

GRADUATION REFLECTION REPORT

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[RE] IMAGINE THE COUNTRY

INTRODUCTION:

The natural temperate grasslands of the Victorian Volcanic Plains [VVP] are one of Australia's most critically endangered ecosystems. Extreme ecological transformations due to agricultural practices and urban development have resulted in less than 1% of the original vegetation remaining in a pre-colonial state. These losses have led to both environmental and cultural destruction among the region's First Nations People, particularly the Wathaurong, whose deep knowledge of the area established complex land management systems sustaining human cultivation with ecological care for thousands of years.

This research and design project posit that to improve the region, a retrospective examination and uncovering of colonialist and First Nations histories is necessary. With the aim to adapt or reengage with FN's Peoples cultural views and landscape management which is hidden beneath the surface. The project aims to delineate the fundamental views, laws, and dynamics of the First Nations People and explore their manifestation in spatial ecologies. The focus is on translating these insights into spatial, practical, and programmatic forms to reassess the urban-rural and natural landscape of the Victorian Volcanic Plains. Seven major design ideas were developed through the research, informing a new social spatial landscape for the area.

Furthermore, the design project concentrates on developing a First Nations Agricultural campus within the VVP context, aligning with the design and spatial principles outlined in the research. Situated on a farm owned by the Wathaurong CoOp, this project addresses the complex poly culture systems of Agricultural, Socio-cultural, and ecological production/reproduction. It navigates this complexity through three major design scales: the System Scale, the Compound Scale, and the Building Scale, creating a farm-scape appropriate for the region.

The overarching theme of journey, evident in ecosystem movement, land management processes, and seasonal and social-cultural reproduction, serves as the project's ligaments. It connects various design scales and dualistic systems on the site to educate users about 'seeing this landscape with new eyes.'

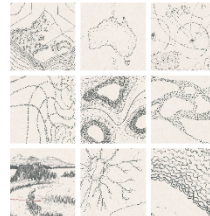
The Building design component focuses on designing spaces for core processes of the polyculture system, particularly the seed cultivating and processing areas, where the strongest interconnections between the three major polyculture systems are found.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS:

The synthesis of research methods led to significant outcomes, including the identification and application of nine key First Nations views, laws, and dynamics in landscape management. These principles, derived from research methods, encompassed concepts such as *Layered Country*, *The Dreaming + Totemic Loci*, *Mobile Spatial Hierarchy*, *Concentrated Loci of Place*, *Detouring + Negative Space*, *Songlines + Embedded Knowledge*, *Spatial Imprinting*, and *Caring for Country*. These principles were further refined into seven specific design ideas tailored to address policy, urban planning, landscape architecture, and architectural design outcomes which can be seen in figure 01.

3 RE-IMAGINING THE VVP

principles



design ideas (applied across scales)

- 3.1 multi-dimensional space
- 3.2 the 'eco-commons'
- 3.3 scale: the entity of place
- 3.4 scale: the sensorial
- 3.5 scale: the sacred
- 3.6 connection through knowledge
- 3.7 human embodied materiality + regimes of care

Figure 01: Diagram depicting the several principles and the respective interpreted design ideas.

The method involved testing these design principles through sandbox type theoretical experiments conducted within the context of the VVP. These tests ranged in various scales from large urbanistic and legislative design to small scale phenomenological and engagement design. The outcomes of these experiments were then synthesized into a spatial synthesis map of the VVP, offering a redrawing of its landscape substantiated with the underlying design principles. This process was not only thought provoking but also led to significant conclusions regarding the research question:

“How can integrating First Nations knowledge into rural urban planning and architecture help conserve VVP’s endangered grasslands and promote sustainable living in Australia’s landscape?”

The conclusions drawn emphasised the need to change human engagement with the Australian landscape, fostering a shared meaning of place between First Nations culture and other cultures. This entails a form of accommodating both representations within the landscape, promoting inclusivity and cultural preservation. The project also highlighted the imperative for truth-telling about the historical mistreatment of the continent, advocating for awareness and rectification. Encouraging wide spread community engagement of First Nations culture as well as an *erinnerungskultur* (culture of remembrance) around the effects of colonisation.

Furthermore, the research findings directly influenced the theoretical and practical aspects of designing the First Nations Agricultural Campus. The central theme of the project revolves around the concept of a journey, encompassing movement in ecosystems, animals, land management processes, seasonality, and social-cultural and ecological reproduction. This thematic framework guided the design execution, ensuring alignment with the project’s core principles and objectives.

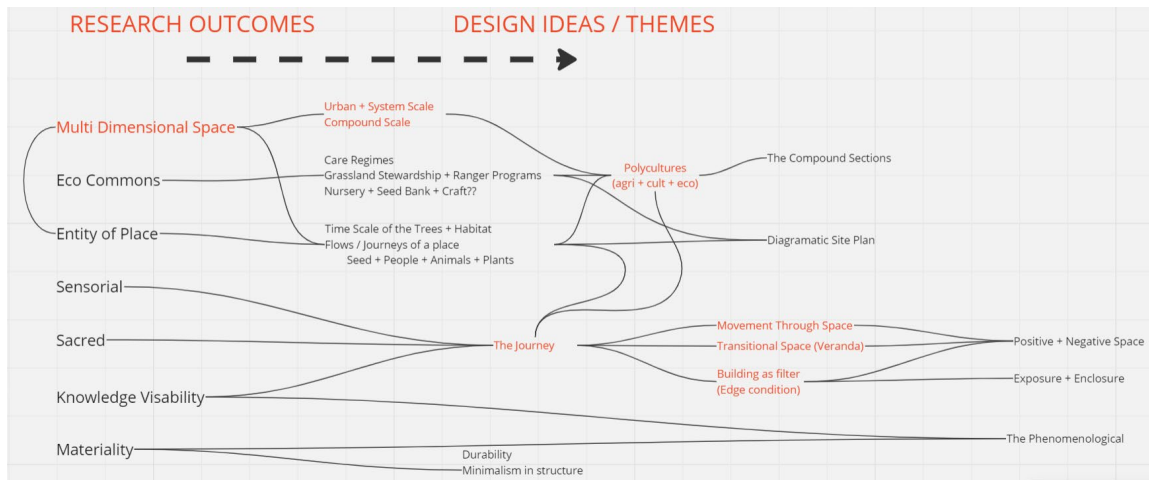


Figure 02: Diagram depicting the main research outcomes which were brought through and connect to the main design themes / ideas.

(Orange text depicts major themes within the design project)

CHOICE OF METHOD

The methodology employed in the research project was chosen to ensure ethical and culturally sensitive engagement with First Nations themes. Utilizing ethnographic and theoretical literature from seminal authors in First Nations social and cultural studies, such as Deborah Bird Rose, Bill Gammage, W.E.H. Stanner, and Nancy D. Munn, alongside interviews with respected First Nations individuals like Bruce Pascoe and Trevor Reg Abrahams, reflects a deliberate effort to incorporate authentic voices and perspectives into the research.

This methodological approach aimed to avoid cultural appropriation while acknowledging and navigating my non-Indigenous background, which inevitably influenced interpretations and findings within the research. The concept of ‘*Two ways of knowing, two ways of seeing,*’ introduced by Chase Aghan – Project Officer (Forest, Fire, and Parks) for Wadawurrung Co-Op, was discussed in-depth in Chapter One, addressing methodological strategies and the inherent interpretation biases.

Furthermore, integrating historic, scientific, and architectural literature, along with engagement with experts like Landscape Architect Adrian Marshall and Paul Memmott facilitated a comprehensive understanding of historical, ecological, political, and social dimensions within the Victorian Volcanic Plains (VVP). The research methodology also recognized the influence of my formal education in architecture on creative design choices, emphasizing the need for critical reflection on biases and perspectives shaping the study's outcomes.

REFLECTION ON APPROACH

In reflecting on the approach, both successes and areas for improvement emerged. Collaboration and ethical engagement in the topic proved effective for both research and design methodologies. Regular engagement with Reg Abrahams via video calls and in-person site visits in February provided valuable feedback and information, ensuring considerate and applicable work. However, while interpretations of research outcomes were overall successful, design tests lacked rigor in reaching a final conclusive outcome and lacked space for deeper critical reflection on ethnological/historiological information.

The methodological approach to the design component, balancing practical use as a farm and cultural/theoretical experiences, was deemed appropriate for this project. The creation of Architectural Languages tailored to varying programmatic requirements ensured a balanced design language implementation. Reflection on feedback from mentors such as Rene and Taneha in landscape architecture and urbanism was crucial, offering insights into new spatial scales and timeframes, boosting confidence in engaging with larger-scale designs and considering their interactions and changes over timeframes longer than that typically addressed in architecture.

Overall, this methodological approach underscores the importance of ethical engagement, cultural sensitivity, critical reflection, and collaborative learning in the research and design processes, particularly when dealing with

complex interdisciplinary topics like First Nations knowledge integration and sustainable urban and architectural design.

This project has been a reflective journey, prompting me to reassess my role as an architect and how I engage within diverse social and spatial contexts, such as agriculture, First Nations perspectives, environmental conservation, and societal interactions within urban and cultural settings. Through this process, I have gained a deeper understanding that architecture extends beyond creating static solutions that react to context; it also involves discerning when not to intervene or when adaptation is more appropriate. It entails actively participating in the journeys of cultural heritage, ecological restoration/ movements, and the changing demands of society.

The key lesson from this experience underscores the importance of authentic collaborative and culturally sensitive approaches, particularly concerning First Nations people, their knowledge, and perspectives. Engaging with diverse stakeholders, including experts and local communities, has deepened my understanding and underscored the critical need to recognise historical contexts and ethical considerations in design processes. It is crucial to approach these sensitive topics not just through consultation but also with honesty and genuine engagement, understanding that they are integral to our history, and we bear a responsibility to engage with and learn from them.

Moreover, this project has taught me the significance of design thinking beyond physical structures. As architects, we must also design our interactions within social spatial systems, challenging conventional paradigms of spatial design. It is crucial to advocate for designing constraints as diligently as designing the physical positive space, envisioning solutions that can adapt and evolve over time to address shifting environmental, cultural, and societal dynamics. Central to this learning is the recognition of architecture's role in fostering sustainable practices, community resilience, and cultural preservation. It prompts a revaluation of our design principles, we need to emphasise the design of negative spaces, limit conditions, and adaptable frameworks rather than static forms of adaptability. It encourages a proactive approach to societal challenges, envisioning social spatial landscapes that evolve reflexively with change over larger timeframes.

In essence, this project has been an informative process, shaping not just my architectural perspectives but also instilling a deeper sense of responsibility towards our engagement with culture and environments. It has underscored the significance of ongoing evolution in architectural interventions, interwoven with societal, environmental, and cultural shifts. To ultimately nurture resilience, repair and adaptation, within the spaces we inhabit and engage with.