

**SHAPING THE FUTURE: ARTS AND CULTURE IN THE  
NORTHERN TERRITORY**

**Submission by the Australian Institute of Architects (NT)**

in response to

**Shaping the Future: Arts and Culture in the  
Northern Territory, Discussion Paper 2015**

November 2015



**Australian  
Institute of  
Architects**

This response to the Government's Discussion Paper is intentionally limited in its ambitions.

We restrict our comments almost exclusively to the intended scope of the future Policy, proposing the merits of including architecture as one of our primary forms of cultural expression. It is currently embedded deep in one of the Cultural Domains of the UNESCO Framework for cultural statistic domains, as referenced, and is confined to 'Architectural Services'. We contend that *what we build* is as much an expression of our cultural life as are any of the equally important Domains.

Our objective is to foster a built culture that is as appropriate to place, vibrant, and expressive as our Indigenous forbears. In saying this, it is important to understand that we refer not only to the outcome, but the expectations that underwrite the ambitions of what we, as a society, ask for in the first place.

If Darwin (ie. Charles) is right, then by extension, built culture ought to evolve with society. It therefore remains our hope that the 'frontier' nature of Darwin's more recent history can evolve into something more complex, layered and sophisticated. We are hopeful that the proposed Policy is large enough in spirit and ambition to prompt such cultural evolution.

## **ARCHITECTURE?**

Architecture is more than just building. Architecture, so it has been named, is "the mother of the Arts". This is a lofty claim. But there is a point that such a claim is trying to make. Troppo, perhaps the Territory's most recognised architects, have previously remarked:

*"Buildings can often achieve a very personal significance for their users; others may be deliberately grand or large, begging public appreciation. Some might be asked to be subservient to the importance and sensitivity of a natural or street landscape... whilst all too many never appear that remarkable anyway. Yet all buildings can tell us something about the time in which they were built, about the people who built them: in the words of the architectural historian, Max Freeland:*

*A country's architecture is a near perfect record of its history. Every building captures in physical form the climate and resources of a country's geography, the social, economic, technological and political conditions of its society and the moral, aesthetic and spiritual values of its people. Every building records, describes and explains the time and place in which it was built".*

Just so. Or at least, *if* so, then not so great for us in the Northern Territory.

Architecture is both the product - what we see and feel and experience as "buildings" - but is just as much the process by which the product is arrived at. One cannot happen without the other.

## ARCHITECTS?

Architecture, ostensibly, is delivered by architects. But understandably, most governments don't know what to do with architects. Are we engineers? Or builders? Or are we artists?

The frustrating answer, for government – and also, for us – is that we are “both/and” types. We are generalists. This means that we, as a profession, profess to know a little about a lot of things. It means that trying to define what we do in any empirical sense is almost always likely to frustrate everyone, from whoever it is who is tasked with categorising us, to us who practice as architects.

Perhaps the easiest parallel to hold in mind is that we are, in a way, a bit like government. For just about every portfolio that you have, we will likely be somehow involved. For every strand of, say, the Government's “*Framing the Future*” strategy, we would see ourselves as a natural contributor:

- “*Prosperous Economy*” – yes, the built environment is one of the benchmark contributors to the Australian economy, and architects design much of it;
- “*Strong Society*” – yes, architects view the design of our environment as means of promoting healthy and vibrant social connections;
- “*Confident Culture*” – yes, architects will passionately promote in their work a form of cultural expression that relates to the place in which it is located;
- “*Balanced Environment*” – yes, architects are committed to the design of sustainable communities.

We say this is not by way of boasting, but merely to explain an architect's sense of professional obligation.

## ARCHITECTS DESIGN?

At a simplistic level, everybody needs a ‘house’ to live in, and this is a fundamental concern for architects. But what you need to understand about architects is that we are trained in design; and design is a synthetic activity that operates in ever increasing circles of inclusion. So it is that you end up with an assortment of interests that are ascribed to architects: arts, science, commerce, law. It is the same reason that in writing this submission, representing their peak professional body, we can say that “*the Institute and its members are dedicated to the advancement of architecture through involved and innovative practice, with the aim of raising the quality of the built environment and, consequently, the quality of life. In this it seeks to improve standards of health and safety for the protection and welfare of all members of the community*”.

We can say this, and mean it; but at the same time be fully aware that this is not something that is widely understood. This we accept, and also contend, is almost entirely bound up as a matter of culture.

## PRINCIPLES AND VALUES OF AN ARTS AND CULTURE POLICY?

We are fundamentally supportive of the idea that the purpose of an Arts and Cultural Policy is to encourage the development of a unique cultural identity, but respectfully submit that arts and culture are two quite different things.

As the draft definition identifies, “*The arts represent an outlet of expression that is influenced by culture and which in turn helps to change culture*”. This differentiates the Arts as an expression of culture.

Culture, on the other hand, seems to us a broader and overarching concept. As you say: “*Culture is the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people, defined by everything from language, kinship, religion, cuisine, social habits to music and arts*”. We suggest that it also includes such domains as business, economics, industry, health, science, and so on.

We understand cultural identity to be a complex and interwoven thing, that is formed by many different groups and individuals within our society, that is shaped by and reflected in the places and spaces that we use, the things that we make, the ways that we dress, the ways in which we depict ourselves, the songs that we sing, the stories that we tell... but also, implicitly, the buildings that we live, and work, and recreate in, as well as the communities that they house, and the fabric which knits them together.

We note that this philosophical position on the fundamental tenets of our culture, if so understood, will necessarily resonate through all of our buildings – not just the “arts” or “cultural” examples.

What this says about the Territory is this: we live in a remarkably beautiful part of this wonderful country, but we populate it, for the most part, with markedly ugly buildings.

A good majority of them are ugly in every sense: aesthetically underwhelming, but with an ugliness that extends to incorporate many elements of functionality, and which ultimately evidences an intellectual vacuity. This is not new: Robin Boyd, one of our great cultural critics, made this point more than fifty years ago in *The Australian Ugliness*.

But here in the Territory, the paradox worsens: for what we know to be sound principle, we frequently, and actively, subvert. We know, for example, that tropical climates are both hot and humid; we also know that the most reasonable response to this is to encourage as much natural cross ventilation as possible, to ameliorate the physical discomfort. But what we for the most part build for ourselves, as a society, are heavily fabricated dwellings, planned in such a way as to actively prohibit any natural advantage. This is a bizarre quality, and surely cannot be considered a positive.

This is not an accident or by-product of design. It is a reflection of our culture. “You get what you pay for”, or so the saying goes. It is just as much to say that “you get what you ask for”.

Whether you like it or not, our buildings speak for who and what we are. On this page, with some rare exceptions, history will not be so kind to the Territory. This is ultimately to its detriment, as it is an opportunity squandered.

## **SHAPING THE FUTURE: EVOLUTION OF THE SPECIES?**

If you acknowledge that our buildings are a reflection of our culture, then where the Northern Territory needs to see change is less so the designers who design the buildings, but the society that procures them – whether privately, or in business terms, or by government. This is a profoundly cultural issue.

To this end, we recommend that Government pursue two separate policies, rather than the combined Arts and Cultural Policy currently proposed:

1. An Arts Policy, which is able to articulate in greater detail Government’s position to specific activities identified in the “Arts”; and
2. A whole-of-government Cultural Policy, which might include:
  - a. recognition of our Indigenous heritage, and acknowledgment that “Australia” as most of us see it is only the most recent chapter of a very long history;
  - b. encouragement, facilitation and promotion of diversity – in terms of gender, cultural background, and philosophy – as a means of curating a rich cultural mix;
  - c. promotion of an increasingly diversified economy;
  - d. a commitment to Innovation in all aspects of Government;
  - e. equity of opportunity;
  - f. a commitment to procuring and delivering excellence;

*etc.*

We provide for your consideration two documents:

- Australian Institute of Architects’ *Public Art Policy*, (2009) with respect to 1) above; and
- Office of the Victorian Government Architect, *Government as Smart Client*, (Edition 01, August 2013), with respect to securing quality outcomes for government, and the public, under 2) above.

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## **PURPOSE**

This submission is made by the NT Chapter of the Australian Institute of Architects (the Institute) to the Department of Arts and Museums, Northern Territory Government, in response to the invitation issued under the *Shaping the Future: Arts and Culture in the Northern Territory* Discussion Paper, 2015.

At the time of the submission the office bearers of the NT Chapter are Simon Scally (President), Richard Layton (Past President), Andrew Broffman, Alice Chambers, Ross Connolly, Jenny Culgan, Robert Foote, Steve Huntingford, Rossi Kourounis, Tammy Neumann, Katy Moir, Joshua Bellette, Jurse Salandanan. The Chapter Manager of the Northern Territory Chapter is Joshua Morrin.

This paper was prepared by Joshua Morrin, NT & International Chapter Manager, for the Northern Territory Chapter Council.

## **ABOUT THE INSITUTE**

The Australian Institute of Architects, incorporated in 1929, is one of the 96 member associations of the International Union of Architects (UIA) and is represented on the International Practice Commission. The Institute is an independent voluntary subscription-based professional member organisation with more than 12,000 members who are bound by a Code of Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures. The Institute is the peak body for the architectural profession in Australia, and works to improve our built environment by promoting quality, responsible, sustainable design.