

Acton Waterfront Redevelopment

Ngunnawal Cultural Narratives

Introduction

There are over 3,500 recorded First Nations cultural heritage sites within the Australia Capital Territory, including rock art, grinding grooves, shelters, scarred trees and artefact scatters (Jarvis and Dunstan, n.d.). Although First Nations cultural heritage is not limited to tangible objects, but also comprises intangible notions of spirituality, interconnected knowledge systems and cultural practices, physical elements of First Nations cultural heritage provides evidence of First Nations people living in the Canberra City for upwards of 25,000 years (Francis and Midena, 2020). The Traditional Custodians that have occupied and continue to live in this area are the Ngunnawal Peoples. Yerrabingin pays its respects to Ngunnawal Peoples, acknowledging their Elders past, present and emerging, as well as their ongoing connection to culture and Country. Yerrabingin is privileged to respectfully suggest ways in which Country can be incorporated into design and recognises the weight of this responsibility. Yerrabingin has identified the following themes for the Acton Waterfront Redevelopment: Created from Country, A transient place and Reconciliation in Action. This document will provide a cultural heritage overview of the site, before exploring these themes in more detail and providing design examples.

Cultural Heritage Overview of the Site

Before the creation of Lake Burley Griffin, the area now known as Canberra City was defined by the Molonglo River. The Molonglo River was and continues to be an important place to Aboriginal peoples. It provided a permanent water source, abundant food, shelter from the wind and proximity to visiting groups. Because of this, the gentle slopes, spurs and alluvial flats surrounding the lower Molonglo River are likely to contain tangible, cultural heritage items. The significance of the Molonglo river is comparable to the Murrumbidgee River, where over 200 Aboriginal sites have been recorded since the early 1990s (Godden Mackay Logan Pty Ltd, 2009, p. 44).



Molonglo is said to mean “sound of thunder” in Ngunnawal language and is associated with the snake called Guddy. Other non-human kin that are culturally connected to the Molonglo River include Girrahwah the great goanna, the eagle and the platypus (ACT Heritage Council, 2017, p. 1-2). Prior to colonisation, landmarks such as the Molonglo River were used as pathways to navigate across the landscape. Wally Bell, a Ngunnawal Elder, states that Sullivans Creek was used to guide people to Black Mountain, a significant ceremonial and meeting place (Jarvis and Dunstan, n.d.). Sullivans Creek is a small offshoot of the Molonglo River, originally called Canberry, it joined the Molonglo River which goes on to join the Murrumbidgee River. Sullivans Creek was renamed after William Sullivan, an early pastoralist from nearby Springbank Station.

The water from Sullivans Creek sustained all different kinds of life, including fish, birds, platypuses, turtles, water rats and other reptiles. Larger land animals would come and drink from the creek, which also supported water plants like bullrush and other reeds. These would be used for medicine, ceremony and even as musical instruments. Wally Bell explains that ponds along the creek were used as fish traps. During times of lower water flow, stacked stones would stop fish from escaping inlets within the creek. Crushed Indigofera would be used to deprive the water of oxygen, causing fish to float to the surface (ANU Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Trail, n.d.).

Although the natural course of Sullivan’s Creek has been altered in the past, it currently winds past the Australian National University’s South Oval. It is speculated that South Oval may have been intentionally cleared by Aboriginal people. Early survey maps indicate a cleared semi-circle in the location of South Oval was deforested prior to European settlement in the 1820s. The area was open grassland, maintained free of trees and shrubs. Some theories suggest the area was kept clear to hunt Kangaroos who were attracted the space by the smell of freshly sprouted grass after a burn. Alternatively, the space has been dubbed a ‘waiting room’ for visiting groups to stay before being welcomed onto Country for ceremony (ANU Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Trail, n.d.).

In addition to Freshwater Country, the area now covered by Lake Burley Griffin was home to a variety of limestone landscape features. During early settlement, Canberra was referred to as the Limestone Plains. It is thought this name came from the limestone outcrops found along Acton Peninsula (Landscapes around Canberra - Acton Peninsula, n.d.). The limestone outcrops found at Acton contain fossils and feature marks from water weathering. Before the lake was constructed, additional limestone caves were mapped, an example of which is Lennox House Cave. Lennox House Cave was approximately eight metres deep and became submerged once the Molonglo River was dammed (Francis, 2016 and Butz, 1987).



Ngunnawal Man, Tyrone Bell recounts stories of his family playing in the limestone caves along the Molonglo River and claims they contained rock art. This would have been one of the few intact rock art sites in the region (ANU Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Trail, n.d.).

Acton Peninsula is also the site of the Old Canberra Hospital, which has gained contemporary cultural significance for some Aboriginal families from the area. Many members of the current community were born, treated for illness or had family who passed there. This is close by another corroboree ground, which was also the location of a racecourse in the early twentieth century. Matilda House states that the place was used for camping and ceremony, but notes that her great-grandfather Henry 'Black Harry' Williams raced on the course. Henry was an accomplished stockman in the region. He broke in, trained and exercised his own horses (Godden Mackay Logan Pty Ltd, 2009, p.53).

It is thought that the sand flats from this area were used to reclaim land in the creation of Springbank Island in Lake Burley Griffin. A recent archaeological dig resulted in 35 stone artefacts being found, some of which were stone from outside the region, once again cementing Canberra as a place where people travelled to from faraway places (Colley, 2018).

Created from Country

As previously mentioned, the Molonglo River was an attractive place to live for Aboriginal people because of its abundant resources. This presents an opportunity for Country, non-human kin and how Aboriginal people utilised and cared for these resources to not only be celebrated, but drawn upon for design inspiration. Sullivans Creek, the Molonglo River and the Murrumbidgee River can be used as naming conventions and wayfinding mechanisms. The Acton Waterfront can link up with broader walking track networks and adopt the namesake of the above, long, flowing pathways can be used to connect the space. In addition, the installation of the boardwalk can replicate the shape and form of how the Molonglo River used to exist in that space, allowing users to walk along and interact with its banks once more. Country needs people just as much as we need Country, Country misses us. Why take this opportunity to facilitate this interaction? Nodes or resting places along the boardwalk could reflect small camps, reiterating the invitation to pre-colonial use of Country and the values that accompanied this. Instead of rushing through a routine walk or stressing about the day ahead, people are invited to sit, be present, listen to and be healed by Country. The more connected people feel to Country, the more likely they are to reciprocate and care for it.



Water plant species endemic to the area, such as bullrush, reeds and indigofera, can be planted along the lake's edge, creating room for First Nations cultural tours and once more fostering curious interaction with freshwater Country. This could be developed further through the inclusion of a native bush food garden. For longevity and ongoing outcomes, First Nations businesses can be employed to install and maintain the bush food garden. Over time the broader community can be encouraged to take ownership of it, increasing education opportunities and appreciation for sustainably grown and native foods.

Eco tones from the nearby limestone outcrops and caves can be used to inform Acton Waterfront's colour palette. Textures from where the water has worn away the limestone and created grooves can influence patternation. The same could be said for any fossils. The 'Reconciliation in Action' theme will examine ways to engage in truth telling with the local community. This could include incorporating a tribute to the caves allegedly containing rock art that were lost in the construction of Lake Burley Griffin. Inspiration from this could be drawn from the Yankee Hat Rock Art Site, within Namadgi National Park.

A Transient Place

Wally Bell stated Sullivans Creek and the Molonglo River were transient pathways used to guide people's journeys to ceremonial or meeting grounds. Recent developments in Canberra have adopted the identity of a meeting place. This is demonstrated by the Australian National University's use of the name 'Kambri', which was gifted by Traditional Custodians. Similarly, Acton Waterfront can embrace its traditional identity and build upon existing narratives to contribute to Canberra's city planning in a truly visionary way. The Waterfront can leverage feelings of anticipation and excitement, the same feelings Aboriginal people would have experienced before arriving at a big event. This can create a space that is easy and enjoyable to spend a lunch break, an afternoon with friends, a coupe of hours out with the kids or attending a concert. On a broader scale, the Acton Waterfront can act as an attractive starting place, somewhere you grab a coffee before strolling to the National Museum - making a day of the lake versus a single spot.

Reconciliation in Action

The Acton Waterfront is in a powerful position to facilitate truth telling around the construction of Lake Burley Griffin. Although a potentially resource intensive commitment, Acton Waterfront could work with Traditional Custodians to recognise the cultural heritage sites that were submerged when Lake Burley Griffin was dammed.



A 2009 Cultural Heritage Management Report for Lake Burley Griffin and the adjacent lands consulted registered Aboriginal corporations in the area regarding their views on the Lake's heritage status. Representatives from the Buru Ngunnawal Aboriginal Corporation said:

"The construction of Lake Burley Griffin further devalued and desecrated the traditional life of the Ngunnawal and it stands as a testament to the ignorance about, and the level of disregard for, Aboriginal values at the time of the construction of the city of Canberra."

(Godden Mackay Logan Pty Ltd, 2009, p.53).

Yerrabingin acknowledges this report is approaching 15 years in age and as a result, attitudes may have changed or steps may have been taken to resolve this past wrongdoing. However, it could be worth investigating further and depending on the needs and desires of the community, manifest itself in the form of an event or educational placards.



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