

PARRAMATTA SQUARE



A major new civic space that marks the contemporary identity of Parramatta and houses a collection of Aboriginal spaces, elements and expressions

Hearth Marker – Fire hearth last used more than 700 years ago

Image: Courtesy triggerdesign.com.au.

Quick facts

Project type:
Major urban renewal precinct with a new public square and civic building

Location:
Parramatta, NSW

Aboriginal language landscape group:
Barramada Yiyura (People), Dharug Nura (Country)

Project team:
Heritage interpretation Dharug Cultural Specialist Panel: Dharug Ngurra Aboriginal Corporation – Aunty Julie Jones, Corina Norman; Dharug Custodian Aboriginal Corporation – Leanne Watson

Dharug Circle: Nuttshell; De Chellis Artistry; Regal Innovations; Fresh Landscapes; City of Parramatta Heritage Interpretation; JMD design; Walker; Built

Broader Interpretation Suite: City of Parramatta Heritage Interpretation; Trigger Design; De Chellis Artistry; Regal Innovations; Fresh Landscapes; JMD design; Walker; Built

Public art
Reko Rennie, UAP; David Hagger, City of Parramatta; JMD design

PHIVE Keeping Place
Manuelle Gautrand; Lacoste

+ Stevenson; DesignInc; Terri Janke and Company; Ngurra Advisory; City of Parramatta; Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council; Deerubbin Local Aboriginal Land Council

Cultural Reference Panel: Julie Jones, Corina Norman, Leanne Watson

Awards (PHIVE)
Project of the Year – 2022 Boomtown Awards (Western Sydney Leadership Dialogue) Australian Institute of Architects NSW, commendation for Public Architecture, commendation for Sustainable Architecture

Parramatta Square is situated in the heart of the city centre, adjacent to Parramatta's transport rail and bus interchange, and the future Light Rail line and Sydney Metro West station.

Key outcomes

Healthy community

The planning, design and delivery of projects has been governed in consultation with local knowledge-holders, organisations and communities. Aboriginal consultants, specialists and artists have been engaged in heritage interpretation, building and public art projects, and engagement processes.

Dharug Country footprints overlay

Image: Courtesy triggerdesign.com.au.

Protecting Aboriginal cultural heritage

Parramatta Square includes a keeping place that recognises, respects and resources Dharug cultural knowledge and knowledge-holders. This is a significant piece of cultural infrastructure for Aboriginal people in Western Sydney.

Archaeological investigation of the Parramatta Square site has identified historic, cultural and natural elements that will be preserved, protected and interpreted in the public domain and buildings.

Better places

As the new civic heart of the city, Parramatta Square will acknowledge the deep history of this place, its changing relationship to Country, and the waves of colonisation and migration experienced here. Throughout the public domain there are many different ways people can understand and engage with the story of this place.

Spatial implications / tips for designers

Engage Custodians at the start of the design process to ensure that a meaningful reading of and respect for Country is integral to the design proposal from first principles through to detailed design.

Ensure early coordination in the design process to integrate public art, interpretation and public domain design.

Better align project timelines, including design and construction stages, with First Nations processes for community engagement to facilitate meaningful direction from community.

Be open to new design opportunities to respond to Country at different stages of the project.

Express and facilitate cultural uses and processes within the fabric of the architecture and/or public spaces.





Dharug circle
Image: Michelle Desailly.

With 6,000 m² of open space, Parramatta Square is comparable in scale to Sydney CBD's Martin Place. It provides the city with a significant new public plaza that is also the civic seat of government for the City of Parramatta local government area.

Parramatta Square is framed by heritage buildings, landmark new commercial towers, Western Sydney University's vertical campus, and City of Parramatta's new community centre and civic building, PHIVE, which houses the city's main library and features a Dharug keeping place. Integrated throughout the precinct is a diverse range of food, beverage and retail options geared towards late-night activation and social gathering. Two major public artworks mark the eastern and western edges of the Square and numerous heritage interpretation works are distributed throughout the public domain to illuminate the site's rich history.

Parramatta Square's contemporary identity as a major civic space is a continuum of the site's significance as a historically important gathering place for Dharug clans and other Aboriginal peoples to meet, share knowledge and engage in ceremony. Archaeological investigations have shown the original ecology of the site was a wetland, abundant with food sources, and included a tributary stream from the Parramatta River.

This case study explains how Dharug cultural knowledge has been integrated into the design and development process of several key elements throughout Parramatta Square, and how the agglomeration of these elements recognises and respects Dharug cultural knowledge, contributes to elevating Country, and redresses the balance between Aboriginal and colonial history in an urban context.

Engaging with community from strategy to delivery

The City of Parramatta's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Committee was initially consulted in 2016 during the early planning stages and archaeological investigations of Parramatta Square. The committee and Dharug community reinforced the site's significance as a gathering place and the need for strong Dharug representation and ceremonial space throughout the Square.

In 2017 the City of Parramatta's reconciliation action plan and cultural plan established foundational principles for celebrating First Nations culture throughout the city centre and formally recognised Parramatta Square as a Dharug meeting place. From 2016–23 council managed and led the heritage interpretation process, overseeing engagement, consultancies, research, collaborations, concept and content development, location selection and overseeing testing, manufacturing and installation across the public domain. Council developed a Heritage Interpretation Framework for Parramatta Square (2019) to underpin a robust thematic approach, coordination and processes in aid of democratising heritage. This involved ongoing consultation with Dharug cultural knowledge-holders and the broader community. As major developments have a legislative requirement to deliver heritage interpretation, it was crucial that all the interpretive responses throughout the public domain and within private developments were coordinated, compatible and strive for best-practice outcomes.

In 2016 council began informal conversations with Dharug community, and in 2018 a Dharug Cultural Specialist Panel was established as a professional body to manage and guide development of the expression of culture and Country from concept through to final design. The panel was responsible for cultural knowledge and worked collaboratively with council's heritage interpretation staff and interpretation designers. Panel members included two key Dharug cultural custodianship organisations: the Dharug Ngurra Aboriginal Corporation and the Dharug Custodian Aboriginal Corporation.

The innovative components of our projects are drawn from our cultural heritage, influencing creative ideas and immersing traditional ideals into a world of modern settings. Valuing our culture and heritage is the most important component of our projects – looking beyond for creativity and change, thinking ideas outside the square, and having a vision for innovation. Everything we do we underpin with culture.

— Kevin (Gavi) Duncan, Senior Tourism Cultural Education Officer, Darkinjung Local Aboriginal Land Council

Highlighting heritage interpretation in the public domain

Parramatta Square's public domain features many highly detailed heritage interpretation works that illuminate the site's main theme as a gathering place where people have congregated for thousands of years. A suite of dedicated Aboriginal interpretation works tell stories that express the enduring link between Dharug Country and Dharug peoples, their connection to the site, and the abundance of plant and animal life that was a feature of the site's natural landscape and waterways. Other non-Aboriginal works illuminate the ways Country has been altered over time, referring to colonisation and the waves of migration that also link to the role of Parramatta Square as a gathering place for its contemporary community.

An on-Country marker can be found at a major entry point into the Square from the train station arcade to remind those passing by of Country and the language of Country.

Burrumatta Nura:
Live life to the full, Respect songlines through Country

Image: Courtesy triggerdesign.com.au.



Nura and yura are one

Image: Courtesy triggerdesign.com.au.



The words 'Burrumatta Nura' (Barramada Country) are etched into granite pavers, intersected by etched barefoot prints that symbolise the walking of Country. Two sinuous brass inlays frame the etchings with exhortations to 'Live life to the full' and 'respect songlines through Country'.

A series of subtle works are found throughout the Square, depicting a melange of footprints in etched and brass inlay form. These include young and old human, as well as a variety of animal and bird prints.

During the archaeological investigation of the site, three Dharug fire hearths were uncovered, dating over 2000, 700 and almost 200 years ago. These hearths and the gatherings of Aboriginal people that took place around them have been interpreted by inlaid, dated brass plaques featuring an illustration by Leanne Watson of a gathering around a hearth and the words of the Dharug Cultural Specialist Panel: Respect Country, Honour the Ancestors, and Remember the Dreaming.

Before colonisation, a creek line connected the wetlands of the Parramatta Square area to the Parramatta River. Colonial settlers drained the wetland site and transformed the creek into a drain to develop an open-air market and town pound on the site. While this transformation of Country was originally to be expressed through etched stippling and brass inlays, it has taken the form of a series of circular bronze markers that mark the line of the waterway.

Dharug Circle

Dharug Circle is a large gathering place for Dharug to rekindle and strengthen connection to Country and undertake ceremony, as they have for millennia in this place. The artwork consists of a 10 metre diameter circle of earth-toned porphyry pavers punctuated by an engraved granite hearth illustration by Leanne Watson at the centre. The paved circle is partially enclosed by cast concrete and timber seating and ringed with significant illustrations by Leanne Watson and words in both Dharug and English by the Dharug Cultural Specialist Panel:

Dharug ngalawa madung – Dharug live and remain strong
Ngara baya nura – Listen, hear Country speak
Gubangala gunyalunglung – Honour the Dreaming

Dharug Circle is both a gathering space for the general public to sit and relax and a place for Dharug to gather, conduct ceremony and engage in cultural practice.

Where Eels Lie Down

An international competition was held in 2019 to select artists to deliver major public art works for 2 sites. Reko Rennie, an internationally renowned First Nations artist, was selected in 2020 to deliver a large-scale public art piece for the western edge of Parramatta Square, where several Aboriginal heritage interpretation works were also planned.

Rennie's work – **Where Eels Lie Down** – is concerned with the importance of the Burrumattagal waterway (now known as Parramatta River), the wetland ecology of the Parramatta Square site and the need to learn from Aboriginal people who have, for tens of thousands of years, successfully managed and maintained native ecologies through sustainable land management practices. **Where Eels Lie Down** brings the history of the eel, inherently tied to the site, its surrounds, and its people, to the fore by celebrating it in large-scale, articulated form. The artwork reaches 8 metres high, and using a series of interlocked painted aluminium and etched granite panels, it depicts 2 brightly coloured eels, intertwined as they play with one another. At night, the eels are illuminated in a sequenced range of blue lights to signify the tidal variations of the Burrumattagal waterway and activate the public domain.

During design development, Rennie consulted with Dharug cultural custodians who hold knowledge of Burrumattagal eel lore and adjusted the artwork design to incorporate their input. Fins have been added as vertical bands in the granite and the orientation of the work was altered to make a stronger connection to the river. The head of one eel now points towards its home, the Burrumattagal waterway, while the other's head points to the sky to honour the Ancestors who live there.

Creating a keeping place for cultural material

PHIVE is a significant new community, cultural and civic facility in Parramatta Square, next to the heritage Parramatta Town Hall and fronting onto the Square's public domain. PHIVE contains council chambers, a public library, exhibition and multifunctional community space. It also contains the first Aboriginal keeping place delivered by an Australian local government in partnership with community inside a civic building.

A keeping place is a technical facility that stores Aboriginal cultural material and enables the Aboriginal community to directly engage with and discuss business relating to the stored artefacts. The Dharug community has long called for a way to preserve and store in-situ the many cultural artefacts excavated from building sites and the public domain throughout the Parramatta local government area. The directive to establish an Aboriginal keeping place in Parramatta to fulfil this need came from council's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Committee in the late 1990s. When planning began for Parramatta Square in the mid-2000s, council identified the opportunity to establish a keeping place within the new PHIVE building.

An extensive period of consultation with local Aboriginal community ensued, and a functional brief for the keeping place was prepared and incorporated into PHIVE's architectural design. During the establishment phase (2019–22), an informal group of Dharug Elders worked with Indigenous-led law firm Terri Janke and Company, cultural advisers Ngurra Advisory, and council to establish legislative frameworks and protocols for the future repatriation and safekeeping of local cultural material. A Keeping Place Officer was employed by council in 2022 to oversee management of the space and collection. In 2023 council commenced the establishment phase of the keeping place and established a cultural reference panel of Dharug Elders to provide ongoing direction, guidance and cultural expertise.

PHIVE Keeping Place opened in late 2022 and is a culturally safe space for the Aboriginal community that is not publicly accessible. It consists of 3 main spaces:

- a secret sacred room stores highly sensitive items not intended for display and has secure access available only to people nominated by Dharug community
- a viewing room houses non-secret and non-sacred materials and enables Dharug, and external parties by appointment, to openly engage with, study and research the general collection
- the Dharug Room, a meeting space for up to 20 people to conduct cultural business focused on artefacts, and may also be used by Aboriginal community for advisory meetings and other significant meetings.

The Dharug Cultural Reference Panel drives decision-making about what cultural material and knowledge will be preserved and how it will be managed and shared, and Dharug community have precedence over using the keeping place facilities. Dharug community own the PHIVE Keeping Place and the facility is managed by council.

The keeping place currently prioritises cultural material originating from the Parramatta River foreshore, North Parramatta heritage core and Parramatta Square, and will soon house the Australian Museum's significant Parramatta collection.

Guiding future development around Parramatta Square

An example of a recent building that engages with the precinct's broader cultural and community objectives is 85–97 Macquarie Street. Council facilitated a rigorous design competition process that required a meaningful response to Country, opportunities to incorporate Aboriginal culture and heritage interpretation, engagement with local Aboriginal land councils and community, and design features that improve the overall sustainability of the building. Building elements include a palette of rich, earth-toned materials, a rooftop garden that features species related to the 6 seasons of the Dharawal calendar, and incorporation of public art and interpretation works created by Indigenous artists.

The Dharug Keeping Place within Phive respects Dharug Culture; past, present and future and is a crucial part of the healing process. It's 'Sorry' in action.

— Karen Maber, Dharug Keeping Place Officer

Further resources

City of Parramatta Council (2017) *City of Parramatta Stretch Reconciliation Action Plan July 2017 – July 2020*, City of Parramatta Council, www.cityofparramatta.nsw.gov.au/sites/council/files/2018-09/stretch-reconciliation-action-plan_0.pdf.

City of Parramatta Council (2017) *Culture and our City: A Cultural Plan for Parramatta's CBD 2017 – 2022*, City of Parramatta Council, www.cityofparramatta.nsw.gov.au/sites/council/files/2017-06/Parramatta%20Cultural%20Plan_3b.pdf.

Credits

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