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The Koorie Heritage Trust re-centres Indigenous communities by design

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Jefe Greenaway leads a sneak preview tours of the new Koorie Heritage Trust place. Author, Author provided

This Saturday marks the 30th anniversary of the Koorie Heritage Trust. The Trust will mark the occasion with the official opening of a new place in the Yarra Building on Federation Square. The move represents the re-centring of South Eastern Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures in the heart of the Melbourne's cultural precinct.

Based on my sneak preview during Melbourne Open House in July, the design of the Trust's new built environment by Lyons Architects, with advocacy by Indigenous Architecture and Design Victoria, introduces an alternative paradigm for community heritage places. This alternative paradigm inverts the old notions of the museum collection and decolonises the collecting practices that the Trust fought in its establishment.

I recently interviewed Jefa Greenaway of Greenaway Architects and Indigenous Architecture and Design Victoria (IADV), who worked on the fit out. His brief was to help design the

expressions of local Indigenous values and the Trust's legacy into the new place. According to Greenaway, IADV and Lyons Architects sought to:

Find a methodology and a process by which we could ensure that Indigenous ideas were woven throughout the process and the design itself.

He highlights three specific ideas expressed in the new built environment for the Trust:

- Greater access to the Trust's over 60,000+ items in its collections;
- Connection to Country, specifically to the cultural and topographic features of the Birrarung (Yarra River); and
- Community engagement and exchange.

Access to Collections



View of the transparent display shelving in the new Koorie Heritage Trust place In-house photography: Lyons Architect

For those who may not know the history of the Koorie Heritage Trust, ensuring Indigenous community access to cultural heritage material was its founding principle. Uncle Jim Berg, Ron Castan, and Ron Merkel successfully sued the University of Melbourne and the Museum of Victoria for their collections of Indigenous cultural material. Greenaway describes:

The original vision of Koorie Heritage Trust was to use the collection as a means to connect with community and showcase cultural continuity.

Although the original KHT building on King Street had nearly three times the space as the Yarra Building, it is estimated that less than 20% of the artefacts were ever on permanent display. In the 2003 opening of the Trust on King Street, the Age reported that included:

Over 600 paintings, 10,000 artefacts - woven eel traps, spears and shields - 6000 books, videos and documents, and 50,000 photographs.

Greenaway talks about how through the consultation process the desire was expressed to move from the more static museum-like displays at the King Street place to designs that more clearly say:

Let's display with pride the collection.

In a stunning design, the architects innovatively turned the internal “walls” into transparent display shelving, with drawers that can be accessed by the public. Now, twenty times more of the Trust’s collections can be displayed with the public and the staff sharing access to the collections. Plans for the Indigenous communities’ curating of display shelves further enhance their access to the collections.

Other means of ensuring access to the collections are through a state of the art temperature and light controlled collections room for Indigenous community members and researchers, drawers full of touchable and viewable artefacts in the “canoe” table for the public, and a large worktable in the staff’s area.

Connection to Country



View of the third level kitchenette, seating, and view of Birrarung in the new Koorie Heritage Trust In-house photographer: Lyons Architect

Connection to Country is one of the most important Indigenous values. The sense of the custodial relationships between people and the lands upon which they depend is enshrined in the Acknowledgements and Welcome to Country that precedes many Melbourne events. Greenaway says:

Given that the building is adjacent to Birrarung (the Yarra River), that was a key reference point. That was pivotal for me finding a means in—to connect to that cultural continuity of the river being the lifeblood of a community. And being

close proximity to cultural sites, like the MCG, just up the road, which was a gathering place for the five Kulin Nations. This began to create a narrative where we could connect to where we were, and therefore we could acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which the site is located.

An odd feature of the Yarra Building is that it turns its back to the Birrarung, which is the Wurundjeri name for the Yarra River. In response, the architects created design features that literally point one towards the presence of the Birrarung.

They opened up window apertures that allow one to glimpse the river. Chevrons patterns of light on the ceiling and on textiles on the floor point one towards the river view. The blue colours on the ceilings and the smooth grey pebble concrete floors evoke a feeling of the Birrarung, even when one cannot see it well. An expansive balcony provides unobstructed views of Birrarung.

Community engagement and exchange



Foyer of the new Koorie Heritage Trust place In-house
photographer: Lyons Architect

When one enters the foyer of new Koorie Heritage Trust's place, the seating on the first level indicates that here is a different kind of engagement with visitors. Greenaway talks about the importance of providing a place for respite, where elders and children can sit down without having to buy a drink at a café and engage in exchange:

What people are looking for is the capacity to connect in with where you are. I think there is a thirst for tourists to connect with Indigenous cultures, thus by extension Indigenous people.

Informal and formal spaces have been designed to enable the Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities to engage and exchange with one another. When one rides the escalator up to the third level, one encounters a seating area with a kitchenette to make a cup of tea.

Formal spaces for community engagement and exchange include the large workshop room that accommodates up to 120 school children. A map of local Indigenous languages operates as the room divider that creates two smaller rooms for business meetings, cultural competency workshops, and other corporate functions.

The 7-meter "canoe" table serves as the signature design feature for the idea of community

engagement and exchange. First, it pays homage to the scar tree that served as a signature feature of the Trust on King Street and thus held significant memories for many community members. Scar trees represent Indigenous custodianship of the land where communities only took what was required and left the tree to continue living.



View of the 'canoe' table and the shelving display cases at the new Koorie Heritage Trust In-house photographer: Lyons Architect

It is a hub for activity and engagement. It encourages you to open draws, look through things through the top of the table, which has glass on it, and see artefacts within the table. The drawers all have artefacts from the collection. They are set at different levels so that from kids to adults, all can interact with the materials close at hand. It has a cantilever on one end, which allows people with wheelchairs to come in. We can have weaving workshops, where people sit around and use it. It could be used for art demonstrations.

Go experience the new Koorie Heritage Trust's place

There are so many other design features of the Koorie Heritage Trust's fit-out that I could describe. But on Saturday, 19 September, you will have the opportunity to experience them all yourself. I leave Jefa Greenaway with the last word:

Indigenous culture is a living culture. This is a living organism of which you become part of that experience. You have the opportunity for engagement in a meaningful way with the Trust.



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