

## The People and Place Podcast: Indigenous Design (Part 1) Transcript

**Hannah (00:39):** In this two part episode, we're exploring indigenous connection to place. How can we interpret and give life to indigenous significance, culture, and stories in our design for places and infrastructure. How does this help us create better places for everyone and how does this help us achieve our sustainability goals? I'm Hannah Bleyerveen and today I'm joined by three fantastic guests. Firstly, Ailsa Walsh, a proud indigenous woman of the Yuggera, Lardil, and Cululeah Countries. Ailsa is an incredible Aboriginal artists who helped us bring up new Brisbane office to life with her paintings. We also have Michael Hromek technical executive in WSP's indigenous specialist services team. Michael is also a researcher and professional tutor at the University of Technology, Sydney's Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research. And last but not least, Ben Gibbs an associate in our sustainability team, who's work helps many different organisations to achieve their sustainability goals. Welcome everyone. Before we get into the questions, I'd like to take this moment to acknowledge the countries on which we gather to record and listen to this podcast. We pay our respects to all the traditional custodians of this land, including the Gaddigal and Turrbal peoples, for it is in their country that we are recording this podcast episode. We extend our respects to elders past, present and future and to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander peoples tuning in today. My first question is for Michael, could you please tell us what is indigenous knowledge?

**Michael (02:00):** That's a very broad term but it's a good place to start because I think a lot of people would have a different interpretation of what it is as an architect and looking at it from an indigenous lens as well. Indigenous knowledge revolves around understanding place and understanding country and understanding what makes the distinctions between place and country. That's kind of what indigenous knowledge is built around is intrinsic and deep knowledge of local places and local systems, broad systems as well, but it goes throughout all of those scales.

**Hannah (02:32):** Ailsa what does indigenous knowledge mean to you?

**Ailsa (02:36):** I think it's changed over time with the ancestors. It was all about the relationship with the land, with the animals, with the weather patterns, with trading and as you seen with colonisation, things have changed obviously a lot more of us young ones now I want to reconnect with Bush tucker, language is a big one and it's quite hard because a lot of it is lost because I elders have died off. Unfortunately haven't passed down the knowledge out of fear or out of governance, but indigenous knowledge, solely means connection to our history and pass that down.

**Hannah (03:12):** Later in the show we'll be talking more in depth about our Brisbane office, but first I think we should give everyone a bit of context around it and why we were so desperate to have Ailsa join us today. Ben, could you give us a little intro about the project?

**Ben (03:27):**

So the project is 900 Anne Street, which is the building where WSP's Brisbane office has relocated to, we occupy four levels in the building. It's a co location of three existing WSP offices around Brisbane, around 600 staff coming together. And I guess as part of the process, you know it's not very common that you have the opportunity to design a new office space essentially from scratch. There was a lot of thought that went into what outcomes we wanted to get out of this and what we wanted to focus on and our key part of that was

creating inclusive spaces and sustainable spaces and health and wellbeing but critically a visible connection to Brisbane's Aboriginal heritage.

**Hannah (04:08):** Michael, could you share a little bit about the Aboriginal led co-design methodology that you adopted on this project and tend to put up on a lot of projects?

**Michael (04:18):** The Aboriginal co-lead design methodology is based from the academic environment. So I'm completing a PhD in the university of technology in Sydney in architecture and some of the methodologies around my research has been indigenous methodologies so yarning and qualitative based research and understanding data from that perspective. From that idea, there's a lot of great academics that we lean upon. Linda Tuhiwai Smith is a brilliant Maori academic who leads the way around some of these ideas around indigenous autonomy and ensuring that indigenous outcomes are equitable and her, publishing is a quite useful and there's others as well. So from an Australian perspective, the indigenous design charter, and that's done in Victoria, Deakin university and a few others there. They've caught with 10 main points around best practice approach to indigenous design. We've distilled it into three core principles, indigenous led, sorry any indigenous content should be led by indigenous people.

**Michael (05:24):** The next one is community involvement. Local Aboriginal people should be involved in these projects as much as possible, particularly when it comes to design. A lot of community and mob are artists in their own right. And it's a really fantastic way to engage them. And the third one is how we do it, the appropriate use indigenous design, and that's the one that's most interesting for me because it's always in flux. It's always changing. You know, 10 years ago we would do indigenous design in a particular way. However, today it's shifted and it's much more contemporary. and still still very much leaning on tradition and patents and local ideas. But using new materials and viewpoints on the world.

**Hannah (06:06):** Ailsa, you worked extensively to co design out Brisbane office. What was that experience like? Do you have any advice to pass on to other indigenous artists who might be thinking about getting involved in similar projects?

**Ailsa (06:19):** I think what was the positive thing is that my first contact was with another Aboriginal person. I think that was already, a barrier that was broken down. So when Michael contacted me, I had a yarn with him on the phone, it was like, okay, cool. Cos sometimes when I get contact from non indigenous people, it's very corporate. It's very structured talk. I don't yarn like that. So it's good that the first communication is from an indigenous person and it's not meant to disrespect non-indigenous people. It's just easier for us to yarn with them and understand lingo a bit.

**Ailsa (06:51):** If there's other indigenous artists out there. My biggest advice for both them and corporations is know their value, we are 3% of the population. We don't get paid as much as we should. So when a company does recognise is that pay and does it, you're empowering that person in their business. When I got this gig I was really nervous on what to quote on for me, I'm like if I'm going to pitch too hard they're going to reject me. But if I pitched too low, it's kind of like take advantage of me cause I do put a lot of work into it. For other artists, I would suggest talking to somebody who's been in the industry for a long time, have a mentor about it. If not, they can call me. And also having an indigenous person in the corporation like Michael be there with the negotiation and be there on the side and have that advocate who works for the company and I think Michael's done a great job at that.

**Ailsa (07:44):** He was friendly to me. He treated me with the respect to the I needed. It's really important that all the artists who work with companies know their value and stick to their value and it's important for nonindigenous companies to not only trust the artist but communicate with them. This is what we'd like. We hope that you can incorporate it and pay them what they're do. Last but not least, what I can really sum it up to companies out there is do not buy fake art. There's a huge fake art movement at the moment and we're trying to put a stop to that. It's important that you got an authentic person to do the art work.

**Hannah (08:24):** Could you please explain to us your process going into the project? Were there certain elements of the space that influenced the art, that you created?

**Ailsa (08:33):** In initial contact I had with you guys, I first wanted to know what your policies were around how you deal with your employees cause I want him to know that if you guys were a good company, Michael gave me a rundown of what the offices will look like, where's the kitchen and stuff like that.

**Ailsa (08:48):** So I went into it with four ideas, four paintings representing not just Brisbane but it's good to incorporate some other places around the actual site of Brisbane. That's when I decided to do four different levels and each painting the colours slid into the next level so they're all connected and each one has their own different meaning. On the third floor I wanted a yarnning circle, everyone to come together and eat because I don't know if you know us very well, but us black fellas we love to eat. Things like that I try to incorporate into the actual WSP ethics and values. What's on the floor plus dealing with my culture and what's on the outside.

**Hannah (09:28):** Can we maybe talk about that yarnning circle in our gathering cafe space and what that means and why it's important?

**Ailsa (09:35):** From my grandfather's country, whenever they had yarnning circles, it would have to be a certain distance away from water, Bora rings, other significant areas. The yarnning circles would consist of you enter one end and you exit the other end because you meant to come in with your issues. Talk about that and leave in a different spiritual light to the other side. The elder or the leader always talks first, which is usually mixed gender, so if there's mixed gender, usually the male elder would talk first. The females in my family, the yarnning circles were a bit different. They mainly happen in water, so you would stand around in a circle toplless talking about your issues and the elders playing with your hair or put in mud through your hair and then you'd exit on the other side of the bank. There's different types of yarnning cycles that a lot of people don't know, but that's the typical one where you'll have a circle of rocks, you have ceremony, but sometimes the females do it a bit different.

**Ben (10:31):** I think from a communication point of view as well, it's been interesting to see the yarnning circle work in a typical office. There is no where to hide when you're in the middle of the yarnning circle, you have 360 degree coverage of people who you're talking to. You need to be highly aware of what you're talking about and make it a really engaging experience. Presented in the yarnning circle is a great way to work out problems and issues quickly and to engage everyone. My experience, so far it's been, yeah, those conversations are much more engaging and often actually less time consuming because people get to the point.

**Hannah (11:05):** That was part one on our discussion around the importance of indigenous connection to place and how we can give life to this through planning and design of places and infrastructure. Join us next week for part two where we discuss meeting sustainable design objectives, using indigenous design to enrich online places and the positive impact of indigenous design for future generations.