Recent work in rural and remote Australia

Iredale Pedersen Hook

Words by Elizabeth Grant

The work of Iredale Pedersen Hook seeks to lessen the divide between the health, economic and educational outcomes of urban dwellers and those of people living in rural and remote areas of Australia, and to realize indigenous aspirations. Elizabeth Grant speaks with the practice directors about harnessing government agendas in order to support and help maintain cultural practices.
The non-institutional design of the Fitzroy Crossing Renal Hostel in Fitzroy Crossing, Western Australia (2017) meets the socio-spatial and cultural needs of its Indigenous users, enabling them to access renal dialysis on Country.

Architectural typologies that function well in urban settings often do not work for people in rural and remote areas. Away from metropolitan centres, the design of institutional and community buildings and housing needs to be reconceptualized to consider the context of the project and the needs of rural and remote users and, particular to architecture in Australia, the cultural and socio-spatial needs and aspirations of Indigenous peoples.

Recent architectural works in Western Australia have been pivotal in the reconceptualization of architectural typologies across a number of genres. In particular, the work of Iredale Pedersen Hook (IPH) seeks to lessen the divide between the health, economic and educational outcomes of urban dwellers and those of individuals living in rural and remote areas, and to realize Indigenous aspirations. Since its formation in 1999, the practice has been grounded in the design of culturally appropriate, accessible housing and social, community and regional infrastructure. IPH has pursued a number of goals and thematic concerns, from seeking social equity through architectural excellence and building for extreme climatic conditions to using Country as the genius loci and collaborating with Indigenous peoples to ensure true participation in the design process.

The Fitzroy Crossing Renal Hostel, completed in 2017, realizes these goals. Located in a remote town in Western Australia’s Kimberley region, Fitzroy Crossing Renal Hostel allows Indigenous people to stay on Country while receiving dialysis. Indigenous people in remote and very remote areas are up to twenty times more likely to suffer from end-stage kidney disease than non-Indigenous people. The burden of being off Country and separated from family and kin for triweekly dialysis causes great distress. The Fitzroy Crossing Renal Hostel provides long-term accommodation for residents and kin. The design comprises thirteen one- and two-bedroom spaces, distributed over six cottages, each with a front verandah for users to observe activity and the surrounds of each cottage and a private external sleep-out at the rear. The non-institutional design provides small gathering areas to ensure residents remain connected with others, and larger areas for community events. Colour and light are integral to the design. Light is filtered and coloured by screens responding to various levels of privacy and integrated with the landscape to create a welcoming and highly liveable therapeutic environment that fits the socio-spatial and cultural needs of its Indigenous users. As IPH codirector Finn Pedersen observes, “All things architectural are contextual. It is about people. We have to take a government agenda, push the boundaries and translate it into an Aboriginal agenda to produce architecture that fits people’s needs.”

IPH pursued the important Indigenous agenda of reaffirming Indigenous rights and connections to Country and dignifying Indigenous identity through design in the Bilya Koort Boodja Centre for Nyoongar Culture and Environmental Knowledge. The centre is located in Northam, eighty-two kilometres north-east of Perth at the confluence of the Avon and Mortlock Rivers (Bilya Koort Boodja translated means “river heart land”). It serves two main functions. The first is operating as a “keeping house” for traditional and contemporary Ballardong Nyoongar Knowledges, with oral histories, ceremony and Indigenous Knowledges incorporated and revealed through the design. The act of designing the building, and the structure itself, are tangible symbols of the unification of local peoples, their rights to Country...
In Northam, the Bilya Koort Boodja Centre for Nyoongar Culture and Environmental Knowledge (2018) is at once a keeping house for local Indigenous knowledge and an educational and tourism venue.

The building is oriented toward the riverbank and hovers above the floodplain.
On the building's western edge, a wide verandah overlooking the river acts as a generous outdoor room and frames views of the river.

IPH and exhibition designer Thylacine worked in collaboration with the Aboriginal community to generate the brief for the building.

Connections are forged with the pedestrian path along the river and the adjacent bridge.
The Cunderdin Health Centre (2018) in Cunderdin, Western Australia is intended to promote good health, prevent illness and manage chronic health issues in regional communities, minimizing time spent in hospitals. The centre’s therapeutic design stresses access to natural light and a connection to the external environment.

The Cunderdin Health Centre, located just over 135 kilometres east of Perth in the wheatbelt of Western Australia, was conceived as a health initiative that would keep people in community and out of hospitalised settings. It provides access to a range of services and 24/7 emergency care. It contains an emergency department, ambulance bays, telehealth videoconferencing facilities, four multipurpose consult rooms enabled with telehealth, group therapy rooms and consultation and treatment spaces. Residents benefit from close proximity to medical care, allowing patients – even those with complex health issues – to live locally. A sense of gravitas and permanence is embedded in the design, with carefully selected materials that relate to both historic and contemporary contexts, the form and materials reflecting the surrounding natural environment. The therapeutic design stresses access to natural light and a connection to the external environment, its inner spaces filled with soft southern light. Carefully placed windows reveal the surrounding context, aiding orientation. Local artist Jennifer Hopewell’s landscape paintings of the wheatbelt, which feature soft edges, colourful stains, layered patterns and local motifs, have been manipulated using a colour glass-printing process onto a series of windows, doors and aluminium screens to provide privacy and to aid in orientation and wayfinding. The project is built alongside new “ageing in place” accommodation, an innovative solution that allows people with complex health needs to continue to live in their community.

There is a rift across Australia. Vast distances mean that rural and remote areas lack housing and social, community and regional infrastructure, resulting in a divide between the health, economic and educational outcomes of people living in cities and those of people living in the bush. Rural and remote architectural typologies need to be compatible with the climate, the landscape and the sociocultural needs, resources and – equally importantly – the aspirations of users, if we are to have effective sustainable buildings that demonstrate a responsible environmental and social agenda. Speaking of IPH’s rural and remote works, Pedersen observes, “A merry-go-round of forgetting occurs with each successive government. Their responses to planning and architectural design are sometimes overbearing and colonial... each piece of architecture needs to embody a unique design response demonstrating [the architect’s] capacity to embrace the context and the complexity of experience.”

— Elizabeth Grant is an adjunct professor of architecture at the University of Canberra and an adjunct associate professor at the Indigenous Design Place at the University of Queensland. She is the lead editor of The Handbook of Contemporary Indigenous Architecture (Springer, 2018).

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