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Transformative or Tokenistic?

Exploring the Legitimacy of Participatory Design Methods within an Indigenous Context

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Participatory design is often promoted as an inclusive, open-ended, and fluid methodology for giving voice to marginalised and underrepresented user groups. In contrast, participatory design can also be used as a tool for political regeneration and is therefore sometimes criticised as ineffectual and tokenistic. Levels of stakeholder participation are not explicitly quantifiable, and the degree to which user groups may be involved in the decision-making process varies significantly.

Exploring the political binaries of transformative versus tokenistic participation within an Indigenous context, this article reflects on a series of participatory workshops undertaken within the design of a preschool and community hub located in the discrete Aboriginal community of Murrin Bridge.

The research draws upon Jeremy Till's take on 'transformative participation' and Susanne Hofmann's 'Architecture is Participation', with reference to the participatory design processes developed within Berlin-based Baupiloten's precedent 'Taka Tuka Land Kindergarten.' The research

also investigates the potential of adapting principles derived from Robert Chambers's Participatory Rural Appraisal as a means of adopting a socially inclusive approach to design. The article evaluates the successes and drawbacks of the participatory design methods used within the Murrin Bridge workshops and provides a critical analysis of the legitimacy of these processes as transformative, and the broader possibilities for reimagining the production of contemporary architecture through participation within in an Indigenous regional context.

Participation or Placebo?

Participatory design is a broad approach that refers to a design practice placing stakeholder inclusion at the forefront. In more successful examples of participatory design, the design question frames the specific context, defines the needs of the user, and balances authority across stakeholders (Hamdi). This approach engages the end-user in decision-making responsibilities, which is more likely to support a congruous relationship between the user and the design outcome (Broffman). It is important to acknowledge that the scope of inclusion in participatory design is not directly measurable and can range from an appearance of inclusion that is "really no more than a placebo" (Till) to active participation of the users, where "the boundary between "designer" and "user" becomes blurred' (Luck). Paul Jenkins's analytical framework, identifying three overarching forms of participation, is helpful in understanding these levels of user participation: (1) the one-way provision of information, (2) two-way consultation, and (3) negotiation or shared decision-making (Jenkins). However, participation without shared authority and user-autonomy in decision-making, indicated in the "information" and "consultation" levels within Jenkins's framework, could arguably be called out as tokenistic. Carole Pateman labels this inclusion of stakeholders as "pseudo-participation", performing as a box-ticking exercise to give users "a sense of influencing the design process" (Sanoff).

Participatory design, also referred to as cooperative design or co-design, is inherently political and often applied as an instrument for regeneration: once participation levels are deemed satisfactory, the design process can progress. As a result, participatory processes can often reinforce power structures; the design problem is established based on the knowledge of the so called 'expert', rather than the lived experience of the user, and control of communication is maintained by the expert (Till). In the situation of designers working within Aboriginal contexts, there is also the implicit responsibility of providing tangible benefits to communities in relation to health and employment, while negotiating delivery and revenue expectations of the service providers (Broffman). The design process is then framed around predetermined outcomes established by the architect or other governing bodies, neglecting to genuinely respond to the knowledge and aspirations of the users. As a result, these parameters persuade the tokenistic inclusion of community, to assert satisfactory participation, which has historically created a disjoint between the users and built outcomes, as the relationship between traditional Aboriginal socio-spatial behaviors and architecture is understated (Memmott).

In contrast, "transformative participation" or "inclusive design" subverts the tokenistic inclusion of stakeholders within the design process by establishing transparency in power, knowledge and decision making between the experts and end-users (Till). When working within Indigenous contexts, it is essential to understand the unique milieu from within which a design problem occurs; therefore, a deep knowledge of the community, including place, practice, culture, and organisations

is key (Hamdi). This understanding allows for methodologies for community participation to be established for the user and "tailored to each context and situation" (Jenkins). While the approach recognises that there will be imbalances of power and knowledge, the aim of transformative participation is to give precedence to user empowerment through genuine and ongoing engagement and subvert assumptions of the design outcomes by ensuring stakeholder involvement is fundamental in the decision-making processes (Till). This form of engagement relies equally upon the knowledge of the user, and how this can shape the knowledge of the "expert", as well as the ability of the expert to interpret, articulate, and translate this.

Till argues that transformative participation should be developed within and in response to the specific environment insofar as "the architect must project themselves into the spatial context, physical and social of the user" (Till). The participatory approach must remain flexible throughout the research in order to respond to the environment and allow for the participants to shape the process. Shaneen Fantin further advocates Till's position within a cross-cultural Aboriginal context, emphasising the significance of recognising the cultural knowledge, perspectives, and bias of the participants as well as their relationship with place (Fantin). Acknowledging that each participant possesses a unique cultural lens is essential in transformative design processes and demonstrates that "genuine consultation and inclusive design is a way of embedding the important link between self and place within the architectural process" (Broffman).

Participatory Design in Place: Murrin Bridge

Murrin Bridge is a discrete Aboriginal community of approximately one hundred people, located in central New South Wales, 12 km from the regional centre of Lake Cargelligo. The community sits on Wiradjuri Country, although most Murrin Bridge residents trace their ancestry back to the Aboriginal people of Ngiyampaa and Barkindji nations. The township was founded in 1949 as an Aboriginal Station, set up by the NSW Government to accommodate Aboriginal people who were forcibly removed from their traditional lands as part of the NSW Aborigines Protection Act and assimilation policy.

The Murrin Bridge Local Aboriginal Land Council (MBLALC) is responsible for the management of the land, community development, and service delivery within Murrin Bridge. In recent years, the land council and community health providers relocated to Lake Cargelligo, while current services within the town such as employment (REDI.E) and welfare (Centrelink) providers operate in office buildings that are in a precarious state of disrepair. The Murrin Bridge Preschool is a not-for-profit community preschool, providing quality education and care for Indigenous and non-Indigenous children, that has become a successful enterprise, increasing its student intake and attracting students from neighbouring communities.

In 2019, the Murrin Bridge Preschool, in close consultation with the Murrin Bridge Local Aboriginal Land Council, commissioned a team of architects and researchers from the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) School of Architecture to design an extension of the preschool as a community hub. The design scheme proposes two additional pavilions organised around a central courtyard to create a civic centre for the community of Murrin Bridge, with new amenities to recover and relocate the community services currently in Lake Cargelligo. The hub will also create a broader community cultural and services centre that will act as a "one stop shop" for residents to access services and

participate in community and cultural events. Once complete, the Murrin Bridge Preschool Community Hub seeks to contribute to Indigenous advancement by focusing on cultural strengths and connection, as well as improved access to relevant services resulting in increased education, employment, and community safety outcomes.

The research was funded through the Indigenous Affairs Group at the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, who approved seed funding for the initial scoping work. The funds were awarded to the Murrin Bridge Preschool who contracted UTS to develop a schematic design for the extension of the Preschool to incorporate the community hub.

Members of the UTS team include lead researchers and architects Dr Campbell Drake, Guillermo Fernandez-Abascal, and Urtzi Grau, Indigenous advisor Allan Teale, landscape architects, and researchers Saskia Schut and Louisa King, research assistants Jack Cooper and Eduard Fernandez Garcia, and Deborah Szapiro from the School of Design.

The opportunity to partner with the MBLALC was facilitated by Allan Teale, a UTS Ph.D. candidate, who discovered his Indigenous heritage when he was 40 years old. Teale traced his ancestry back to Murrin Bridge and plays an important role within the project as an Indigenous Elder, advisor, researcher, and first point of contact with the MBLALC and community. This relationship with the MBLALC was strengthened through a series of undergraduate design studios that were coordinated by Drake from 2016-2018, focused on community revitalisation and the adaptive reuse of existing infrastructure. Both Drake and Teale are founding members of The Indigenous Infrastructure and Sustainable Housing Alliance (TIISHA), which is a group of researchers and building professionals at UTS who share a commitment to developing "health enabling infrastructure" as a means to address underlying structural factors of Indigenous disadvantage.

Taka Tuka Land Kindergarten

To establish a baseline prior to unpacking the participatory design processes that took place in Murrin Bridge, the participatory processes of a project of similar scope and program by Die Baupiloten titled "Taka Tuka Land Kindergarten" are explored. Die Baupiloten are a Berlin-based architecture practice specialising in kindergartens, who are championed as world leaders in participatory design involving preschool students.

Fig. 1: Taka Tuka Land Kindergarten

Built between 2005 and 2007, the Taka Tuka Land Kindergarten involved direct participation from the kindergarten children in the generation of the building design. Like Murrin Bridge, the scope of the project involved the alteration and addition to an existing kindergarten based on designs that emerged from participatory workshops with students. This was a collaborative approach that evolved from Die Baupiloten's principle that "user participation should be understood as part of the foundation of a design proposal ... it provides a robust foundation leading to a design that is highly relevant in terms of use, and to an increased sense of belonging" (Hofmann). Die Baupiloten's design process asked the kindergarten students to respond to the spatial narrative of Astrid Lindgren's book *Pippi Longstocking*. Individual workshops invited the students to develop paintings and pictures, plans and models to reflect their ideas and interpretations of Taka Tuka Land Kindergarten. These interpretations were documented by the teachers and architects, and in conjunction with observations of the children's interactions, playtime and daily routines, were translated into a series of spatial interventions throughout the existing building, exhibiting the generative potential of storytelling and the development of collective narratives. This participatory design process also breaks down the traditional hierarchical dichotomies of expert and user to offer spatial agency through the student's fundamental role in the design of their built environment.

The Participatory Design Process

In developing the schematic design proposal for the Murrin Bridge Preschool and Community Hub, the researchers arranged a series of participatory design workshops seeking to incorporate the knowledge, opinions, and aspirations of local community members within the design process.

Attempting to subvert "traditional architectural practice that is associated with predetermined action through its habit of playing out established themes" (Awan, Schneider, & Till), the workshops sought to develop participatory processes that emphasised user empowerment and decision making. Drawing on Die Baupiloten's collective narrative methods, the researchers adapted principles derived from Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) to situate the participatory design workshops within a cross-cultural Indigenous context.

Sharing similarities with both intercultural and inclusive design principles, Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) is a technique refined by development scholar Robert Chambers, commonly used in the international development sector, and is characterised by a participatory approach through which the "outsider" relinquishes the role of an extractive expert in favour of rapport building. The approach encourages "local people to choose and improvise methods for themselves" while "outsiders metaphorically, and sometimes actually, 'hand over the stick' of authority" (Chambers). PRA gives precedence to the knowledge, aspirations, and values of the community, as well as autonomy in decision-making responsibilities that can lead to the transformative destabilisation of traditional hierarchies between subjects and researchers. While all of the core principles of PRA facilitate inclusion, the principles of "offsetting biases" and "they do it" were applied to this study based on their particular relevance within a remote Indigenous context.

According to Chambers, "they do it" involves the facilitator initiating a process of participatory analysis and then sitting back or walking away, taking care not to interview or interrupt. In a similar vein, offsetting biases involves "being relaxed and not rushing, listening not lecturing and being unimposing instead of important" (Chambers). In the context of designing the preschool, "offsetting biases" and "they do it" gives precedence to local Indigenous knowledge over the expertise of the academic outsider. Advocating for the ability "to learn directly from local people, directly, on the site" (Chambers), these principles can enable the potential destabilisation of the hierarchical dichotomy between "us" and "them", allowing the researchers to access what Mudimbe describes as an "intermediate, diffused space".

The approach employed within the Murrin Bridge workshops centred on the use of the participatory techniques including storytelling, participatory drawing and modelling, and iterative and recursive feedback loops. Exploring the capacity of these techniques to enact transformative rather than tokenistic participation within an Indigenous context, the following section provides a critical evaluation of the successes and pitfalls of the methods employed during the participatory workshops carried out in designing the Murrin Bridge Preschool and Community Hub.

The Participatory Design Process

Meaningful participatory design processes acknowledge the significance of building mutual understandings with the community over time, recognising that it is "overly optimistic to expect a community to feel a sense of 'ownership' of a community planning process, especially when this is essentially a transient event. While this may just seem a matter of semantics, such terminology raises the status of participatory planning (and of its facilitators) to misleading heights" (Moran). Therefore, the process for the design of the Murrin Bridge Preschool and Community Hub commenced with a participatory workshop series, which spanned over four days across a four-week period, involving all the future users of the civic space. Staff, students, and parents of the

preschool, residents of Murrin Bridge, members of the MBLALC, and various community service providers including medical, welfare, and employment agencies were all involved in the workshops to best understand the future aspirations for the centre.

Workshop Series: Murrin Bridge

Collective narratives create an opportunity for individuals to share their stories and experiences and can be significant in acknowledging the legacies of older generations and local knowledge (Denborough). The workshop series at Murrin Bridge Preschool began with the students and staff of the preschool, with an exercise focused on storytelling and the development of collective narratives. The preschool students were read the storybook *The Emu Egg*, by Aboriginal author Sharon Thorpe, from Murrin Bridge and Indigenous illustrator, David Leffler. The story was read by Allan Teale and was selected for its specificity to the community, as it depicts the cultural tale of searching for emu eggs to make a cake in Murrin Bridge.

Fig. 2: Uncle Allan reading The Emu Egg *to the Murrin Bridge Preschool students*

Following the story, each student was presented with a laser-cut scale model of the existing classroom, where the exercise was taking place. Facilitated by the UTS research team, the students developed creative responses to *The Emu Egg*, imagining their ideal classroom and interpreting this through the recreation and decoration of the scale model. With encouragement from their teachers, the students enthusiastically took to the task, producing a variety of colourfully painted and

textured interiors.

Fig. 3: Murrin Bridge Preschool student's response to The Emu Egg

The second exercise was centred on a 1:20 scale model of the existing preschool, situated on a printed site plan. The students developed self-portraits as figurines, along with coloured timber blocks, and were encouraged to play and build structures around the existing facility. The students' interpretations were used to promote conversations with the parents and teachers around stakeholder needs and aspirations for the space. The preschool staff also presented several schemes of their own based on their experiences of the space and its users.

Fig. 4: Self-portrait figurines

Through critical reflection of the workshop series carried out within the Murrin Bridge Preschool in relation to transformative versus tokenistic participation, it is important to identify and discuss the models and drawings that were produced by the participants, and how these artefacts were translated and incorporated by the design researchers into design proposals for built outcomes. The development of collective narratives with the preschool students produced colourful classroom interiors based on the students' imaginations and spatial interpretations of *The Emu Egg* storybook, followed by abstract urban landscapes developed using coloured timber blocks. While the students delighted in the activities, upon reflection, the connection between *The Emu Egg* narrative and the students' creative outcomes was all but lost. Similarly, the abilty of the students to make a connection between their immediate environment of the classroom and the models they were decorating was fragmentary or absent. In considering the difficulties linking the story, the students' artefacts, and their spatial awareness of the immediate environment suggest that the activities and methods were either poorly executed by the researchers or the activity was misdirected and perhaps more suitable for school-age students.

During the workshop series, the research team discussed the potential for translating the creations of the preschool students into the design proposal, with one researcher stating that the purpose of the workshop was to build rapport with the participants, rather than using the work produced by the students in the development of design outcomes. When evaluating how the students' creations were translated into the final schematic design proposal, the vibrant colours of the painted interiors

and the cubic abstractions from the timber blocks are both noticeably absent. Till refers to this type of participation as a tool for reinforcing power structures, with the predisposition of architects to neglect the contributions of participants, and instead retain their predetermined architectural outcomes. Till unequivocally states, "under the guise of inclusion, the same old patterns of power repeat themselves, defeating the expectations of the participant citizens in actually gaining themselves anything better, and distancing them from the real processes of spatial production" (Till). This resonates with the unwitting tokenistic participation of the students that was enacted within the preschool workshops, reaffirming the hegemonic relationship between the experts and end-users by dismissing the value of their creative input within the decision-making of the design process.

Susanne Hofmann, founder of Die Baupiloten, claims that "well-planned participation can also contribute significantly to a high-quality built environment and an increased sense of belonging" (Hofmann). When reflecting on the participatory techniques borrowed from Die Baupiloten's Taka Tuka Land Kindergarten, which was applied through the storybook *The Emu Egg* in Murrin Bridge, the authenticity of this statement raises scepticism. Respecting and understanding Hofmann's intent to break down the hierarchy between the expert and the user, having re-produced a similar exercise at the Murrin Bridge Preschool, the ability of Die Baupiloten to produce seven structured outcomes from kindergarten children's interpretations of *Pippi Longstocking* is post-rationalised at best. The participatory process of Taka Tuka Land Kindergarten shows signs of being partially fabricated; the designers have perhaps taken creative liberty in developing the majority of the architectural interventions, irrespective of the outcomes of the workshops conducted with the students of the preschool.

The remaining stages of the workshop series extended to include residents of Murrin Bridge, senior members of the MBLALC, and a variety of service providers interested in relocating to and operating from the Murrin Bridge Preschool and Community Hub. Incorporating input from previous workshops, this stage was centred on a second 1:20 scale model of the proposed schematic design for the Murrin Bridge Preschool and Community Hub. Similarly, the students were first to engage with the model and were asked to arrange and position model trees and shrubs around the design. Guided by the two landscape architects, the designers encouraged discussion around the integration of community gardens and native plants within the design proposal. Following this landscape design exercise, the preschool staff, service providers and the community members of Murrin Bridge were invited to review the schematic model and drawings. This provided an opportunity for various stakeholders to discuss their opinions of how the preschool and community hub could operate simultaneously, and how to negotiate pragmatic concerns such as ensuring adequate privacy and security as well as managing community events.

Fig. 5: Preschool student landscape arrangements

*Fig. 6: Workshop with parents, preschool staff, service providers and residents*

Fig. 7: Workshop with land council members, preschool staff and service providers

Despite the fact that the students were asked to arrange and position vegetation around the buildings based on their understanding of the land, on reflection, it is noticeable that their input did not register in the landscape design, instead favouring the expert opinion of the designers—yet another design decision that had "misplaced good intentions" (Mahood) yet ultimately disregarded the creative input of the students, resulting in another example of tokenistic rather than transformative participation enacted within the preschool workshops.

Despite the participatory shortcomings involving preschool students, the workshops did afford a range of unpredictable intercultural interactions between the researchers and stakeholders that were instrumental to informing the design outcome. One such example was a conversation between the lead landscape architect and a resident Elder about the integration of community gardens and native plants. Emerging from this conversation was a complementary strategy for designing culturally specific landscaping reminiscent with what Fantin describes as "spiritual aspects (responding to connections to place and country and spirituality) … and artistic ideas (including specifically designed cultural elements". The landscape strategy proposes three interwoven educational zones, each tailored to local vegetation and learning outcomes. Zone One is the "Edible Woodland" consisting of mixed small trees and shrubs such as quandong and wattles. Zone Two is the "Medicinal, Ceremonial and Spiritual" area, consisting of mixed small and medium trees such as native apricot and wilga, as well as mixed shrubs like emu bush. Zone Three is the "Craft Zone", which is made up of locally sourced mixed grasses and small shrubs suitable for weaving.

Facilitated by local Aboriginal Elders, the landscape strategy encourages and celebrates the transfer of traditional knowledge, providing a culturally responsive educational setting for Aboriginal children.
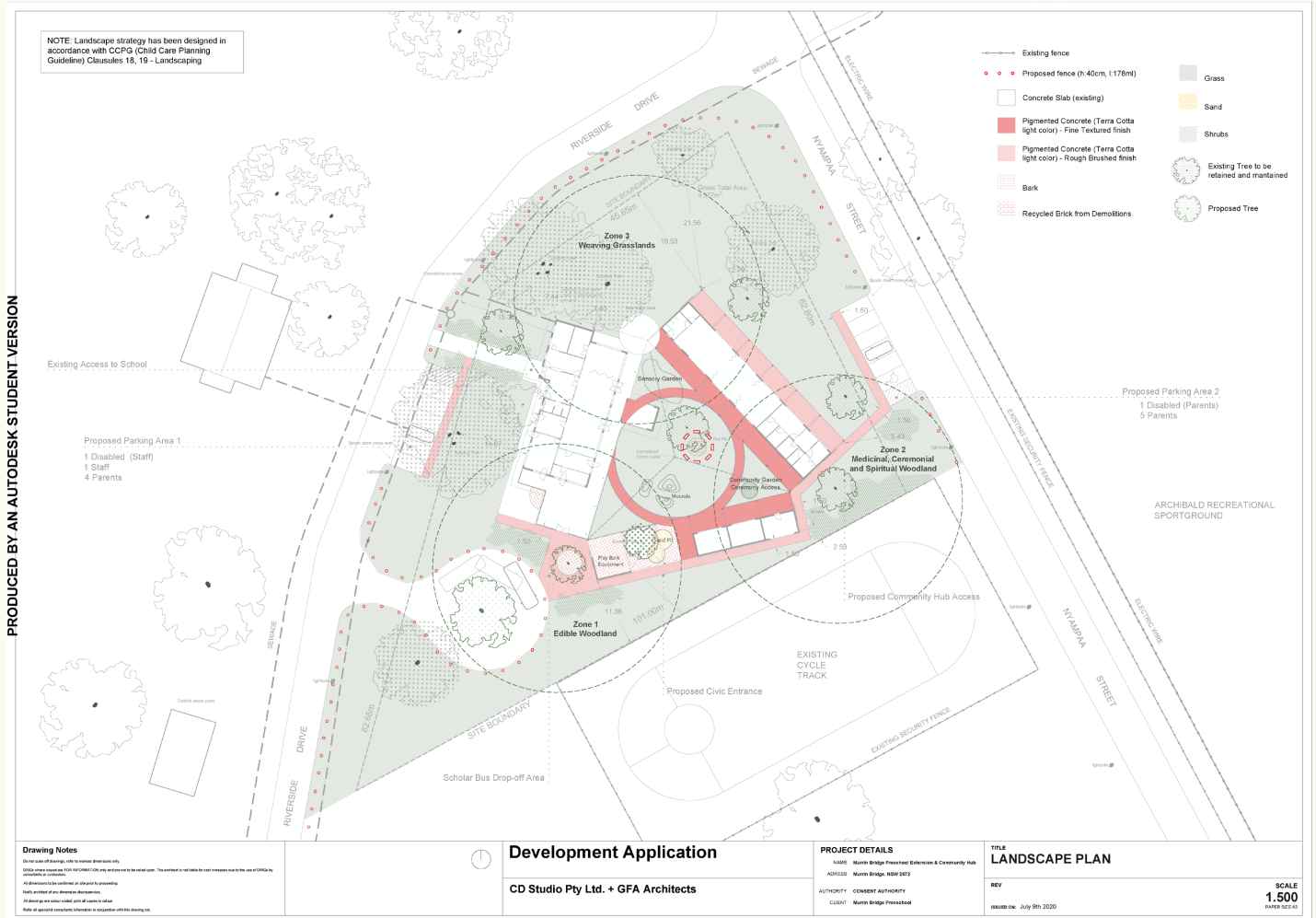
Figs. 8 and 9: Proposed landscape schematics

The workshop series concluded with a presentation and meeting in the offices of the Murrin Bridge Local Aboriginal Land Council (fig. 6). During this meeting, land council members, service providers and preschool staff used the schematic model to identify, outline and discuss the complexities of managing the hub with simultaneous operations between preschool programs, service providers (Centrelink, REDI.E and health), and community events. The meeting was also an opportunity to discuss the steps required to deliver the project, including consultants, funding, procurement, and partnerships.

In recent years, the relationship between the preschool and the MBLALC had become strained, resulting from a series of break-ins at the preschool and disputes concerning who was responsible for maintenance as well as rectifying vandalism. The participatory approach to the design of the Murrin Bridge Preschool and Community Hub offered the chance for the preschool and MBLALC to work together towards co-designing and operating a shared facility. The design process provided the opportunity to transform this relationship between organisations, eventuating in reciprocal board representation, the drafting and signing of a new leasing arrangement, and a renewed partnership to deliver the preschool extension and community hub. The unexpected outcome between organisations suggests a form of transformative participation where the role of the "architects as brokers, advocates and agents in the design process" (Fantin) challenges typical architectural design practice.

A third example of an unexpected derivative of the workshop series was the emergence of an influential sketch prepared by Uncle Michael Mitchell, preschool educator and parent, of his vision for the preschool and community hub. Mitchell's sketch depicts a centralised communal courtyard

surrounded by a series of multifunctional rooms, each with corresponding segmented gardens (fig. 10). Mitchell's sketch was prepared independently, in advance of the workshops, and no credit for its production can be claimed by the design researchers. When analysing the design proposal that was submitted for development approval—three pavilions, each with different prescribed programs, assembled around a communal courtyard with segmented gardens—there is an uncanny resemblance to Mitchell's sketch.
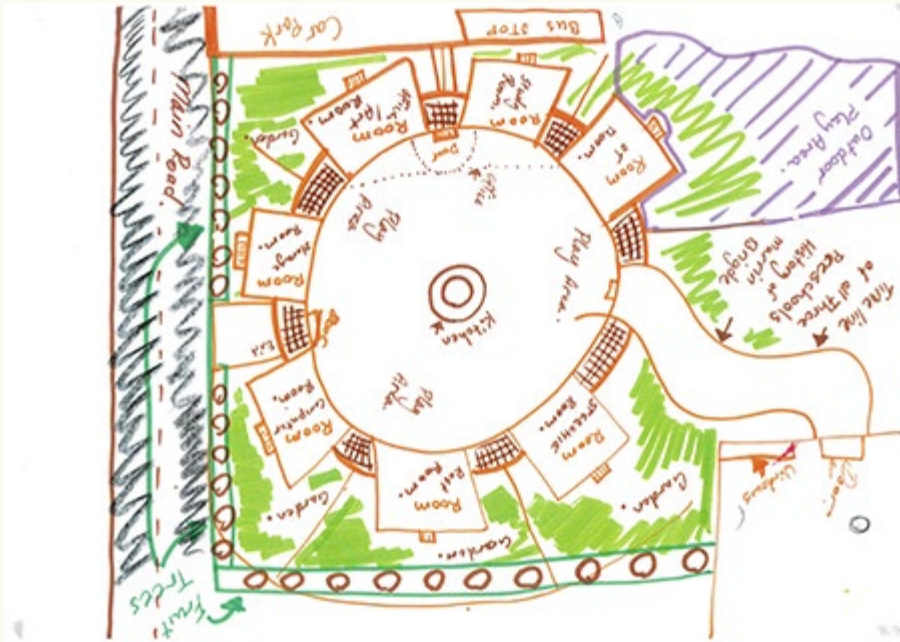

Fig. 10: Uncle Michael Mitchell's schematic
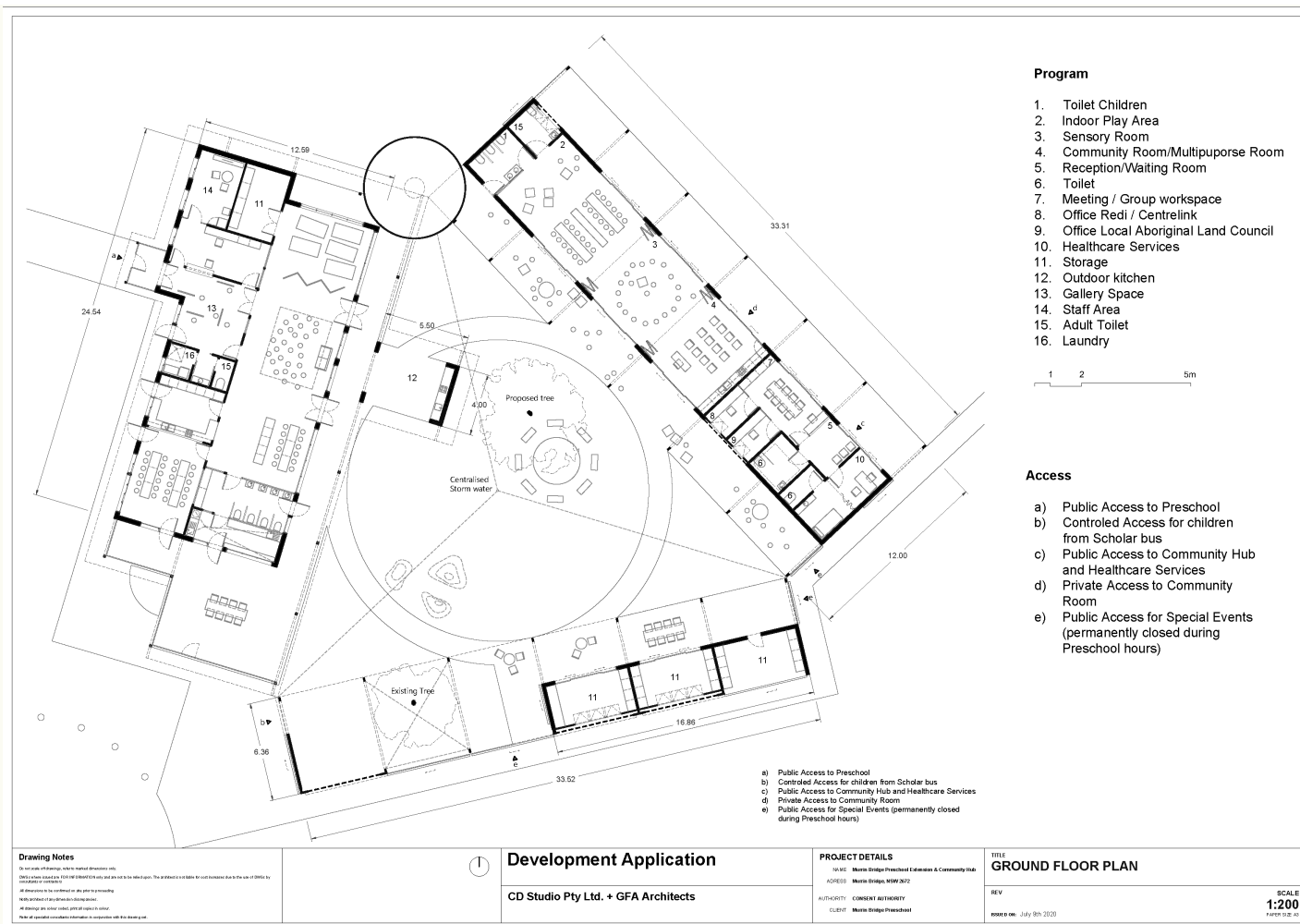
Fig. 11: Design proposal

The drawing appears to have directly influenced the design outcome, suggesting a form of transformative participation and co-authorship where Mitchell was indirectly engaged in the decision-making process. The emergence of the sketch within an intercultural design space aligns with Fantin's assertion that "the speaking up of Indigenous stakeholders is worthy of noting because Indigenous projects in remote areas of Australia people will often avoid conflict and will not make their individual or group opinion known in an overt way". Even though the production of this sketch was not facilitated within a formal workshop setting, it provided the opportunity for direct engagement that was presented by the workshop series; it established an intercultural design space where Mitchell felt comfortable to share his vision for the preschool.

Conclusion

Since undertaking the workshops in Murrin Bridge, the project has progressed so far as receiving development approval from Lachlan Shire Council and capital works funding confirmed from the NSW Department of Education, The National Indigenous Australians Agency, and Multiplex. With construction scheduled to commence by end of 2021 and the foundations of a working relationship between researchers, local residents, and partner organisations firmly set, new capacity-building opportunities for transformative participation are on the horizon. In particular, this is in relation to training and employment initiatives for local community members in the delivery of the Murrin

Bridge Preschool extension and establishment of the Community Hub, suggesting an expanded role for architects and researchers as brokers, advocates, and agents challenging conventional architectural design practice.

The techniques used within the workshops at Murrin Bridge were underpinned by the adaption of principles derived from Participatory Rural Appraisal, combined with methods inspired by collective narratives drawn from Die Baupiloten's design of the Taka Tuka Land Kindergarten. Reflecting on these approaches in relation to the artefacts produced within the workshops and their translations into architectural design, the inference that the design process enacted transformative participation was unconvincing. Despite the more tokenistic results with the preschool children, the process did facilitate cross-cultural interaction to produce a culturally responsive landscape strategy, the reparation of strained relationships between community organisations, and the production of an "intermediate, diffused space" (Mudimbe), which enabled the emergence of Mitchell's sketch that was instrumental in the architectural design outcome.

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