

# Conveying Sacred Knowledge through Contemporary Architectural Design: The Garma Cultural Knowledge Centre

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## Abstract

The Indigenous peoples of north east Arnhem Land in Australia (Yolngu) overlay their culture with the customs and social behaviour of other societies to achieve positive outcomes and autonomy. Passing down cultural knowledge is intrinsic to the cultural identity of Yolngu. The paper discusses the recently completed Garma Cultural Knowledge Centre and examines the cultural knowledge conveyed through the medium of contemporary architecture design. The paper finds that the Garma Cultural Knowledge Centre combined aspects of non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal cultures to form a coherent whole with multi-faceted meanings.

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**Keywords:** People and environments; cultural knowledge; architecture; indigenous architecture

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## 1. Introduction

North east Arnhem Land is a remote area of land in excess of 40,000 square kilometres situated at the top of Australia. Aboriginal people of north east Arnhem Land are collectively known as Yolngu. Due to the relative isolation of the area, Yolngu had limited contact with Europeans until the late 19th century. At that time, Arnhem Land was divided into a number of pastoral leases by colonisers and violence ensued as Yolngu resisted the occupation of their lands. In the early 20th century, missions were opened in the area and attempts made to assimilate Yolngu to Anglo Christian traditions.

Despite the impacts of colonisation, Yolngu have fought hard to preserve Yolngu identity and their retain cultural traditions and land. In 1963, a bark petition was presented to Parliament in Canberra to protest the excision of land on the Gove Peninsula for mining (the first formal assertion of native title by an Aboriginal group in Australia) (Yunupingu 1997; Ginsburg and Myers 2006). Lengthy legal struggles eventually restored Yolngu legal and sovereign rights to their land (Yunupingu 1997; Marika 1999). The resilience of the Yolngu and their ability to adapt has always been apparent. There is a long history of working within the systems imposed by the dominant non-Aboriginal culture.

Clan leaders view their people and communities as encapsulated rather than colonised. Yolngu desire to bring “together traditional Aboriginal and introduced ways, in order to achieve the maximum benefit from the latter” (Berndt 1962 p. 39). Strategies have included the extension of traditional practices into intercultural contexts using contemporary mediums. The

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creation of bark paintings for the outside world, the public performance of ceremonies and the production of films and other activities can all be seen as exercises to educate the public about Yolngu law and worldviews, while preserving Yolngu cultural practices for future generations.



Fig.1. Location of Arnhem Land within Australia

The design and construction of the Garma Cultural Knowledge Centre at Gulkula appears to be the first instance where cultural knowledge has been expressed through contemporary architectural design in this region. The paper discusses the development of the Garma Cultural Knowledge Centre. The analysis was completed by the author by conducting fieldwork at the site, completing a series of interviews followed by background research into the meanings and Yolngu oral histories. The analysis revealed the multi-layers of cultural meaning conveyed through contemporary architectural design.

## 2. The sacred site of Gulkula

Gulkula in north east Arnhem Land is located 600 kilometres east of Darwin in the Northern Territory. The site is the traditional country of the Gumatj clan and stands on the Dhupuma escarpment overlooking the Gulf of Carpentaria. From this majestic standpoint, amidst a grey stringy bark forest, one can see the serpentine watercourses meandering in an intricate matrix into the Arafura Sea. For Yolngu and others, Gulkula is a profound and sacred place. Mungurrawuy Yununpingu described Gulkula as “an all-encompassing philosophical, physical, cosmological, theoretical place” where Yolngu have danced “from the beginning” (Croft 2013).

It is at Gulkula that another ancestor, Ganbulabula is said to have brought the yidaki (didgeridoo) to the Gumatj people. It said that Ganbulabula would preside “...over yati, or a garma, for public ceremonies, for all the different Yirritja clans” (Marika et al. 1999). At one time, Ganbulabula presided over a ceremony was devised to heal the divisions between the groups and a decorated log coffin was placed in the centre of the ceremonial ground to receive the body of the dead. During the ceremony, a disturbance occurred and caused disharmony. To express his displeasure and end the behaviour, Ganbulabula took one of the intricate memorial poles and flung it into the sea. The feat grabbed the attention of those around him, and caused people to put an end to their disagreements and reunite. The act imbued spiritual properties from the edge of the escarpment to the ocean below and the sound of the yidaki (didgeridoo) at Gulkula became a call to the clans of northeast Arnhem Land to come together in unity (Yothu Yindi Foundation 1999).

Ceremonies have been performed at Gulkula since time immeasurable. Yolngu Elders act as architects to create a form of religious architecture in the preparation of the ceremony area:

Preparing the ground for ceremonies, creating the appropriate structures to be used in them, and enacting the song and dance in them is a highly ordered process which is controlled and directed by particular Yolngu Elders, they are the architects of the

ceremony. The processes required to organise, prepare and build ceremony grounds, and then invoke an ancestor's presence and power through song and dance creates a Yolngu religious architecture (Fantin cited in Memmott 2002 p.10-11). Within the Yolngu belief system, the land is brought to life by performance. It is through "...dancing that one enters the intimate sphere of intersubjective relationships, in which one is emotionally involved and held socially accountable. Dancing is holding the Law, knowing the country, helping and working for people" (Tamisari 2000 p. 277). In 1999, a large gathering of senior Yolngu Elders established the Garma Festival at the sacred Gulkula site to encourage the practice, preservation and maintenance of traditional ceremony. It has quickly grown to be a gathering of national political, cultural and academic significance while continuing to be a meeting of Yolngu clans for cultural purposes. The Garma Festival attracts attracting over one thousand participants annually and Yolngu aspirations for the site have developed. The concept to construct a 'Garma Centre' evolved over a number of years. Clan leaders desired a permanent building to be used as an adult learning centre, meeting place and a 'keeping house' to house and showcase cultural artefacts. After securing funding, the Garma Cultural Knowledge Centre was constructed in 2014.

### 3. The Design of the Garma Cultural Knowledge Centre

The Garma Cultural Knowledge Centre was been sited on the edge of the Dhupuma escarpment (the most revered area within the Gulkula site). The architect received (limited) instructions from the clients that the floor plan for building was to take "...the form of an anchor and be placed as close as possible to the edge of the escarpment" (Grant pers. comm.). The resultant floor plan is the shape of an anchor consisting of a crown, arms, shank and ring (or shackle). The shank of the anchor houses an auditorium designed to accommodate up to 150 people with the base of the shank housing the meeting area. One arm houses offices, administration and other services while the other arm contains the learning area. A round window situated the front of the building subtly references the 'ring' of the anchor (Grant 2015).

The floor plan is hierarchical. The meeting room where clan leaders meet is located at the apex of the building commanding a significant view. The learning area has a view to the culturally significant landscape. The building can also operate in an informal mode where the spaces are opened up to accommodate a large function. The building is designed to support and encourage Yolngu preferences, needs and etiquette with multiple entries and exits so that people can move subtly away from one another if needed and stay connected to the surrounding landscape (Grant 2015).

The floor plan of the building is culturally significant. Gumatj clan leader, Galarrwuy Yunupingu, AM explained that "[t]he anchor represents unity and strength. It anchors Yolngu to our land and makes real our ties to the ceremonial meeting ground at Gulkula. At Gulkula our guests are anchored to us and share in our cultural strength" (Yunupingu in Yothu Yindi Foundation 2014). The symbol of the anchor is embedded in Yolngu oral traditions. Macassar traders visited north east Arnhem Land regularly from 1780 onwards and built relationships that are celebrated in Yolngu art, songs and stories (Bilous 2013). Macassans became integrated into Yolngu narratives of creation, which told of the Bayini or Dreaming Macassans as mythological beings. In the sacred songs associated with the Bayini ancestor, Birrinydji, Yolngu "... drew names from words such as 'manunu'" (ship's anchor) (Berndt 1962; Urry and Walsh 1981; De Costa 2012).

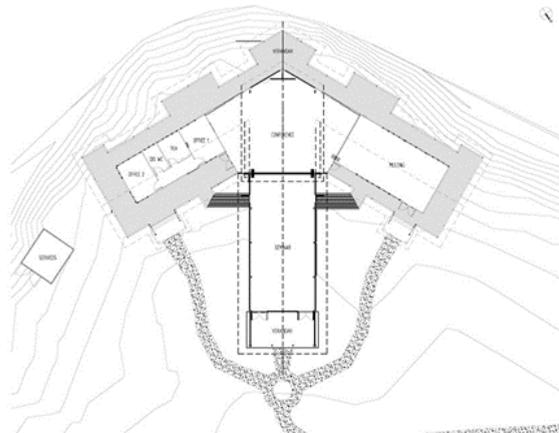


Fig. 2. The floor plan of the Garma Cultural Knowledge Centre reflecting the shape of an anchor  
(Source: Built Up Design, 2014)

The anchor is integral to the story of the female warrior, Bayini who sailed to Arnhem Land centuries ago. When Bayini arrived at Port Bradshaw, her anchor became stuck beneath a rock and was lost to the sand. Yolngu Elder, Ms. Lak Lak Burarrwanga provides a detailed account:

Long time ago, when the north-east wind blew, the Mangatharra [Makassans] would travel from their place up north in Indonesia to Arnhem Land.

One time, they anchored in the mouth of the bay and there was a lady on the boat called Bayini. She was a beautiful lady and a princess but she was a slave on the boat. She had to work—cooking, making clothes for the boss, the leader of the Makassans. She was chained up but then, Bayini, she took the sword from the captain. She saw the land. She had pride because she was a princess and she got the sword. They threw her to the sea and she swam all the way to the other side—to Bayini Beach. She's got a footprint in the rock there. You can see it. Bayini slept on the rock, drying herself. Then when she woke up she named places like Bungulu which we also call Bayini Beach. She has long hair to her thigh, and wears gold rings and necklaces. She walked straight to Bawaka. There's the area with the tamarind tree. That's where she cooked rice. She had a shelter there too and a husband maybe. After she died she remained, protecting Bawaka. When you're out at the point you can see a sandbar that ends in a rock under the water and that's an anchor from the boat she came on. There's a chain that runs all the way to the edge of our land. You can see the rock she slept on too. Her spirit is still living and protecting the land here and on the other side. Still some people see her. We dance pretending to be Bayini with the knife and she's got millions of eyes. So we have to be careful for the land and for the nature because still we believe the stories. Those stories and Bayini, it goes on and on for future generations. Sometimes we use a wish—Bayini guya—asking her to give us fish. And the new generation—our boys—now they write songs and stories about Bayini. We still believe that she's there. (Burarrwanga cited in Lloyd et al. 2010 p. 710).

Thus, Bayini is the spiritual protector of the land protects all of the plants, animals and people. The story of the Bayini is linked to the role of Aboriginal people as agents of trade. While Bayini takes the item, she makes it clear that these belong still to the visitors, just as she as will always belong to the land. Thus, she is never the property of Macassans and the legend commemorates a time when Yolngu felt equal to outsiders and by association, the anchor is a symbol of strength, unity and Yolngu connection to country.



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Fig. 3. Frontage of the Garma Cultural Knowledge Centre showing the shank and arms of the anchor  
(Source: Peter Eve, 2014)

Colour is an important component in Yolngu life. In the Yolngu belief system, two of the most important creator ancestors are the Wawilak Sisters. The sisters created ceremonies through which they taught the first ancestral people, the Djuwany, the sacred and moral laws. They divided their companions and the whole of the universe into two moieties, the Dhuwa and the Yirritja. The exterior of the Garma Cultural Knowledge Centre is predominately two colours, yellow and dark red. Everything in the Yolngu universe: spirit beings, atmospheric phenomena, plant and animal species, clan groups, areas of land and water are either Dhuwa or Yirritja (Palmer, 1984; Robinson, 1998). Within each moiety, people belong to smaller groups called clans. Across the Gove Peninsula and the surrounding area, people belong to one of sixteen clans, eight of which are Dhuwa and eight are Yirritja, each with its own country (wanga), ceremonies (bunggul) and Yolngu Matha dialect/s. Panels of the building are painted yellow to replicate the colour of the ochre representing the blood of the Yirritja moiety. The locally milled timber of the building is

a dark red which represents the blood of the Dhuwa moiety. For ceremony, Yolngu apply ochres in these colours in a sacrament that is said to renew and strengthen the blood of participants. The process of body painting is said to free the participants from danger from dangerous mystical powers (Morphy 1984). Each clan also has a colour and yellow is the hue of the Gumatj clan, the owners of the land upon which the Garma Cultural Knowledge Centre is built.

#### 4. Incorporating Art Work

The incorporation of art into an architectural design through the layering of appropriate signs, symbols and icons generally increases the aesthetic control and autonomy felt by people (Festinger 1957; McCoy and Evans 2002). The process can reinforce group identity and people's commitment to a place and create a more stimulating environment (Grant 2007). Yolngu art is unique in that it expresses people's social identities, ancestral law and ownership of land. It is an essential system of communication by which people put coherence into their society and is integral to Yolngu politics, education, religion (Morphy 1984) and storytelling. The work of the late artist, Ms. 'Djotarra' Yunupingu was chosen to be incorporated into the design.



Fig. 4. View from the newly completed Garma Cultural Knowledge Centre down the Dhupuma Escarpment  
(Source: Peter Eve, 2014)

Interpretations of the late Ms Yunupingu's work, 'Garak, The Universe' were translated into a series of laser cut corten steel panels. Previously, Ms. Yunupingu had been chosen as one of the Aboriginal artist whose work was included in the design of the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris. In Paris, 'Garak, the Universe,' was translated into architectural forms and installed on the second floor ceilings (acrylic on plasterboard) of the museum (Naumann and Ruault 2006).



Fig. 5. An important cultural artwork has been translated into a series of perforated panels which shade and reflect the artwork in relief form  
(Source: Peter Eve, 2014)

Another interpretation of the same work was also incorporated into the design of the Garma Cultural Knowledge Centre. Garak is an important ancestral story fitting the intentions of the Garma Knowledge Centre as “[t]he work is about the entire universe, all the stars that can be seen by the naked eye, and also everything that exists far beyond any scientific expedition or estimation - everything that can be imagined and all that cannot” (Yunupingu cited in National Gallery of Australia 2012). The artwork was translated into a series of perforated steel panels which are installed along the balconies to increase privacy and act as sun shades. The translation is more subtle interpretation of Garak than the work at the Musée du Quai Branly with light and shade changing the qualities of the work throughout the day and night. The art work is an important, powerful and appropriate message conveyed through the architecture.

## 5. Architecture as an extension of Yolngu cultural practice

The involvement of architects in projects in north east Arnhem Land is not a new phenomenon (Nolan 2010). In 1991, Glenn Murcutt designed a house for Banduk Marika and her husband in Yirrkala. The Marika-Alderton house was held up as an architectural exemplar in meeting the cultural housing needs of Aboriginal people and climatic conditions and gained national and international attention (Baird 1996; Murcutt 1996; Beck and Cooper 2002; Smith 2005; Carter 2011). The project was controversially critiqued by Dovey in 1996 and as a result a national dialogue commenced on the manner in which architects engage with Aboriginal clients and projects (Lochert 1997; Dovey 2000; Memmott and Reser 2000; Fantin 2003). Debates on the complexities of addressing Aboriginal identity through architectural design have arisen periodically since.

2. The design and construction of the Garma Cultural Knowledge Centre has transgressed these debates with Yolngu negotiating a creative synthesis with the architect to produce a project which showcases their culture as passed down from previous generations and elements introduced from other cultures. The Garma Cultural Knowledge Centre appears to be the first time that Yolngu have extended the ‘two way’ practice into architectural design. Yolngu were the creative directors for the project, using the architect as a means of conveying their artistic aspirations for the building.

3. There are deviations from the documented architectural ‘best practice’ for Aboriginal buildings in this project. Fantin (2003) noted that when working with Yolngu clients, they specifically wanted to avoid any reference to Yolngu ancestral histories in the design of buildings as they saw non-Indigenous architecture as a non-Indigenous initiative or imposition. These groups felt that ancestors and their histories were best left in the country. Similarly, Go-Sam commented that “story places of ancestors are about country, divisions, boundaries, ownership and being caretakers for country – if you put it in a building it is disenfranchised” (Go Sam quoted in Fantin 2003). Far from being disenfranchised, the incorporation of Wangarr signs and symbols into the design of the Garma Cultural Knowledge Centre has strengthened the design and supplied gravitas given the sacredness of the site. In this project, Yolngu have been able to use architecture as a medium to tell their story. This has required the architect to surrender some design to Yolngu direction which appears to have been completed with the architect knowing what makes good architecture.

## Conclusion

There are long traditions of Yolngu overlaying and blending Yolngu culture with the ideas, customs, and social behaviour of other societies to achieve positive outcomes and autonomy. Combining aspects of non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal cultures to form a coherent whole has meaning for Yolngu which is not just imposed on them from outside. For Yolngu, to lose traditions would be to lose the functional logic through which ancestral law is exercised and the human experience is sanctified. Efforts to sustain the unique traditions amid the underlying fiscal poverty of remote Australia, economic and political pressures from without, and personal pressures from within are nothing short of heroic.

Questions do however arise from this project. The design of the Garma Cultural Knowledge Centre appears to be powerful agent in conveying cultural knowledge. The true value of such processes is not typically acknowledged in formal evaluations and the importance of embedded knowledge in design is difficult to codify. It may be useful to further assess this and other Indigenous projects through some form of post occupancy evaluation. It would also be useful to know the level to which such projects reinforce group identity and people’s commitment to a place. The analysis of this project also indicates while some literature discourages the use of ancestor stories in contemporary Indigenous design, when Aboriginal clients wish to use architecture to convey and reinforce traditional knowledge this may be necessary. In the case of the Garma Cultural Knowledge Centre, the anchor appears at first glance to be a simplistic design trigger, but as one delves through the project, multi-layers of cultural

meaning and new interpretations of traditional knowledge appear. The importance of documenting Aboriginal design projects is evident. Architects require precedents to draw upon and clients need to see examples of sound design. The Garma Cultural Knowledge Centre is located on a profoundly sacred site. For Yolngu (and many other Indigenous peoples) to be mentally sound "...is to be in place, able to feel place, to avoid place and know when one is out of place." Unravelling processes of cultural production behind the architecture of Garma Cultural Knowledge Centre reveals social complexes of knowledge, power and identity, social systems, religious understanding and the forces of representation. The Garma Cultural Knowledge Centre dispels any notion that Yolngu that may be alienated, disempowered or subjugated in their engagement with non-Aboriginal culture. It is a building which celebrates Yolngu achievement and endeavour. It provides a powerful architectural precedent for other Indigenous groups wishing to preserve their identity and pass on oral traditions.

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