

Design Studio Spatial Agency 86530

The Caged Trees of the Central West

July-November 2018



Henry King. A carved Wiradjuri tree photographed near Dubbo, New South Wales. (191?.).
Collection, State Library of New South Wales. Call no. SPF/1153.

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Caged tree in Geurie, South of Dubbo, New South Wales.

Site : Dubbo

Brief : The Caged Trees of the Central West

Proposal :

The design studio seeks to demonstrate how design can make positive contribution to the preservation of Aboriginal culture.

The proposed studio requires students to conceive site specific, culturally appropriate, alternative design solutions to the current practice of placing Aboriginal culturally modify trees in cages.

As part of the proposed studio 18 students from the University of Technology Sydney Faculty of Design, Architecture and Building, will spend a week in Dubbo (3rd-7th of September 2018).

While in Dubbo students will undertake a process of community consultation, collaborative research and design development and documentation.

Design Studio Outcomes:

- Provide the communities of central NSW with design solutions for the preservation of Aboriginal cultural artefacts in the landscape.
- Establish partnerships between communities in regional NSW with University of Technology Sydney
- Introduce students to Aboriginal culture and people
- Introduce students to the complexities of Australian colonial race relations
- Assign students a contemporary, culturally important, cross-culture design brief
- Familiarise students with appropriate processes of cultural engagement and consultation across cultures

Studio assignment context and background:

DESECRATION

By **PATRICK BEGLEY**

A LOCAL Aboriginal site has been desecrated, the scarred tree at its centre burned, its shelter torn down.

Aboriginal Elder Coral Peckham said the attack was the latest in a long history of vandalism against Aboriginal sites in the region.

"This is Tubba-Gah country and we have an obligation to protect it on behalf of our ancestors," Ms Peckham, a descendant of the Tubba-Gah and Wiradjuri peoples, said.

"When it's not protected, the traditional people feel unwell."

The markings on a scarred tree show how ancestors used its wood for tools, while carved trees act as headstones or markers of ceremonial sites.

Ms Peckham said she had seen the trees lacerated by chainsaws, hammered with nails, covered in paint, and burned.

"You feel unwell and sad when you see these things happening over and over again," she said.

The recent desecration took place at a site close to the highway between Dubbo and Gilgandra, where the Aboriginal community had erected a wire and concrete shelter to protect the tree.

A Wiradjuri man who discovered the damage said the tree was "completely destroyed" by fire and the shelter ruined.

Harming or desecrating an Aboriginal object or site carries a maximum penalty of two years' jail under the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Act.

Ms Peckham said after the Aboriginal community worked in the 1990s to erect



A scarred tree significant to local Aboriginal people has been burned and its shelter destroyed.
Photo: CONTRIBUTED

signs around the special sites, many of these were then deliberately damaged.

Signs welcoming people to Tubba-Gah and Wiradjuri country on the way to Wellington and Narromine, she said, had been shot through with bullets to the point of illegibility.

Ms Peckham said while Tubba-Gah and Wiradjuri country included hand stencils on rock walls and other significant pieces of Indigenous heritage, the elders would not disclose their whereabouts.

"We don't want to do anything with that information because we're too scared that someone will come up behind us and desecrate them."

Dubbo City Council's parks and landcare director, Murray Wood, said: "Any desecration of Aboriginal sites is disturbing and needs to be appropriately dealt with through the respective land holders and managers".

Mr Wood said the two Aboriginal sites council helped to manage at Wiradjuri Park and Terramungamine Reserve had not seen significant vandalism.

Daily Liberal (Dubbo, NSW.) Local Aboriginal Site Attacked by Vandals.
23 March, 2014.

Two hundred years of colonisation and assimilation have almost completely erased tens of thousands of years of Aboriginal culture from the landscape of the Central West of NSW. In Wiradjuri and Gamilaroi country one of the few remaining visible cultural signifiers are the now dead 'ghost' scar and carved trees, or dendroglyphs, of the region. For contemporary Wiradjuri and Gamilaroi people, both carved and scar trees hold tremendous cultural importance as tangible conduits to their cultural heritage.

In the early 18th century, when Wiradjuri country was first colonised, tens of thousands of scar and carved trees dotted the Wiradjuri landscape. Many of these were recorded and documented by the Anthropological Society of NSW in the early 19th century. Extensive land clearing, the decay of old trees, fire and vandalism have all contributed to there now being only a handful of carved and scar trees left in the landscape; scar trees are found in greater numbers. Like other significant and spiritual Aboriginal sites across the region they are the focus and flash points of ongoing racial tensions between Wiradjuri people and land owners. Over the last 15 – 20 years, local councils have initiated a practice of caging scar and carved trees, ostensibly to protect them from acts of desecration. Once caged the trees are more visible in the landscape and perversely, more contested as signifiers of Indigenous place belonging. In the last few years, several caged trees have been completely destroyed as a result of carefully planned premeditated acts of desecration.

The practice of caging culturally modified trees in the central west represents a basic solution to a complicated set of issues. It is a cultural practice that did not emerge from a considered and researched process initiated by either an Indigenous group such as the Dubbo Local Aboriginal Lands Council or a government department such as the New South Wales Heritage Division Office of Environment and Heritage. Rather, it is a cultural practice, initiated by various local councils, in consultation with various Indigenous representatives, that has emerged and evolved over decades.

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Stakeholders/Participants:

Tubba-Gah (maing) Wiradjuri Aboriginal Corporation
Wellington Local Aboriginal Land Councils
Dubbo Local Aboriginal Land Councils
Heritage Division Office of Environment and Heritage
Dubbo Western Plains Cultural Centre
State Library of NSW
Regional ABC radio
Dubbo Liberal newspaper

UTS Stakeholders/Participants

Mat Gallois _ Studio Leader from The University of Technology Sydney
Campbell Drake _Senior Lecturer from The University of Technology Sydney
18 students from the Faculty of Design, Architecture and Building at The University of Technology Sydney

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About Studio Leader Mat Gallois

Between 2010 and 2013 Gallois researched and wrote the Wellington publication. Wellington is a 50,000 word, 64 page newspaper-style publication featuring contributions by, and perspectives on, the local Wiradjuri community as a gesture toward writing their narratives back into the recorded history of the area. Wellington represents an intimate history of Wellington's race relations, the processes of colonisation and the community's tentative steps towards reconciliation, highlighting some of the complexities of cross-cultural engagement as well as issues of censorship and selective historicising. Mat Gallois' grandfather was the owner and editor the Wellington Times from 1944 to 1965. The publication was widely distributed within the local community.