



WHAT IF? WHAT NEXT?

SPECULATIONS ON HISTORY'S FUTURES

SESSION 3B

COUNTERING THE CANON/S

Activism and Agency in Architectural History:
Migrancy, Gender Diversity, Class

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RE-VISIONING AND RE-FRAMING ARCHITECTURAL KNOWLEDGE: FROM IMPERIAL FOUNDATIONS TO SHIFTING GROUND

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Historical architectural canons are etched, illustrated and housed in leather-bound embossed volumes: their form and content fixed as they stand proud on library shelves. The knowledge and stories of Aboriginal peoples' are shared and inscribed differently: spoken, drawn, sung or danced into being, transcending vast eons and times. Given that Aboriginal knowledges are shared differently, how well have architecture's imperial foundations prepared us for contemporary practice?

This paper proposes the idea that including the knowledge of Australia's First Peoples and re-framing our points of reference from the core canons of architecture could inform new ways to practice architecture. My recent PhD thesis, "Aboriginal Stories of Victoria Park: Navigation, consultation and engagement: Design engagement on colonised and contested urban land," compared oral knowledge with written understandings of design consultation processes for Aboriginal design projects in urban and contested locations.

This paper shares some of those findings along with some historical and contemporary contexts relevant to consultation and engagement for Aboriginal design projects. Finally, it challenges architectural educators and practitioners to re-centre and re-frame their educational and architectural practices as living, contemporary and dynamic examples of Maori educator Linda Tuhiwai Smith's "small spaces on shifting ground."

Historical architectural canons are etched, illustrated and housed in leather-bound embossed volumes: their form and content fixed to the times of their creation as they inhabit our library shelves and educational establishments. The knowledge of Australia's First Peoples are inscribed differently: painted, etched, drawn, spoken, sung and danced into being, transcending vast eons and times. Is it possible that knowledge held, taught and shared differently could transform contemporary architectural practice?

In Homi Bhabha's view, "the revision of the history of critical theory rests ... on cultural difference, not cultural diversity". Diversity is another word for difference, but while diversity can be broad and encompassing, difference sits at the interface—relative to its comparative "other". This paper sits at the interface of difference as it draws on the author's PhD research: Aboriginal Stories of Victoria Park: Navigation, consultation and engagement: Design engagement on colonised and contested urban land". The Aboriginal Stories of Victoria Park research compared the oral knowledge of Aboriginal peoples and non-aboriginal peoples with written knowledge on design consultation for Aboriginal design projects with a focus on contested urban land in the Sydney area.¹ It applied the ideas of Maori educator Linda Tuhiwai Smith to decolonise research methodologies from an outsider position with the aim to reframe our knowledge of architectural practice for Aboriginal peoples in urban locations.² This paper takes a next step by asking if architectural education, history and practice can take up the call of Linda Tuhiwai-Smith's decolonising methodologies to re-frame architecture beyond its imperial foundations?³

Historical Background

On 26 January, 1788, the First Fleet landed near the waterway called *Warrane*, now called Port Jackson.⁴ This was the land of the *Gadigal* people, a smaller clan of the coastal *Dharug* language group. At that time, the *Dharug* peoples' population is estimated to be around 1500 people within a ten kilometre radius, with fifty or sixty members of the *Gadigal* clan in Sydney's CBD.⁵ However by 1791, a devastating smallpox epidemic and famine had killed 50-90 percent of the *Dharug* language group and only three *Gadigal* people are known to have survived.⁶

The *Dharug* and other Aboriginal language and clan groups identify with specific areas of land—their *Country*.⁷ They have their own *Dreamings*, clan boundaries, sacred sites, rituals, traditions and responsibilities for managing and caring for *Country*.⁸ While Aboriginal peoples' clan "boundaries" are associated with terrain, territorial and topographical features, non-Aboriginal people more typically identify land through signposting and Cartesian mapping.⁹ This is just one example of difference in the ways cultures have their own traditions, norms, and processes.

Difference, Diversity and Design Consultation

Different cultures have different ways of knowing and being (epistemological and ontological difference), of understanding creation (cosmological difference), of authorising knowledge and authority and different business methods.¹⁰ Aboriginal peoples' business practices in the Northern Territory were once compared by economist Richard Seymour.¹¹ Seymour found that while social enterprises and NGOs were more likely to focus on social or cultural values, business and commercial entrepreneurship were more likely to focus on economic values (Fig. 1).¹²

Different business approaches have different priorities, timelines and consultation practices. Interviewee Gary Ella described a time when he coordinated engagement with the *Multitjulu* community during the Sydney Olympics preparations.¹³ When it was time for their planned meeting, sadly someone had passed away. According to local cultural practices, "sorry business" took priority over those of the Olympics Committee meeting, which had to wait three more days. Ella explained:

That work building a relationship was so important and they [SOCOG] just thought it was a business deal, but it wasn't a business deal. There were all those type of issues that we needed to deal with and sometimes it was just saying to SOCOG just pull your head in, we'll

get through this, we'll get this done, just pull your head in for five minutes. 'Cause there were times where they were just trying to rush things through because they're on deadlines...¹⁴



Figure 1. Conceptualizing entrepreneurship, business and NGO activities. Source: Richard G. Seymour, *Handbook of Research Methods on Social Entrepreneurship*, p.4. Courtesy Richard G. Seymour, 2016

Design traditions also have their own techniques, skills, jargon and discourses and these can affect design success or failure.¹⁵ For example the 1970s design for transitional housing by architect L. Howroyd for the Wongatha Wonganarra group in Laverton, Western Australia.¹⁶ A goanna image was placed on a building against the resident's wishes, and although they told Howroyd the goanna was sacred, he disregarded their concerns as "unwarranted."¹⁷ Unsurprisingly, the building was deserted soon after completion. The architect was professionally arrogant, but he also failed to credit the importance of localised cultural knowledge.



Figure 2. Diagram showing diversity of traditional structure types from Arnhem Land, Northern Territory. 2007. Source: Tim O'Rourke. Courtesy of Tim O'Rourke and Paul Memmott.

Cultural difference can also affect our education. In 1962 award-winning Melbourne architect and educator Robin Boyd (1919-1971) taught Australian school children that Aboriginal people had built nothing:

The story of building in Australia opens when the first white settlers began building the first walls ... The Aborigines might have been like the original natives of most other regions of the globe. ...They might have built cabins of rocks piled on the ground or huts of sticks wedged up in the branches of trees, as others did. They might have built on top of poles out in the water, as some of their New Guinea neighbours did. But they built nothing.¹⁸

Boyd's claim was incorrect. Diverse building forms were used throughout Australia, including cabins of rocks and buildings on top of poles (Fig. 2).¹⁹ These building techniques were documented, yet Australian students were taught otherwise. Boyd's words are an example of the limits and prejudices of his educational background and highlight the difference between his norms and the traditional understandings of Aboriginal people. They also show that our architectural education was once flawed. As artist Djon Mundine once said: "Who is the person writing and interpreting ... can the colonizer express and define the colonized?"²⁰

Navigating the Cultural Interface

Design consultation can be particularly complex in cross-cultural situations, and especially so in areas affected by the enduring effects of colonisation.²¹ If architects are not taught the potential risks and necessary skills, how can they avoid repeating historic mistakes and provide successful designs for their Aboriginal clients? As interviewee Gary Ella said "If you think you're going to walk in and know how to deal with it—you're in for trouble."²² So what constitutes successful design and what knowledge do designer's need to achieve that? The Victoria Park interviewees suggested that successful design consultation is more likely when there is client engagement and ownership, where the project recognises and celebrates community wishes, when all are happy with the outcome and when it has proved the test of time.²³

Cultural protocols vary across different cultural groups and this can affect the success, or otherwise, of design consultation, as seen in the Laverton example.²⁴ The City of Sydney once defined cultural protocols as "...the customs, lores and codes of behaviour of a particular cultural group."²⁵ Cultural protocols are an important part of all cultures and exist to ensure people behave and interact in a culturally acceptable manner.²⁶

Cultural awareness or competency training can improve cultural capacity, awareness and knowledge.²⁷ Cultural awareness training needs to be adaptable to dynamic, changeable and localised situations and is best seen as a "continuum" or ongoing process.²⁸ As each community you work with is different, you also need to gain localised cultural knowledge. One can gain localised knowledge on-site by doing background research, and by talking to people who are from or who know the area well.²⁹

Trust-based relationships are standard in any negotiation, but essential where there have been historically unequal power relations, as happens in colonised situations where trust is repeatedly broken.³⁰ For one Australian example, the "Board for the Protection of Aborigines" took children from their families based on their Aboriginal heritage.³¹ For such reasons, Aboriginal people are much less likely to trust people they don't know and this can affect design engagement. Paul Pholeros explained:

When we start any project (an architectural project or Housing for Health project) people will relate to your image and what you represent—they may be scared of you, distrust you or see only your reputation or history. They will not relate to you personally and we all must work hard to build a new relationship as part of the design process.³²

This means that designers working with Aboriginal clients need to place a higher emphasis on building strong, trust-based relationships and to be clear they have no harmful intentions. Certain

personal attributes and behaviours can help develop trust and respect and improve the prospects of developing long-term relationships. These personal qualities include respect, sensitivity, ethical behaviours, empathy, honesty, trustworthiness and reliability of intentions (Fig. 3).³³

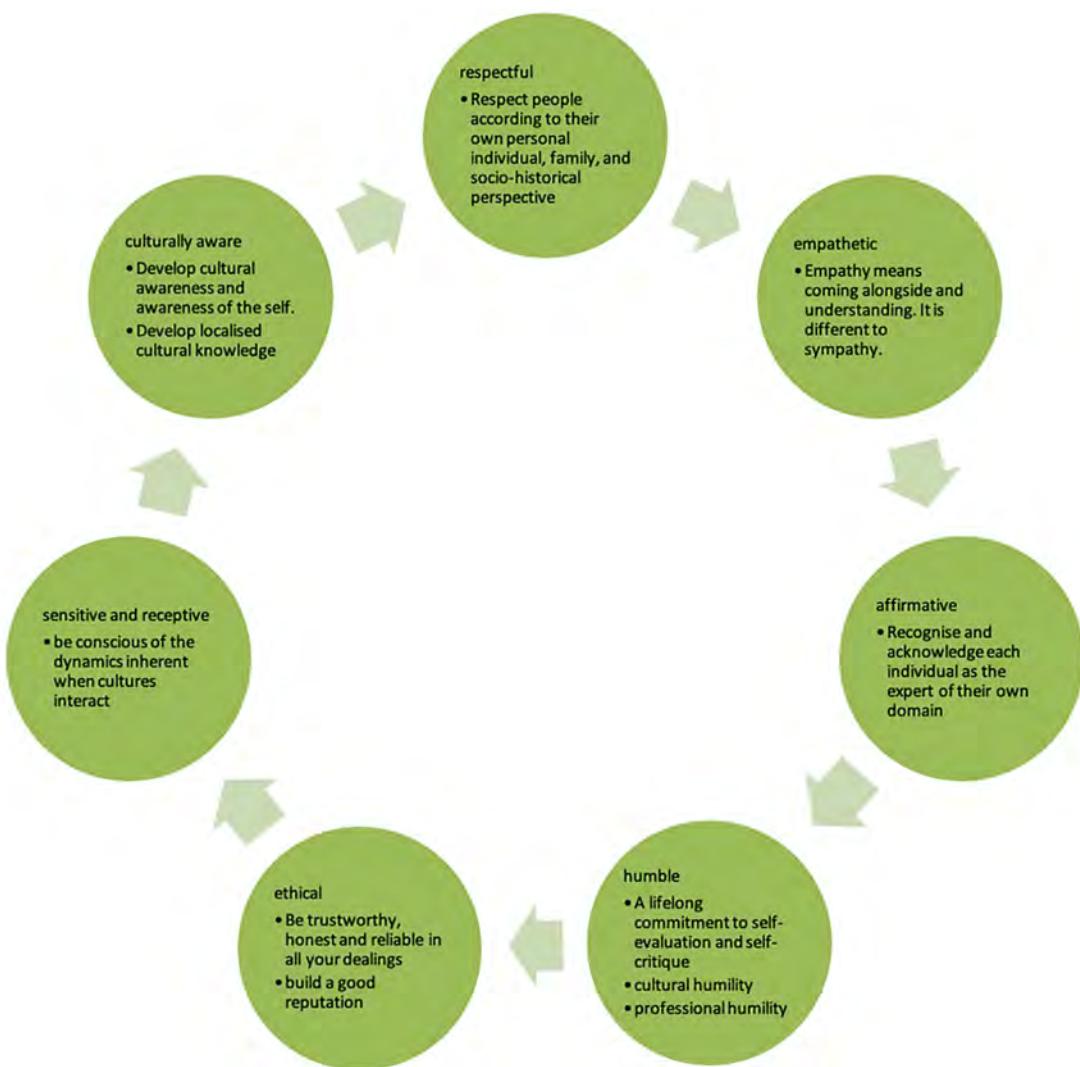


Figure 3. Personal attributes that support cross-cultural consultation. Source: Anne Burgess, 2018. Anne Maree Player Burgess, "Aboriginal Stories of Victoria Park," 2018. 183.

Different Ways of Communicating

The “elephant in the room” of cross-cultural practice is communication—different cultures have different ways of understanding and communicating.³⁴ Linguists have identified indirect speech patterns as a “norm” amongst Australian Aboriginal peoples.³⁵ Linguist Diana Eades states that if a person uses a direct communication approach towards someone who uses indirect speech, it can create tension.³⁶ People who use indirect speech sometimes express disagreement by not answering a question or by putting forward their own case without responding to the question or comment and might avoid saying “you are wrong” unless provoked.³⁷ Von Sturmer believes that questions for serious discussion with persons who use indirect speech patterns would never be presented in a way that required a direct refusal or disagreement. Different communication techniques mean designers may have to alter their own expectations, attitudes, behaviours and approaches.³⁸ They will need sensitivity to the local context to know when to speak, when not to speak and even what not to say.³⁹ If first languages are different, translators or liaison consultants can help, but there are still many other potential hurdles.⁴⁰

Negotiating Voices on Contested Land

Different cultures have different ways of authorising power, position and authority. Aboriginal peoples' ways of authorising who can speak for a particular place is related to *Country*, *Elders* and individual, familial and cultural obligations.⁴¹ The highest authority to consult regarding issues that affect a clan on Aboriginal lands are the clan *Elder/s*. This is different to western ways of giving authority. For example, in the architectural profession, authority is given according to different levels of academic or professional attainment. People who have the right to speak for *Country* are usually bloodline connected and/or authorised by someone from that *Country*, while people who are not authorised to speak for *Country* are typically Aboriginal people who are either not "from here," those who have no bloodline connection to the area, or non-aboriginal people.⁴² An interviewee explained:

Now, how other people, Aboriginal people from different mob, whether they're Bundjalung, Wiradjuri, whatever, how they see their role within this urbanised contemporary context is different to how I see their role. Their role is not to sit there on committees and talk about Country because this isn't their Country. They've got no blood line connection. People can sit here for thirty or forty years as a resident, as a contemporary resident. So, they don't have a right to speak for Country and that's why your bloodline gives you that right to speak for Country. I can't go over the mountains and speak for that Country even though my children through their father, their grandmother, is Wiradjuri, I don't have a right to go over there and speak.⁴³

When there is no available bloodline-connected spokesperson, sometimes others are conditionally authorised to speak for *Country*, for example, respected and acknowledged *Elders* or locally authorised representative Aboriginal organisations.⁴⁴ Sometimes outsiders are authorised to speak for a place on the basis of perceived skill set—for example, an historian with specialised local knowledge.⁴⁵ Some conditions for authorising outsiders include the development of a trust-based relationship, willingness to share the knowledge, and to acknowledge the source of the knowledge, not to plagiarise or be the "captain" of knowledge, and to provide "benefit back to the community."⁴⁶

Barriers to Successful Design Consultation

While Australia is no longer a colonial frontier, remnants from the past continue to haunt the nation, and so, design practice. Invasion, colonisation and settlement have contributed substantially to the fracturing of Aboriginal peoples' local knowledge. Contestation is common in colonised locations where cultural connections have been broken or knowledge lost, and consequently, Aboriginal lands in urban areas are often contested.⁴⁷ Even the NSW Aboriginal Land Council's (ALC), the government authorised first port of call for consultation in NSW, could be contested if their employees do not come from the area.⁴⁸ Interviewee Vic Simms explained: "I know what the protocols of local lands council are—most things have got to be done by the local community and who they propose. But a lot of the people the Metropolitan Lands Council recommend don't come from Sydney, so this where your dilemma is."⁴⁹

In such circumstances, knowing who to consult according to Aboriginal peoples' ways of authorising can be difficult for outsiders.⁵⁰ If you don't know the correct *Elder*, *Traditional Owner* or governing body—the incorrect people may be approached and you could receive misleading advice or pressure to take sides.⁵¹ Interviewee Reuben Berg explained: "A lot of times there are people who claim to be representing a group, but no one else agrees that they are representing that group. If you just hear 'That's the person to contact,' and that's the only person you talk to—that's all you're going to know—and that's a big risk."⁵² In contested locations, the research suggested negotiations are best handled by the local Aboriginal authorities. Designers can facilitate this, but should avoid intervening in community negotiations. Sometimes, different groups are best approached separately and discreetly.⁵³

However, there are many other barriers to successful design consultation.⁵⁴ Designers will have to negotiate attitude barriers, cross-cultural barriers and socio-cultural barriers, disagreements, power plays and competing agendas, insufficient time, funding problems, inflexibility, connecting with the wrong people, misunderstandings, ignorance and plain arrogance (Figs. 4 and 5).⁵⁵ A genuine understanding of the opportunities and barriers that difference can raise is pivotal for delivering equitable, productive and successful design outcomes.

attitude barriers	cross-cultural communication barriers	socio-cultural barriers
	lack of respect	different norms, customs and backgrounds
	language difference	different ways of knowing being and doing
	different linguistic strategies	different ways of learning and educating
	different speech patterns, timing, and usage	different codes of behaviour, lores, and laws
	different grammatical structures	different ways of authorising people or knowledge
	logical ordering of arguments	different ways of sharing knowledge
	different styles of speaking: intonations; stresses; voice speed	different social contexts
	different meanings of the same words	different perceptions of time
	different use of silence: knowing when to speak or not to speak.	different ways of relating
	direct or indirect speech patterns	lack of cultural awareness of cultural competence
	different question and answer strategies	

Figure 4. Barriers of attitude, cross-cultural communication and social-cultural context to effective design consultation for Aboriginal design projects. Source: Anne Maree Player Burgess, "Aboriginal Stories of Victoria Park", 184.



Figure 5. Summary of barriers of successful design consultation. Source: Anne Maree Player Burgess, "Aboriginal Stories of Victoria Park", 259.

Navigating the Design Consultation Process

Given the enormous number of potential barriers, how can outsiders know where to start? While it is important to avoid haphazard generalisation, fortunately, there are some generalisable principles (Fig. 6). The first is the fundamental right to inclusion and participation—with full participation—before design decisions are made. This is linked to the human rights principle of “prior informed consent” where Indigenous peoples themselves specify who speaks for their land and it is pivotal for building trust and respect.⁵⁶ Sometimes that is outside the designer’s control, for example if they are engaged after the project started, but appropriate consultation practices could still potentially be introduced as early as possible.

The design consultation process may be a brief initial meeting, a series of meetings or forums, or a minor element of complex contractual arrangements.⁵⁷ In each case, you could ask “has the designer consulted?” Even if the answer is “yes,” to what extent was the consultation meaningful or productive? Were people engaged? Did they have ownership or were they alienated or disempowered by the process? Historical evidence has shown that unengaged design is less likely to be successful, as we saw in Laverton and other examples documented elsewhere.⁵⁸

The start of consultation is crucial for getting people on board. To achieve this, there might need to be broad consultation or one where there is some sort of event.⁵⁹ Design consultation needs to be an ongoing, dynamic and participatory process—it can’t be satisfied by a one-off meeting or a tick mark on a checklist. It is important to build meaningful, mutual and reciprocal engagement throughout, and this is crucial for long-term success.⁶⁰ Building meaningful relationships take time, so extra time needs to be incorporated into the design program.⁶¹ Giving feedback is also essential for maintaining engagement and keeping people informed and needs to be provided throughout the design—even beyond design completion.

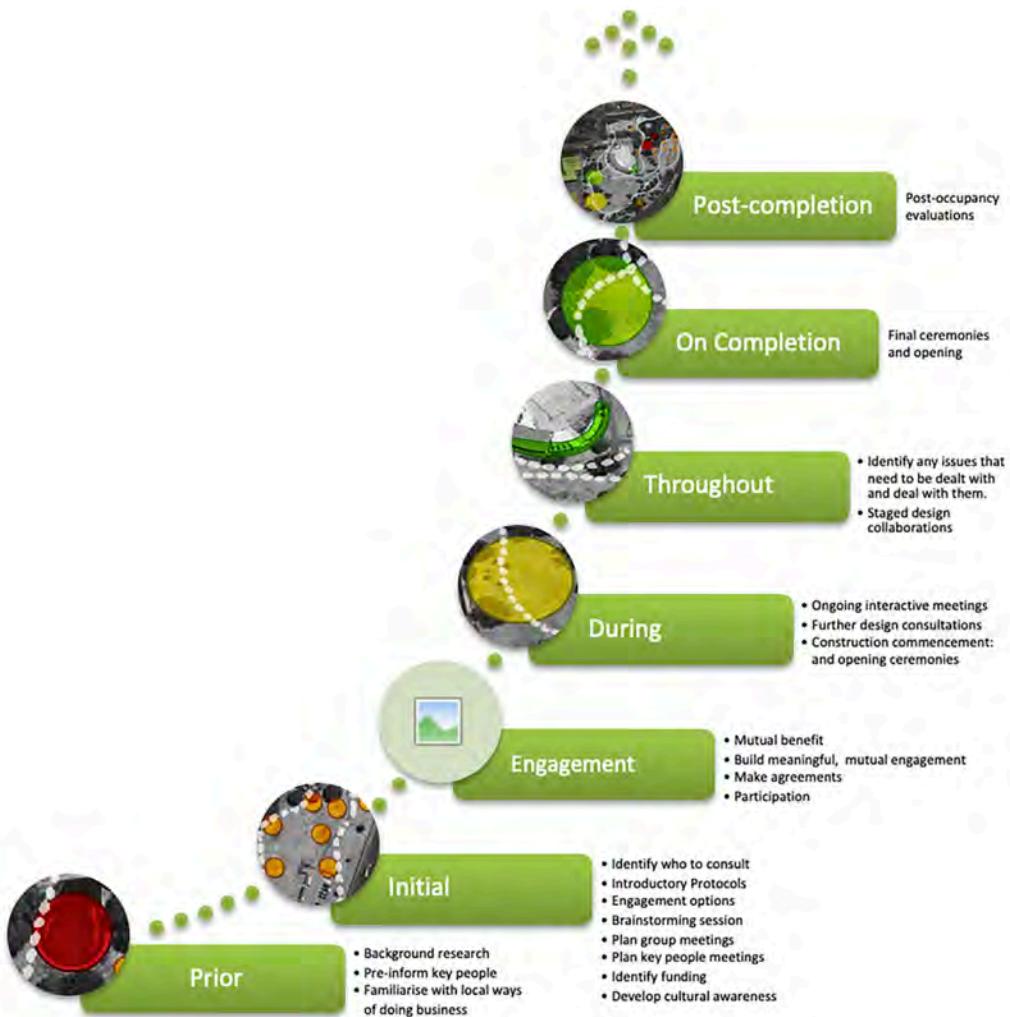


Figure 6. Summary elements of a model for the design consultation process for urban Aboriginal design projects. 2018. Anne Maree Player Burgess, "Aboriginal Stories of Victoria Park: Negotiation, consultation and engagement. Navigating design consultation on colonised and contested urban land" PhD diss. University of Sydney, 2018, 253.

In Closing...

Given that Aboriginal knowledge is shared differently, how well have the imperial foundations of architecture prepared us for contemporary architectural practice? Talking and listening to Aboriginal people through the Victoria Park research confirmed that most written guidelines are on track, and it enhanced the knowledge on why guidelines informed by Australian Aboriginal peoples are useful. It also clarified that architects need specialised skills for providing their professional services to Aboriginal peoples, but also that architects need to be informed and culturally aware when working with Australia's First Peoples.

Contemporary school education in Australia now includes more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education than in the time of Robin Boyd, so today's architects are potentially more enlightened, but surprisingly our tertiary design curriculums still do not provide Aboriginal cultural education as a standard across the board. If architects are to be skilled for contemporary practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples—that needs to change. I close this paper by asking architectural practitioners, educators and historians: can architectural ways of knowing, historicising, educating and practicing be re-framed to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' ways of knowing as a living, contemporary and dynamic example of Linda Tuhiwai Smith's "small spaces on shifting ground?"⁶²

Endnotes

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