

# ECOLOGICAL COMMUNITIES LIVING HOLISTICALLY

## Dwellings

In spite of millions of dollars being spent on the 'Intervention' in the Northern Territory since 2005, and on 'housing' for Indigenous communities across Australia, the outcomes are still paltry and meaningless. In the quest to improve the levels of health, reduce the chronic illnesses which plague so many Indigenous people, extend the number of quality years they will live and provide appropriate, personable and attractive housing, there hasn't been any change in these critical measurements – in many instances, the problems have worsened.

Wherever 'housing' has been supplied to Aboriginal people, similar issues and problems have resulted in the mass construction and distribution of rectangular boxes designed for suburban situations and nuclear family demographics. As a consequence, these 'houses' have become blights on and in the landscape and are a scandalous waste of money.

An ecological community is one where all the elements of Nature, the sun, moon, rain, people, natural materials, plants, animals, shadows, winds and breezes, rain and mist, dew and imagination come together to create beautiful, meaningful and healthy places to live, work, share and ultimately, die.

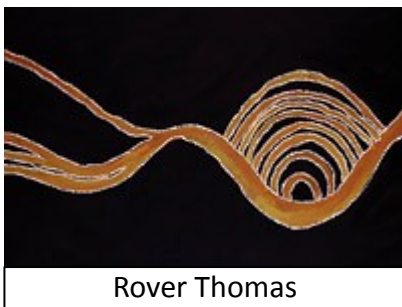
The built environment is critical to the potential pleasure of life and living and, in Indigenous families, the extended family is central to how people come together and combine with other families to create their communities. Sadly and through sheer ignorance [or perhaps arrogance] there hasn't been any effort from Departments of Housing, Territory of Commonwealth, to take into consideration how, why and when Indigenous people live their lives. Instead, there has been insistent continuation of providing ugly, rectangular boxes designed for a nuclear family unit which is completely dissimilar to how Indigenous families live.

In traditional communities there were separate men's and women's areas with other accommodation for married couples. The younger boys and all the girls would stay with the women until the boys reached puberty when they would be banished from this area to commence their training for initiation. This system also ensured girls and young women were in no danger of having sexual relations prior to the union with their future husbands.

Although this system is no longer the norm in most Indigenous communities, the families still tend to congregate as one and prefer to spend as much time outside, especially cooking on an open fire and not in a 'kitchen' with electric or gas appliances.

*I began to understand that a house could respond to the local climate and the seasons as well as providing the practical necessities of shelter. This is simply achieved by using basic principles of design without any increase in cost. A house could respond and relate to its environment instead of just crashing through it.*

**Karen Palmer – Builder**  
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Rover Thomas

The majority of shelters and housing of First Peoples from all around the world are all round in shape; yurts, teepees and igloos - yet 'housing' for Indigenous people in Australia continues to be rectangular in design and built from steel, concrete or fired bricks. Is it any wonder there is little respect for these impersonal and mass-produced impositions.

Most Australians applaud the significant talents of Indigenous artists and appreciate the unique and intimate knowledge of these artists. It must be said that to think it is acceptable to impose thoughtless, ugly and inappropriate 'houses' and expect them to be lived in is arrogance and stupidity of the highest order. These 'living conditions' contribute to the ill-health, moribund and sedentary lives - elements which add to the demise of active, energetic and vibrant communities.

Aboriginal Australians are first and foremost people of the outdoors, living, breathing, walking and existing in the natural elements to the fullest capacity. The sky is their roof.....the ground is their floor, the grass the carpet; the sun is the light and the wind is the energy and air conditioner. Trees are shade, food and shelter. .... water is from the earth, rocks and wells and plants and animals are the pantry. The innate knowledge of thousands of generations living in country creates intimacy and connection....confidence and surety of the future.



Emily Kame Kngwarreye

In partnership with Indigenous people, the creation of ecological communities is acknowledgement of how they wish to live in country.....live in harmony.....sympatico with the natural rhythms and changes in seasons and lunar cycles; living in dwellings made from locally sourced natural materials and designed to reflect the ways their families share cooking, meals, discussions and responsibilities; living in houses from the earth which they have built and decorated to reflect their stories, dreamings, songs and art.

*Every home ought to be that family's sanctuary.  
A house is not simply about shelter.  
A home should provide a sense of comfort and  
security and belonging to the landscape.  
A family's home is the centre of social activities  
and welcoming to share stories, food and laughter.*

An Ecological Community also includes plants, animals, shadows, wind, food gardens and, of course, the humans who live there....who create the spaces.....who decorate the spaces.....who develop a strong sense of belonging because they have created their built environment with their own hands.....developing confidence, ownership and surety in the process.

When living in country the inside is on the outside and the outside is everywhere and so it is in an ecological community.....the food gardens are in, around, on and outside the houses. The windbreaks of trees have multiple uses apart from breaking the wind through baffles of leaves and providing shade, shelter and food. Trees provide habitat for insects, birds, marsupials, reptiles and other plants.....all members of a fully functioning ecological community – all of equal value and all playing their role in providing essential services to the other members, including the humans.

Natural cycles and rhythms determine activities of all species – above and below the ground the elements continue to write our destinies – and working with these elements, not attempting to control them, is living in harmony with our own human vulnerabilities and resilience. For people who have lived only in artificial environments – air conditioning and central heating – and haven't felt the warmth of sunlight on their skin in the early morning.....the crunch of frost under their feet on a crisp, clear winter morning..... a zephyr blowing through their hair..... heard the CRACK of lightning above their head or the spine-tingling excitement of rain on a tin roof perhaps ought not be making decisions about how Aboriginal Australians should live for the two lives are diametrically opposed.

These decisions need to be made by the people who live in country.