

Harnessing cultural diversity to elevate architecture

David Kaunitz

The team at Kaunitz Yeung Architecture and I have the amazing privilege to work with some of the most culturally rich and diverse clients and communities in the world. People often think this is a strange context for an inner Sydney firm. How can we have the right understanding and perspective to overcome the differences and challenges? The answer is simple. Through our experience we have developed an approach which harnesses the challenges of working in very different cultural worlds. This process turns what may appear to be insurmountable challenges into advantages which lift the architecture beyond what normally could be achieved.

The challenges appear to be infinite. How do you communicate? How can you be sure you are understood? How do you understand the culture? How do you do this in a short project time frame? How do you avoid making a cultural mistake so significant the building is not used? Uncertainty compounds these challenges. What can we possibly have to offer from the outside? Would it be better for a more culturally aligned architect to lead this project?

These challenges and doubts could be harnessed by gaining a level of proficiency of the particular culture and language. In my case I speak fluent pidgin and a now very rusty Indigenous language – one of sixty – in the Solomon Islands. But even there where I spent years living in remote communities as the only outsider, I would need to live a lifetime to have a true understanding. Nor could I possibly learn each of the 60 languages. The truth is that you can never become the ‘other’ and nor should you. So the only approach if you are to work across cultures is to have the right process.

The foundation of working with diverse groups is mutual respect. You must acknowledge what you do not know and open yourself up to two-way learning. In central Australia this is called the Mulparara Way. In Vanuatu this is the Penama System, which in Ambae Province is the Hango-Hango: the respectful two-way learning in equal partnership. This requires humility and can be confronting for architects as it means relinquishing control. The design process must be opened to the clients and users. In this way, the clients and end users bring their knowledge of their cultural world to the design process. They bring what you lack. This complements what you bring to the project: your experience, best practice

and expertise. The best of both worlds can be brought together to turn the challenges to your advantage.

We use local governance structures to facilitate consultation and interaction with clients and users through the whole project. All cultural settings have often complex and not necessarily apparent structures. If you ignore these, you risk causing offence. Or worse you could cause complete disengagement. For example, if you do not follow the right cultural protocols you may put people in the position of only being able to engage if they offend their family, elders or leaders. We almost always use a cultural intermediary to overcome this.

How might this work in practice? A starting point is to identify an individual or group that can act as an intermediary. This may be a person that has the respect of the clients and users; they also will have some cultural understanding of your world. This person (or people) will serve as a bridge and may be a community leader or future leader. It could also be a board in an instance where the board is a true representative of the culture and diversity.

This person or group then becomes your sounding board and navigator. An effective approach we use is to jointly present or run consultation workshops with the cultural intermediary. We may spend the morning presenting to them and engaging with them. This allows for two-way learning to enrich the presentation. The result is a joint presentation to a broader group in the afternoon in a culturally appropriate way – perhaps in language – by the intermediary. Our role is to dovetail our input to ensure the detail is not lost and guide discussion towards meaningful outcomes.

It is also important that engagement is as diverse as the group you are dealing with. Women, men, school children, youth and older people should all be engaged. Here we are creative (eg it may include school workshops or community BBQs). We also allow time and opportunity for the incidental: a chat at the shops or a yarn under a tree. The more voices you hear the greater understanding of the challenges you will have. This will maximise the opportunities for the project.

What are these opportunities? The primary opportunity is the ability to make a building that is highly relevant to its users and loved by your clients. You can think of these as



The Punmu Aboriginal Health Clinic in the Western Australian desert aimed to reinforce the organisational approach of respect of people, land and culture to create a facility with community ownership
 Photo courtesy Kaunitz Yeung

customisations that enrich the building. Many of these will be small and not obvious in the finished product. They also may be things that were not done to avoid cultural irrelevance. They enable cultural compliance just as conventional regulations are required for compliance.

The real opportunities are in those elements which raise the architecture to another level. Particularly in our Pacific and south-east Asian work this has taken the form of fusing of local vernacular into the architecture using local building practices and materials. Through the involvement of local artisans and trades we allow for local expression and architectural quirks. This combines with your expertise, best practice and broader architectural approach to create a cohesive architectural outcome.

In other instances, particularly in the Australian context, there may be an absence of clear local vernacular or local artisans. In these cases, we use art as the opportunity to create a cultural connection and involve community members. In Australia we are privileged to be able to work with some of the most amazing artists who are sold in Sotheby's and collected by galleries. Their art reflects the oldest living culture in the world. The integration of culturally appropriate art in a meaningful way into the building is an opportunity. An opportunity which creates cultural relevance and elevates the architecture.

We have used this approach in our latest remote Aboriginal health clinics in the communities of Parngurr and Punmu in Matu Country in the Western Australian Desert. There, in parallel, we have delivered two of the remotest pieces of architecture in the country. At the end of the project there were the usual teething problems and defects. When the CEO of the health service sat with the elders to discuss these, they told him not to worry – they were very happy with the building. The CEO said that's good they were

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designed by the white guy, the architect. The elders replied by saying: 'That guy was very respectful and we like him, but he did not design the building – we told him what to draw. So any issues are our issues.' Of course, we did more than draw what we were told. The projects were a complex synthesis of culture, place, program and the tectonic. However, this sense of ownership is the most important outcome and is a level of ownership and responsibility not usually experienced from clients.

Working in a different cultural world is the opportunity to elevate the architecture beyond what would normally be possible; to create buildings that are loved and used. Buildings that are owned by the clients, users and communities, and reinforce their aspirations for a brighter future. Without the challenges this would not be possible.

We are by no means the only practice who work in this way. We are thankful for those who helped forged this path, such as Paul Pholeros and Dr David Week among others. We also respect the work of practices such as MASS Design Group, Elemental and Kéré Architecture who show how working in culturally diverse settings in a collaborative way can lead to elevated architectural outcomes. But through our experiences, particularly in the remote places of Melanesia and Aboriginal Australia, we have forged a unique approach specific to the context. In an increasingly homogenised architectural world, it is important that there are still unique approaches contextualised in place. Harnessing cultural diversity in this way elevates architecture.

David Kaunitz is the director and co-founder of Kaunitz Yeung Architecture. He has more than a decade of community development and post-disaster experience in south-east Asia and the Pacific working for clients such as UNICEF, UNHCR, World Vision and the governments of Australia, New Zealand, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Cook Islands, Fiji and the Philippines.



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