



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Voicing First Nations Country, culture and community in urban policy

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Acknowledgement of Country

The research team would like to acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Country around Australia, and particularly those situated within urban contexts. It is easy to overlook the deep and enduring connection of Traditional Custodians to Country that has been built over with physical structures and imposed notions of Western planning. However, when we scratch the surface it reveals hidden and precious layers of knowledge and deep ancient wisdom that is ready to be reawakened.

A special acknowledgement and deep gratitude is extended to the First Nations people who were involved in this research, Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung and Dharug Traditional Custodians and First Nations practitioners from Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. Your commitment to advocating for your sovereign rights to Country are commendable and this research hopes to help advocate for addressing your frustrations and also share and celebrate your achievements.

Artist statement – cover illustration

Visual artist and designer; Jade Holland is a Wiradjuri and Gomeroi woman who grew up on Bundjalung Country and has been living on Wurundjeri Country in Melbourne for the last ten years. She is committed to developing her cultural knowledge to support First Nations communities through increased visual representation, empowering voices and creating better balance in the public domain.

Image depicts a common connection of water across both Wurundjeri and Dharug Country – the river, sands and waters. The footprints highlight the concept of walking together in partnership and genuine meaningful relationships. This artwork illustrates that 'Country is everywhere', including the urbanised environments that exist alongside the natural landscapes of Country.

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Executive summary

Key points

- All urban areas in Australia are Country: the lands, waters and skies of First Nations peoples whose continuing connection and authority has never been ceded.
- Engaging with the complexity of urban policy is viewed by Traditional Custodians as an important practice of continuing connection, obligation and rights with Country. However, urban policy practices and processes are experienced as burdensome, misaligned with First Nations obligations and values, and often disrespectful or harmful.
- Relationship is at the foundation of more positive experiences of engagement and interaction with urban policy. Better understandings of appropriate cultural protocol and meaningful engagement would arise through government and industry developing trusted, long-term, agenda-free relationships with Traditional Custodians.
- Urban policy frameworks that seek to ‘recognise’ First Nations people are fractured and complex, and produce shallow forms of recognition. Urban policy professions, practices and institutions bear the responsibility to respond to these realities.
- Practitioners recognise their responsibility and the burden of engagement but are not equipped to address material power-sharing. This requires attention to redressing the construction of unequal power relations between First Nations people and urban policy through power-sharing models, resourcing and unlearning. Sustained resourcing is needed to redress the legacy of dispossession and to share power in meaningful ways.
- The project design was informed by First Nations philosophies and methods of knowledge-sharing and creation, centring principles of reciprocity and respect. The findings present extended quotations from Traditional Custodians and First Nations practitioners to honour and centre their voices.

Key findings

This project examines the relationship of First Nations peoples in Australia with urban policy. The project was designed to centre First Nations sovereignty, authority, knowledge, governance and agency as the starting point toward a more responsible relationship. The research pivoted around partnerships involving the methodology of yarning circles with two First Nations groups that are Traditional Custodians of urban areas, Wurundjeri Woi-Wurrung and Dharug, and their interactions with the policy jurisdictions that are imposed, uninvited, across their Country. The study takes a view of urban policy *from* their perspective. In this way, 'urban policy' means the plethora of overlapping policy frameworks, legislative requirements and regulations that govern the use and management of lands and waters on their Country.

The study built on both prior scholarship and discussions with Traditional Custodian participants to identify three aspects of this relationship:

- the experiences and expectations of First Nations peoples in engaging with urban policy domains in major Australian cities
- the capacity of non-Indigenous urban policy professions to partner with First Nations peoples as sovereign actors
- the pathways by which urban policy makers can respectfully learn, engage and embed First Nations' perspectives in policy formulation and practice.

The project highlights four main findings:

First, that First Nations—particularly Traditional Custodians whose Country is now a built-up urban area—see it as important to engage in urban policy and decision-making about development, planning, design and infrastructure provision. Even though their experience of urban policy processes is generally poor, Traditional Custodians remain engaged because it matters to care for Country and to use urban policy as a mechanism for helping to fulfil obligations to care for Country. Thus urban policy must understand its relationship with First Nations people through the concept of Country, and First Nations authority as sovereign peoples with responsibilities to Country, community and culture.

Second, that First Nations experience urban policy as practices, systems and processes that obstruct their obligations to culture and Country, frustrate their efforts and aspirations, undermine their rights, authority and voice, and poorly interpret their knowledges and perspectives. Traditional Custodians especially must navigate a dense web of institutional actors and agencies, policy texts, guidelines, government processes, legal regulations, policy norms and individual practices just to find a way to have some input. Frequently this input is characterised as engagement or consultation, and misrecognises First Nations peoples as stakeholders. The study demonstrates that a key step in addressing this is to build genuine, long-term, enduring relationships that are well supported with appropriate resources. This is the first step toward meaningful engagement.

Third, the research provides insights into urban policy contact zones: specific sites where the power relationships between First Nations peoples and imposed policy jurisdictions become clear. Where urban policy frameworks actually recognise First Nations rights and interests, this tends to be fractured, complex and produce shallow forms of recognition. Observing this through a comparative framework, the research shows some key differences in the policy contexts between Victoria and New South Wales. In Victoria, the presence of Treaty and an emphasis on the alignment of cultural protocol within policy frameworks pushes engagement conversations towards self-determination. In NSW, no Treaty conversation exists, and the statutory land rights system produces conflicts and tensions where cultural protocols are not routinely safeguarded.

Fourth, non-Indigenous urban practitioners in this study revealed an awareness of their responsibility, the burden of engagement and some of the challenges First Nations people experience. However, several important constraints on the capacity of non-Indigenous policy professionals to address these matters were revealed. Practitioners framed their role as relatively neutral intermediaries with a focus on unlearning and re-educating themselves. This is an important initial step. However, there is less capacity and readiness to join the dots between the harm resulting from the imposition of a colonial structure of governance with the contemporary realities of engagement fatigue, misaligned timeframes and the universal under-resourcing or non-resourcing endured by Traditional Custodians. Better understandings of appropriate cultural protocol should be developed. This would require developing trusted, long-term, agenda-free relationships with Traditional Custodians. Such relationships need to be structured around First Nations sovereignty, Traditional Custodian's rights and authority for Country and be effectively resourced in material and practical ways.

Policy development options

Before setting out policy development options, it is important to note that urban policy is produced, implemented, and policed by an imposed system of governance upon First Nations sovereignty and Country. Ultimately, many of the policy options available will involve practices that may fundamentally challenge or transform these structures and their legitimacy. This is likely to be politically challenging in many cases. Therefore, options range from small but consequential reforms through to more fundamental restructuring of decision-making toward power-sharing in recognition of First Nations continuing connection, rights and authority for Country.

As a starting point, Traditional Custodian's authority, knowledges and governance must be framed as central within urban policy decision-making. This requires learning with First Nations people and Country as well as unlearning—or coming to understand as partial—some of the assumptions and worldviews that shape policy and practice attention. However, urban policy making must move beyond 'consultative' norms and past unlearning as an end in itself. An immediate policy implication for all jurisdictions is to understand that Traditional Custodians are often under-resourced, stretched thin, and constantly suffering from consultation fatigue. This 'load on community' must be addressed in material and practical forms. This should involve:

- rethinking methods of engagement
- rethinking imposed timeframes to align better with First Nations expectations and realities
- becoming more sharply conscious of team personnel and providing continuity to relationship development.

The aim must be to create positive material structures to resource First Nations communities in ways that are sustained, that are de-linked from specific projects, and that centre self-determination principles and intergenerational thinking.

Progress in urban policy over recent years that acknowledges the need for First Nations engagement is not to be taken for granted. Improving ways in which First Nations peoples are included in urban policy formation is widely recognised as an important goal.

But all too often First Nations people are framed as 'stakeholders' to be consulted, rather than sovereign peoples with connections to and rights and responsibilities for Country under their law and custom. Without parallel pathways in urban policy that centre the principles of self-determination and the fact of unceded sovereignty, these interventions remain vulnerable to tokenism, guilt-avoidance, and the ongoing production of colonial harms. The role that Treaty plays as a mechanism for moving beyond simplistic engagement tools is very real. The learnings from Victoria and Aotearoa New Zealand offer significant insights into how this can help shift the framing and introduce a sharper understanding of political authority into the relationship.

However, whether in an explicit Treaty context or not, the relationship still exists. It is the responsibility of urban policy makers and practitioners to consider seriously what such a relationship entails, including constructing ways of working that share power, and materially move the relationship towards repair and away from the reproduction of harm.

Public service reform in the key urban directorates is an obvious policy challenge—and an opportunity. The complexity of siloed agencies, departments and authorities makes little sense from a First Nations perspective, and can actively undermine the ability to care properly for Country. It is the responsibility of the various non-Indigenous authorities to contribute to an interface that does not take this toll. In machinery of government discussions at the formation of new governments and cabinets, there are important moments where the personnel chosen to lead major agencies can be assessed for their understanding of First Nations perspectives. While agency formation is always contested, incoming governments might show leadership in partnering in the way they create these agencies. This, along with reducing staff turnover in key relationships, can help to:

- reduce the load on community
- build longer-term partnerships based on trust and respect
- embed a more fundamental understanding about how First Nations knowledges and governance can be reflected in public service composition.

The study

The project design was informed by First Nations philosophies and methods of knowledge-sharing and creation, centring principles of reciprocity and respect. It used Yarning Circles, which are an Indigenous methodology for respectful knowledge-sharing based on relational philosophies where Country is a participant. The findings include extended quotations from Traditional Custodians and practitioners to present the material in the voices of those who contributed.

The study focussed on two significant projects between First Nations and urban policy that were underway in Melbourne and Sydney at the time this study was commissioned. The decision to bid for the project was taken in partnership with both these First Nations groups through existing relationships with the research team. Through these discussions it was clear that these projects offered immediate insights for policy learning, and Traditional Custodians saw value in contributing.

In Melbourne, the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation (Wurundjeri Corporation) had been engaged with the State of Victoria's Department of Environment Energy and Climate Action (DEECA; formerly Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning [DELWP]) on the Melbourne Future Planning Framework (MFPF). This was a metropolitan-wide planning process to develop strategic plans for six distinct regions as part of the wider Plan Melbourne strategic direction of the Melbourne metropolitan area. The MFPF was auspiced and led by the state government with involvement from the 32 local governments within the metropolitan area. Five of the six regions under the MFPF intersect with Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Country.

In Sydney, the Western Sydney Aerotropolis and Western Parkland City proposes transformation to Country, which is viewed as destruction of Country by Traditional Custodians. These are large regional strategic planning processes also led at the state level of NSW and involving multiple stakeholders, including local government and regional authorities. While Dharug Traditional Custodians do not have a legislated voice, a number of engagement efforts have sought to include Dharug perspectives in these processes.

These relationships that Wurundjeri Woi-Wurrung people and Dharug people were engaged in within their respective state policy interventions became the central focus of the study. To this extent, the study defines urban policy as settler-state interventions that seek to influence and shape the future and shape of human settlements.

We first held three yarning circles with First Nations urban practitioners based in NSW and Victoria who work in a range of policy domains including planning, design, community development and urban research. We then held a series of yarning circles with Dharug custodians and with Wurundjeri custodians about urban policy impacts on their respective Country. The first yarn established the grounding of the project on Wurundjeri and Dharug terms and co-created the main themes for further discussion. A second more substantive yarning circle was held for around four hours, and focussed on the areas of highest priority and concern agreed in the first yarn. Both yarning circles were held online at the request of participants, as scheduling difficulties made the original intention of in-person yarns impossible. An iterative process of transcribing, reviewing and workshopping of main themes and messages was undertaken with each of the Wurundjeri and Dharug participants all the way through to publication of this report.

At the same time, we collated and annotated the relevant urban policy texts to understand the precise nature of the statutes, regulations, policies, strategies, codes and guidelines that shape the relationship of urban policy professions with First Nations people. This involved a very extensive analysis of policy texts at the international, national and state levels of Victoria and NSW. The most relevant policy texts are presented in the main report with the full and detailed analysis contained in a separate policy synthesis paper prepared in conjunction with this report (Wensing and Kelly 2024).

Yarns with non-Indigenous urban practitioners were undertaken as a final stage in the data collection. These were heavily informed by the earlier yarns, ensuring that the main concerns of First Nations people framed the discussion. These practitioners had worked with First Nations people or engagement processes and were all also interested and personally motivated to improve urban policy responses and practices. As such they should not be seen as representative of the profession broadly, but should be seen to provide a strong example of an engaged and well-informed cohort of practitioners.

The yarning methodology was vitally important for this research, and is a key contribution from the study. Each yarn was both iterative and generative, developing a new level of understanding co-created among everyone involved in the yarn, which then informed the next yarn. This was especially important in the analysis we undertook of the yarn with non-Indigenous practitioners. When placed in relationship with the earlier yarns with Traditional Custodians and First Nations practitioners centred, we were able to bring to light aspects that may have remained obscured under a more linear approach to the analysis. While such practices cannot fully resolve the unequal power relations embedded in urban research as much as urban policy, we make these practices explicit to further contribute to the development of future research and policy practices in good relationship.

Finally, we acknowledge and highlight that this report is not an outcome sought (or indeed valued) by Wurundjeri Woi-Wurrung and Dharug partners in this research. It is an output required by the funder and expected as routine within academic and policy-related research activities. The project team continues to work with Dharug and Wurundjeri custodians after the publication of this report to bring about more relevant and useful community-focussed outcomes from the research.



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