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Caring for our cities: Incorporating indigenous knowledge into urban design

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From the imposing Maori gate to the soundscape of native birds, you're immediately immersed in New Zealand's indigenous heritage from the moment you land at Auckland Airport. Arrive in Sydney and you'd never know it's the home of the world's most ancient human culture.

Why? Because there's no formal Aboriginal voice in Sydney's planning systems. Around the edges, maybe, but not front and centre. The [Internet of Things](#) has more influence than Australia's first peoples.

Yet urban planners and designers are wrestling with issues that Aboriginal people have dealt with for generations. Australia's changing climate, threats to biodiversity and other environmental challenges are directly connected to how we interact with the land. And Aboriginal people are the traditional custodians of that land.

With the [NSW Green Globe Awards](#) coming up, we look at what contemporary urban design can learn from traditional Aboriginal and indigenous cultures.

For 40,000 years, indigenous peoples have established systems for providing food, water and other community needs on the very ground where cities now stand. Even now, [three quarters of Aboriginal people live in an urban environment](#). But few of them help to shape it.

If they did, cities would be designed more holistically, acknowledging that each built form contributes to a wider urban ecosystem linking our society, environment and economy. We'd celebrate and protect nature, not see it as an obstacle to work around.

Every new, rebuilt and refurbished building would be rated six star Green Star, not just the award winners. We'd be surrounded by Australia's rich biodiversity as we lived and worked – think water features, rocky outcrops, living walls and courtyards full of native plants and bush tucker.

On every street, you'd see people getting together at vegetable gardens, green spaces and other communal meeting spots. And we'd experience indigenous art and culture every day without going to a museum, because it would be an integral part of urban design and planning.

It sounds like a more sustainable, less stressful lifestyle than city dwellers have now. But it's clearly a long-term vision. So is it possible?

Well, it's already happening elsewhere. Maori and Pacific people are active in New Zealand's urban planning systems and its national design protocol is built around ancient design principles. In Canada, urban planners are learning what First Nation peoples can contribute and some of its cities are drawing on traditional environmental philosophies as part of the development process.

Closer to home, Melbourne's applying the Aboriginal concept of 'caring for country' to urban planning and design, working with IADV (Indigenous Architecture and Design Victoria) and other organisations to make it happen.

It's clear you can move an indigenous perspective from the fringes to the mainstream. But to do it, we'll have to challenge established planning systems and ideologies and tap into Aboriginal knowledge through partnership and collaboration, not appropriation.

Our reward will be cities that are healthier, more sustainable and just nicer place to live and work in. And surely that's what everyone wants.

Do you know any urban design projects that integrate indigenous principles? [Nominate](#) them for a Green Globe by 11 July 2016.