:
2020 Kevin Borland Award for Small Project Architecture, Australian Institute of Architects Victorian Chapter Awards
2020 Small Project Architecture, Australian Institute of Architects National Awards

2020 Collaboration Commendation, The Design Files
2020 Small Building, Dezeen Awards
2020 Cultural Longlist, Dezeen Awards
2020 Social Space Honourable Mention, INDE.Awards
2019 National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) architectural commission



Commissioned by the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV), the project was a collaboration between Kokatha and Nukunu artist Yhonnie Scarce and Naarm-based architecture studio Edition Office.

Key outcomes

Healthy community

By making Aboriginal peoples' strong connection with cultural identity highly visible in a prominent national institution, this project supported the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal communities.

Cultural competency

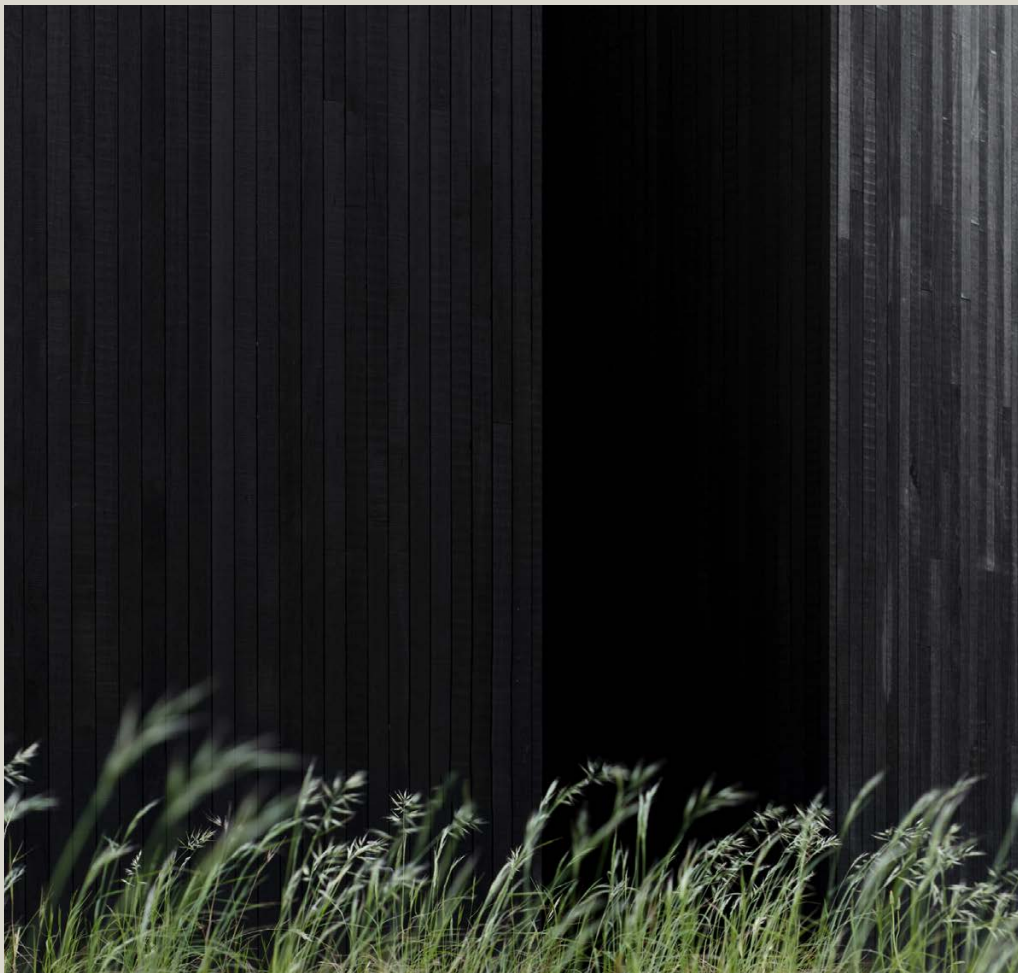
The concept for the project was drawn from various Aboriginal perspectives and research, ensuring that multiple points of view were respectfully considered and represented. The commission provided an educational opportunity for all involved, encouraging a deeper understanding of Aboriginal culture.

Better places

The memories of significant cultural, historic and natural events were embedded and traced within the design, enabling these stories and knowledge to inform and have presence in the experience of the site.

Garden beds surrounding the pavilion were planted with varieties of kangaroo and wallaby grasses that wave in the breeze. 3 species of native yams were planted beneath, with the crop ready for harvest by the time the pavilion was decommissioned and deconstructed.

Image: Ben Hosking.



Spatial implications / tips for designers

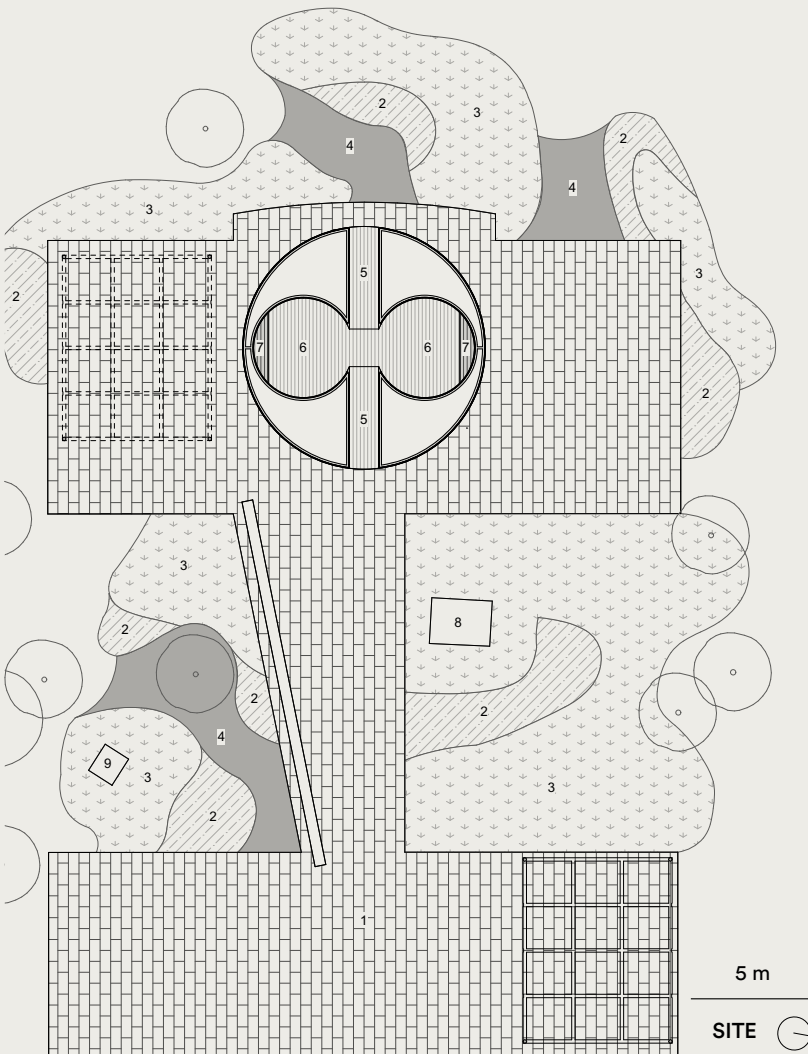
Design spaces to encourage social interactions, learning and cultural exchange.

Consider how powerful singular forms can be layered with many narratives.

Single projects can provide multiple opportunities for the voices and contributions of Aboriginal consultants, researchers, writers and practitioners.

Orientation, sightlines, and interaction with wind, light, sound and temperature can enable a powerful experience of a site and a heightened sense of connection with place.

The cylindrical form was bisected through its entirety, creating a tall, narrow slice of void through its centre that allowed visitors to enter. Set on axis with the institutional form of the NGV, the void directly addressed the gallery entrance, forcing confrontation and emphasising the presence of absence of acknowledged histories, stories and cultural richness.
 Images: Ben Hosking



Site plan illustrating the 10-m wide cylindrical form located in the Grollo Equiset Garden at the National Gallery of Victoria.

Image: Edition Office.

Legend

- 1 NGV Grollo Equiset Garden forecourt
- 2 Murnong plantings
- 3 Kangaroo and wallaby grass plantings
- 4 Basalt stone paths
- 5 In Absence – entrance void
- 6 In Absence – inner chamber
- 7 In Absence – Seating
- 8 Henry Moore Draped seated women
- 9 Auguste Rodin Balzac



In Absence was a temporary pavilion that was constructed in the Grollo Equiset Garden at the National Gallery of Victoria. It was selected as the fifth annual NGV architecture commission, an ongoing initiative seeking temporary works of architecture that are ‘thought-provoking, immersive, and resonant’.

NGV selects an architecture commission each year through a 2-stage, open competition process managed by procurement specialist CityLab. The open process of the commission encourages multidisciplinary teams to collaborate on proposals. This project was a collaboration between artist Yhonnie Scarce, a descendant of the

Kokatha and Nukunu people of South Australia, and Naarm-based architecture studio Edition Office.

The pavilion was designed in response to the NGV’s main building (designed in the 1960s by architect Sir Roy Grounds), a dark and enigmatic monolith exerting its presence in the gardens of this colonial institution. In **Absence’s** strong physical presence represented a challenge to the long-term colonial narratives that fail to acknowledge the rich histories and vast networks of Aboriginal culture, agriculture, aquaculture, industry and architecture.

Within the context of the garden site, the exterior form of the tower asserted itself at the entry point by rising up against the backdrop of the celebrated Roy Grounds building. The dialogue between the 2 structures drew attention to an imbalanced culture and history that seeks recalibration and recognition of past ignorance and myopia.

Confronting colonial legacies

In *Absence* exemplified the potential of architecture to challenge colonial legacies rather than reinforce them. The pavilion combined simple architectural manoeuvres (scale, height, orientation) with rich symbolic meaning to assert the unassailable depth of Aboriginal knowledge. The simple geometries and elemental forms were intentionally abstract in design, avoiding references to the Western architectural canon. This ambiguity allowed visitors to approach the structure without preconceptions or bias, with an openness to sensing, experiencing and interpreting what was presented.

The pavilion was a towering 9-m high by 10-m wide cylindrical form, bisected through its entirety, creating a tall, narrow void through its centre that allowed visitors to enter. It was set on axis with the institutional form of the NGV, the void directly addressing the gallery's

entrance, forcing confrontation. The presence of absence was made powerfully visible, acknowledging the forced cultural disconnect still at the heart of Indigeneity today.

The dark solidity of the exterior acted as a shield, protecting views into an intimate interior. A narrow pathway drew visitors in towards 2 internal chambers, twin circular hollows mirrored across the void, small in footprint yet soaring upwards to orient the gaze towards the sky. The symmetry of the chambers flattened hierarchy in these spaces. They looked directly into one another, in conversation, with a spatial intimacy that commanded attention. The dark walls of the chambers created a 'theatre of time' as the sun moved overhead and cast light down into the void. Visitors were engulfed by the pavilion and by Country in these chambers, quiet spaces with only a bench, designed for contemplation about absence and responsibility.

In *Absence* speaks directly to the richness of architecture, agriculture and industry of the traditional custodians of this land, the presence of which sadly lies hidden within the deep myopic shadows of this nation's history.

—Aaron Roberts and Kim Bridgland, architects, Edition Office

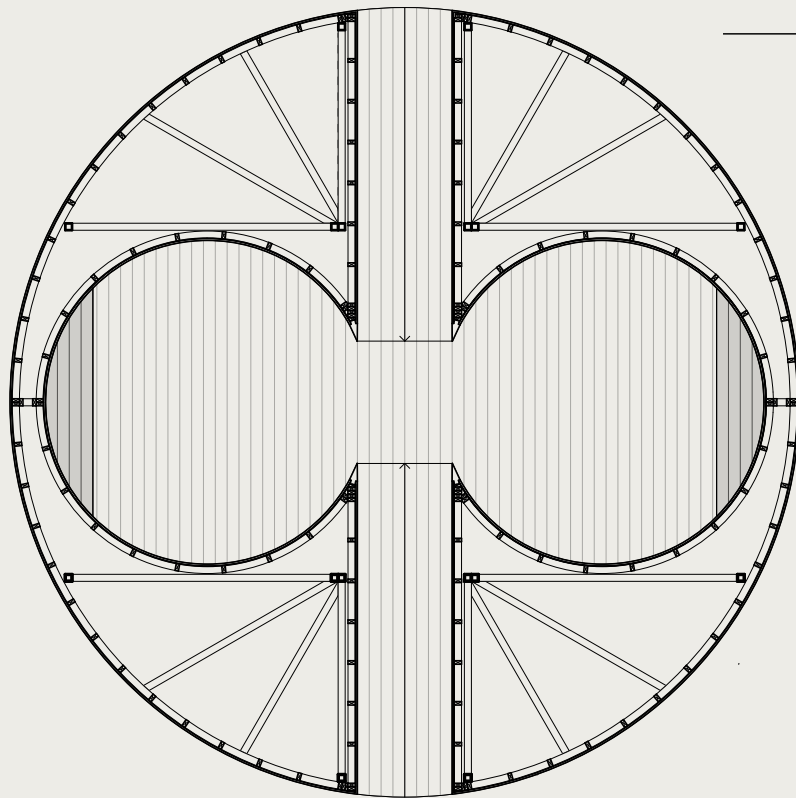
Twin C-shaped chambers were held within the tall cylindrical form.

Image: Ben Hosking.



Plan of In Absence, showing the twin chambers, seating and timber walls.

Image: Edition Office.



5 m



Using rich symbolism

Despite the architecture's refined simplicity, the work was rich with symbolism referencing the sophistication of Aboriginal infrastructure and technologies at the time of colonisation. The twin C-shaped chambers mimicked the form and scale of the permanent homes that existed in many Aboriginal communities, often constructed of stone, timber and bark, with reed thatching. The hollows of these chambers also recalled the charred interiors of smoking trees, used to smoke and preserve eels and fish for trade or storage.

The void that consumed the heart of the pavilion also referenced the structure of stone eel traps that sustained aquacultural farming. Rather than a literal reference in shape, it recalled the design principles behind these traps that were engineered to lure eels and pull them into pockets of water where they could be caught easily. In the same way, the pavilion directed visitors through the void and into the circular chambers where they were held, pausing to consider the breadth and intelligence of Aboriginal living ecosystems.

Celebrating ancient technologies through contemporary cultural practices

Within the twin chambers, clinging to the walls and seeping from the gaps between boards, 1,600 glass murnong climbed towards the sky. These blown-glass yams were the work of Kokatha and Nukunu artist Yhonnie Scarce, whose work frequently dwells on colonial trauma and mistruth in cultural narratives. The murnong, also known as yam daisies, were a literal reference to their significance as a staple crop for countless Aboriginal communities across the continent. In *Dark Emu* (2014), a seminal book by Bunurong, Palawa and Yuin author Bruce Pascoe, murnong are a symbol of Aboriginal agriculture, evidencing thousands of years of

sophisticated and sensitive land management dismissed in favour of colonial narratives.

These inky-black glass forms are a signature of Scarce's work, leaning into the imperfection and individuality that arises from the glassblowing process to make reference to Aboriginal bush tucker and food-sharing cultures. Yet, in the pavilion, these organic forms appeared anthropomorphic, shape-shifting. The murnong resembled wriggling eels, or fat leeches, oil from fish or medicinal sap from trees. For Scarce, they also recalled Aboriginal traditions of mapping waterways and stars, glossy surfaces that glitter as the sun moves across the sky.

Held within these metaphors, the murnong filled the space with the echoing presence of Aboriginal resistance to and resilience through colonisation. They reinforced the pavilion's interrogation of the absence of truth, and the celebration of Aboriginal knowledge, agriculture and industry.

Given life through breath, the glass is fragile to some extent, but these yams reference the resilience of Aboriginal people. They have this strength about them. They take on their own personality, their own existence.

—Yhonnie Scarce, Kokatha and Nukunu artist

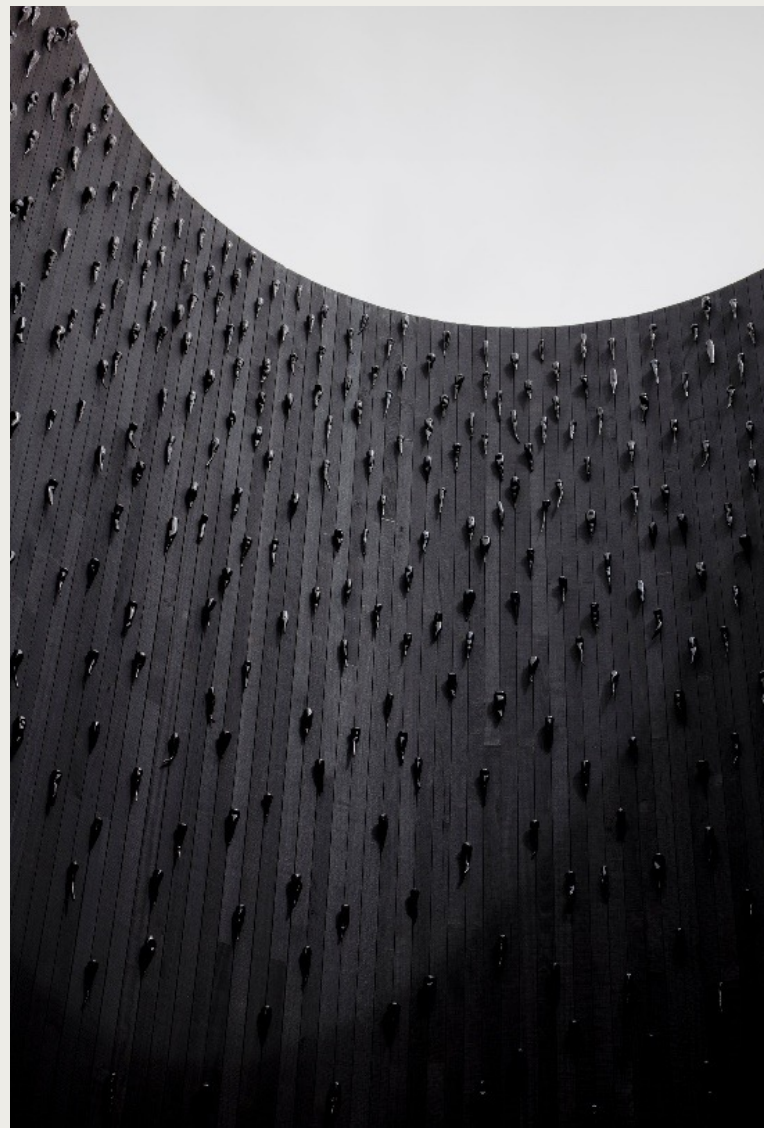
Evoking Country through sensory and temporal experiences

The first impression of the pavilion from a distance was of material uniformity, while the textures and heightened sensory qualities that revealed themselves on approach referenced Country. *In Absence* was entirely clad in rough-sawn Tasmanian ash hardwood varieties, texturally rich and dark-stained to appear as though charred. Its materiality recalled a strong tree, burnt by the heat of fire. Yet this tree still stands, its core uncompromised; just as charred timber naturally protects itself against the elements, its dark skin merely forms a protective layer.

Scent was introduced into the work to amplify the sensory experience. The lingering smell of ash and eucalypt permeated the twin chambers. Scent activates memory, recalling previous experiences of Country, the memories attached to them, and creating new ones.

In Absence was also set within a highly-textured native landscape designed specifically for this commission. Pathways formed by basalt rock referenced long traditions of Aboriginal stone toolmaking and weapon-making. Gardens beds surrounding the pavilion were planted with varieties of kangaroo and wallaby grasses. Hidden beneath the grasses, 3 species of murnong (native yams, or yam daisies) planted in the soil referenced their importance as an Aboriginal staple crop. By the time the pavilion was decommissioned and deconstructed, a mature bed of native crops was revealed: yams ready for harvest and grass seeds that could be ground into flour.

These smart, sensory applications of material and landscaping embodied the persistence of Aboriginal ecosystem knowledge through time and the cyclical nature of Country through seasons of management and harvest.



Within the twin chambers, clinging to the walls and seeping from the gaps between boards, 1,600 glass murnong (yam daisies) climbed towards the sky, by Kokatha and Nukunu artist Yhonnie Scarce.

Image: Ben Hosking

Further resources

Audio and video recordings

'Artist Talk – In Absence: NGV Architecture Commission 2019' video, Yhonnie Scarce and Edition Office interview by Ewan McEoin, Hugh DT Williamson Senior Curator of Contemporary Design and Architecture, National Gallery of Victoria, <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/multimedia/talk-in-absence-ngv-architecture-commission-2019/>.

Books and writing

Pascoe B (2014) *Dark Emu*, Magabala Books.

Mokak LA (2020) 'Memory keeper: *In Absence*', *Architecture Australia*, March 2020, <https://architectureau.com/articles/in-absence/>.

McEoin E (2019) *In Absence*, *Yhonnie Scarce and Edition Office, 2019 NGV Architecture Commission* webpage, National Gallery of Victoria website, <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/essay/in-absence-yhonnie-scarce-and-edition-office-2019-ngv-architecture-commission/>.

Sachathep T (2019) *In Absence – This year's architecture commission winner at the NGV* webpage, The Local Project website, <https://thelocalproject.com.au/articles/on-now-in-absence-by-yhonnie-scarce-and-edition-office-ngv-news/>.

Tan S (2019) *In Absence: Symbolic of both life and death* webpage, InDesignLive website, Indesign Media, <https://www.indesignlive.com/news/in-absence-symbolic-of-both-life-and-death>.

Credits

Research and writing:

Isabelle Toland and Janelle Woo (Aileen Sage Architects)

In collaboration with:

Dillon Kombumerri (Government Architect NSW)