

YARRILA PLACE



Yarrila Place strives to create a place that is welcoming to all and connects strongly with the many layers of this place and its people

An impressive fig tree stands proudly at the entry, welcoming people to the site. The form of the building adapts to accommodate it, encircling and embracing it.

Image: BVN.

Quick facts

Project type:
Community, cultural and civic building

Location:
Coffs Harbour, NSW

Aboriginal language landscape group:
Gumbaynggirr

Project commencement – construction completion:
2019–23

Client:
Coffs Harbour City Council



Project scale:
10,000 m², 6 storeys

Project team:
Architecture
BVN

Builder
Lipman
Coffs Harbour City Council
Uncle Richard Widders,
Coffs Harbour City Council
Aboriginal planner

Artists
Zakpage

Interpretation
Thylacine

Gumbaynggirr community representatives

Gumbaynggirr Art Trail Selection Panel
Jo Besley, Coffs Harbour City Council; Ricky Buchanan, Community; Aunty Deb Dootson, Garby Elders and Yandarra; Aunty Yvette Pacey, Chair of the Garlambirla Guuyu-Girrwa (Coffs Harbour Aboriginal Elders Group); Patricia Wallace, Deputy Chair of Coffs Harbour Local Aboriginal Land Council; Alison Williams, Garby and Creative Director, Wadjar Regional Indigenous Gallery, Yarrawarra Aboriginal Cultural Centre; Tori Donnelly, first YAM exhibition curator

Yarrila Place is a community and cultural building in the town centre of Coffs Harbour in northern NSW. Designed for all communities in the Coffs Harbour area, including a diverse range of Aboriginal and migrant communities, Yarrila Place is named after a Gumbaynggirr word that means ‘illuminate, brighten, light up or illustrate’.

Key outcomes

Healthy community

This project acknowledges multiple overlapping layers of heritage and culture: from the first layer of Aboriginal Country, to subsequent layers of colonisation, infrastructure, multiculturalism and ongoing diversity. Recognition of these layers creates a place in which all people feel recognised and valued.

Cultural competency

Yarrila Place has provided an opportunity for the project team, client and public to develop a deeper cultural awareness and respect for all peoples and communities in the area, acknowledging their highly varied experiences and perspectives. This includes multiple First Nations groups, migrant groups with connections to the area over many generations, and those who have more recently joined the community.

Better places

Materials, spaces and building form relate to stories of the site and its surrounds. The design team used a Country-centred approach to inform its sustainable, place-based design response, founded on strong community engagement, creating a welcoming and accessible place for all.

Spatial implications / tips for designers

Reveal and reconnect the original layers of Country that still exist and are the foundations of a site.

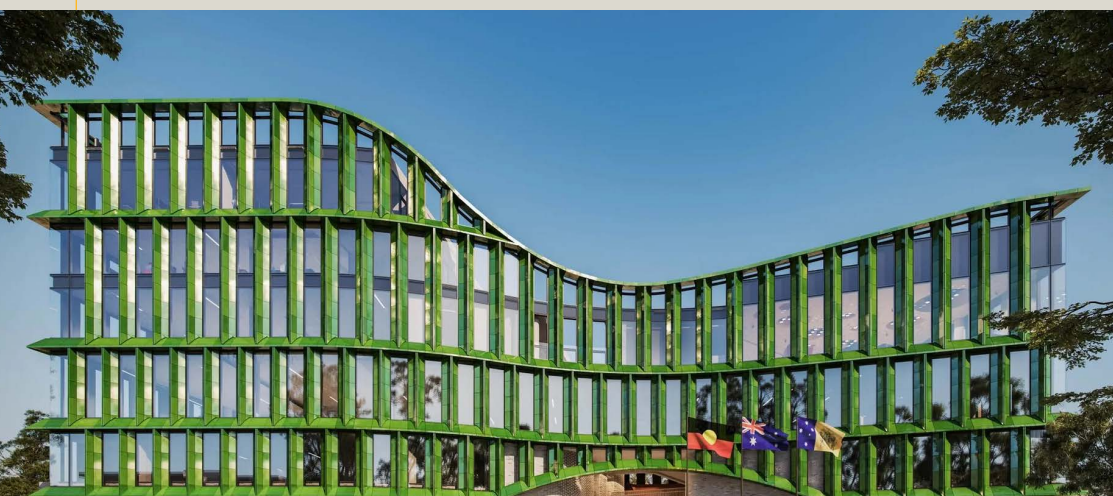
Consider opportunities for layered narratives and experiences that enable multiple stories and perspectives.

Abstract translations can enable multiple readings, providing potential for an inclusive, multilayered experience within a singular and powerful design strategy.

Consider how outdoor and indoor spaces connect, and how architecture can make visual and physical connections to context and Country.

Identify opportunities for Aboriginal artists, cultural consultants and practitioners throughout the design phase and ongoing use. This helps Aboriginal businesses and communities to continue their living cultural practices.

Consider supporting the living cultural practices of all groups within the community, and opportunities for cross-cultural learning and collaboration.



The building is clad in a brightly coloured glazed ceramic skin. Its unique form and expression speak to the natural features and qualities of the region.

Image: BVN.



The public rooftop garden provides space for public events and gatherings.

Image: BVN.

The project design team included Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal members, who strove to create a place that is welcoming to all, connecting strongly with the many layers of this place and its people.

BVN's lead architect for the project, Matthew Blair, is non-Aboriginal. He grew up in Coffs Harbour, bringing an understanding of the local place and community. Matthew worked with Aboriginal architect and BVN principal, Kevin O'Brien (Kaurareg and Meriam), to connect the design with local Aboriginal people and layers of meaning.

Coffs Harbour has one of the highest and fastest growing levels of cultural diversity in regional New South Wales. Since 2008 it has been a dedicated refugee and migration resettlement area and has a larger proportion of people speaking languages other than English at home than any other city in regional NSW. Yarrila Place aims to provide a place that is welcoming to all people of the community, present and future.

Yarrila Place includes a public library, adaptable event spaces, creative spaces, a cafe, an art museum and council services. The library provides dedicated areas for children, young adults, local history and private study. Yarrila Art Museum (YAM) celebrates local stories and creative practices. An open-air rooftop garden is open to the public, and there are maker spaces, creative places and a dedicated young adults' terrace.

Community driven

The Coffs Harbour Civic Building Community Lobby Group was instrumental in working with the Coffs Harbour City Council on the brief development and site selection for the project through many years of community consultation. Yarrila Place combines a variety of community functions and services, from arts and culture to technology and educational programs, to create a vibrant community hub for all ages and diverse backgrounds.

All welcoming

This is a place for every cultural thread of Coffs Harbour, including the diverse range of indigenous and migrant communities. This blend is woven into the very fabric of the building – the result of many conversations and ideas explored in collaboration with local communities. Brightly coloured, uniquely shaped and prominently situated, it's designed to be visible, welcoming, and memorable.

—BVN, Yarrila Place webpage, BVN website, www.bvn.com.au/project/yarrila-place

Yarrila Place seeks to create a variety of spaces in volume, size and type, that will be welcoming to a diverse range of people in age, cultural background and interests. It provides both programmed and open spaces for flexible use.

A design anchored by the landscape

Three natural features anchor the design: the sparkling waters of the harbour, the surrounding mountain range with its verdant landscape, and a huge historic fig tree located on the site. The design is driven by these features.

These are not just orienting features but meaningful points of reference that resonate for the community as they do for the design of Yarrila.

—BVN, Yarrila Place webpage, BVN website, www.bvn.com.au/project/yarrila-place

The harbour is seen as a place of refuge and welcome, and the pockets of subtropical rainforest that are characteristic of the area are lush and exuberant. Through discussions with community groups a desire was expressed for the building to have an overt expression in form and finish that represented the forest and the ocean, the waves and deep gorges with sun streaming through.

A symbol of resilience

The large lone fig tree on the site became a metaphor for the resilience and strength of Country despite the layers of colonial infrastructure (roads and buildings) that had been forced over it. Its roots were engaged with the footpath and, despite the 1980s car park that had been built around it, it had flourished through adversity. This became a potent tool to communicate the ideas and ambitions of the project.

The impressive fig tree stands proudly at the entry, welcoming people to the site. The form of the building adapts to accommodate it, encircling and embracing it. It is a focal point of the centre.

A cultural landmark

The vision for the project was one of optimism and a promising future – hence the name that was selected – Yarrila – the Gumbaynggirr word for ‘illuminate, brighten, light up or illustrate’.

Yarrila Place sits in the middle of Coffs City Centre, in a coastal valley of the Great Dividing Range. It’s a distinctive structure wrapped in a glazed ceramic skin, proudly announcing its presence and optimism.

—BVN, Yarrila Place webpage, BVN website, www.bvn.com.au/project/yarrila-place

Wayfinding via the Track

Inserted into the heart of the building is a tall, internal open air ‘street’ or ‘track’ that connects the ground to the sky, making Country present from within the centre of the building. Like the creek which runs through the centre of the town, this internal space runs through the middle of the building, linking everything. The local Council’s intention is that this will become a 24-hour public open space.

The Track is a wayfinding and architectural device that Kevin O’Brien developed in collaboration with the Gumbaynggirr community. The Track will take visitors on a journey through Gumbaynggirr Country as they move through the building from the ground floor to the rooftop terrace along a continuous circulation path. The internal space reflects the curvature of the giant fig tree nearby. On the rooftop, places are provided to sit and look out into the tree canopy and out to the harbour beyond.

Around 20 locations in Gumbaynggirr Country are referenced along the Track. These were determined by traditional knowledge-holders from each of the 6 clan groups – Bagawa, Garby, Garlambirla, Yurrunga, Ngambaga and Gambalamam. Six artworks by Gumbaynggirr artists are being commissioned to respond to place names from each clan and will be located across 3 floors of the building. Local Aboriginal organisation Saltwater Freshwater Arts Alliance with the National Aboriginal Design Agency have been engaged by Coffs Harbour City Council to develop and deliver the artworks.

Welcome to Country

Consultation with community groups and stakeholder engagement clearly identified strong support for the integration of Gumbaynggirr language and culture throughout the building. Several key projects were identified to ensure cultural recognition, celebration and ownership, including the Art Trail along the Track, a Welcome to Country in the new Yarrila Arts Museum (YAM), and the first art exhibition to open YAM, ‘Yaam Gumbaynggirr Jagun: Here is Gumbaynggirr Country’. The exhibition will be curated by Tori Donnelly, a First Nations artist and curator with connections to Gumbaynggirr and Bundjalung Country.

The Welcome to Country will take the form of a digital audio-visual work by Zakpage (a creative partnership between Alison Page with Nik Lachajczak) in collaboration with Thylacine interpretive design and members of the Gumbaynggirr community. The work will sit prominently at the entrance to YAM. It will welcome visitors to land, sea and sky country.

Council is going well beyond the local government boundary and incorporating the footprint of the entire Gumbaynggirr nation into the building. This is a symbol that Yarrila Place is a truly regional hub to visit, embrace and enjoy. This will be a place for past present and future to blend together for everyone's benefit.

—Uncle Richard Widders, Aboriginal planner, Coffs Harbour City Council

Facilitating cultural sharing

The opportunity for cultural sharing is evident in the experience of the completed design, and was also evident throughout the collaborative process of developing the design. Through a shared understanding and reading of Country, from multiple perspectives, the sharing of culture and knowledge has been embedded into both the design process, the design itself, and the ongoing life of the building.

An outdoor atrium spans the centre of the building, leading to a new public rooftop garden.

Image: BVN.



Genuine sustainability

Genuine sustainability understands Country – in which all things are equally important and interrelated. This means understanding where materials are being taken from, how they are extracted from Country, the practices used to form them, and what impact this has.

Sustainability also considers how community connection with a building design, methods of construction and ongoing participation in the life of the building can create a sense of value and belonging within community. Ideally a project's development process will create a desire to care for the outcome, value it as a living part of community and Country, and sustain its life into the future.

Genuinely consider the sustainability credentials and opportunities for a project from the outset. Ensure the client and design team are realistic in their programming and cost plans to ensure sustainability ambitions are realised and remain uncompromised through all stages to project completion and the ongoing life of the building.

Consider how early Aboriginal engagement can enrich design

We are now, in 2023, at a significant junction in Australian design practice. It is 3 years since the first version of the GANSW Draft Connecting with Country Framework. In recent years there has been a significant increase nationally in considering how architects and designers can meaningfully engage and support First Nations practitioners, consultants, knowledge-holders, businesses and communities.

Consider opportunities for Aboriginal consultants and Aboriginal-owned businesses at all stages

On large projects, there are many opportunities for the engagement of Aboriginal consultants, practitioners and businesses through the course of design, development, delivery and ongoing operations. These opportunities need to be considered and planned for at the outset.

Further resources

Audio and video recordings

Yarrila Place Fly-Through video, *Yarrila Place Project* webpage, Coffs Harbour City Council website, <https://www.coffsharbour.nsw.gov.au/Your-Council/Projects-and-initiatives/Current-projects/Yarrila-Place-Project>.

'Living with Country – Kevin O'Brien on architecture' broadcast, *Blueprint for Living*, ABC Radio National, 7 August 2021 <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/blueprintforliving/living-with-country-kevin-obrien-on-architecture/13485096>.

Books and writing

Kevin O'Brien, Timmah Ball, Bradley Kerr, Elisapeta Heta and Georgia Birks; (2022) 'Get comfortable with being uncomfortable: Supporting First Nations practitioners', *Architecture Australia*, 8 September 2022, https://architectureau.com/articles/aa2209_discussion_indigenizing_practice/.

For instance, they may include consultation, archaeology, archival services, site history research, engineering, artwork design and fabrication, construction, landscape design, horticulture, landscape supply and ongoing maintenance, partnerships with Aboriginal training programs, and giving precedence to suppliers and contractors with established accredited Aboriginal training programs and initiatives. Consideration also needs to be given to respecting local Aboriginal communities, businesses and programs or those with specific connections to the site and history of the project.

To our non-Indigenous practitioners, my advice is this: get comfortable with being uncomfortable. Shake off any ego or fragility around this shift. Lean in to having two ears and one mouth – do twice as much listening. The Indigenous world view is inherently different and that difference – the idea that everything you know to be true needs to be challenged, overturned and re-analyzed – is an uncomfortable space. The idea that knowledge-holders from outside of 'traditional' practice might be able not only to challenge but to add inextricable value to the creation of the built environment is an opportunity to add value to your program and your budget. I promise.

—Elisapeta Heta, 'Get comfortable with being uncomfortable: Supporting First Nations practitioners', *Architecture Australia*, 8 September 2022

BVN (no date) *Yarrila Place* webpage, BVN website, <https://www.bvn.com.au/project/yarrila-place>.

Coffs Harbour City Council (2021) *Gumbaynggirr Culture Will Weave Through Yarrila Place* media release, 3 November 2021, Coffs Harbour City Council website, <https://www.coffsharbour.nsw.gov.au/Your-Council/Newsroom/Gumbaynggirr-Culture-Will-Weave-Through-Yarrila-Place>.

Credits

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