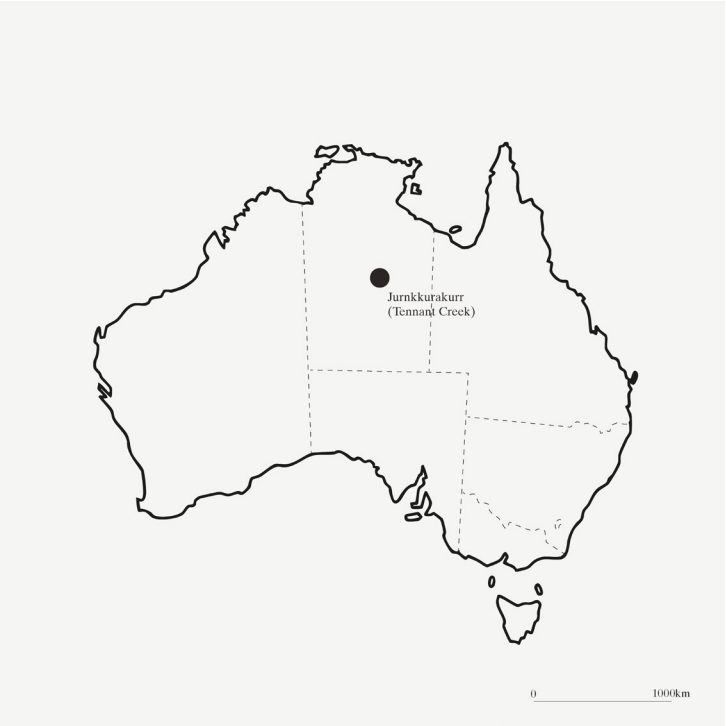
A Living Culture Mapped in Plan: Warumungu Housing in Jurnkkurakurr, Australia

Simon Robinson

Tennant Creek Town Maps Painted onto Car Bonnets.

In the heart of Australia's vast interior, the town of Jurnkkurakurr (Tennant Creek) stands as a poignant symbol of the deep and ongoing inequity faced by Aboriginal communities. Despite its proximity to vital infrastructure, the housing conditions for many Aboriginal residents reflect a legacy of colonial neglect, cultural erasure, and systemic disregard. The houses in Tennant Creek embody a fundamental clash between an ancient way of being and Modernist Western ideals of domesticity that have been imposed upon the Traditional Owners and can be viewed as a tool of assimilation and cultural erasure. Standardized, replicable three-bedroom houses designed for nuclear families fail to reflect, acknowledge, or allow for the rich and highly structured cultural protocols still practiced by some First Nations people today. This is a domestic tradition that is not bound to architectural form but rather enacted through the spatialization of complex relationships—a living culture mapped in plan rather than expressed through symbolic and static design. For Aboriginal peoples, the concept of home is found in the land itself—in *Country*.[1] Country is not just a physical place but a living entity, imbued with spiritual significance, ancestral presence, and kinship obligations. Aboriginal people live with and through Country, drawing upon collective memory, Story, and Dreaming knowledge. This understanding of home as a relationship, rather than a built form, stands in contrast to Western ideals of domesticity as enclosed, permanent, and private. Aboriginal domesticity for a long time was outward-facing, socially embedded, and temporally fluid, grounded in the rhythms of Country and the obligations of kinship.

1 See: *The First Knowledges Series* (2020–2023), published by Thames & Hudson Australia.



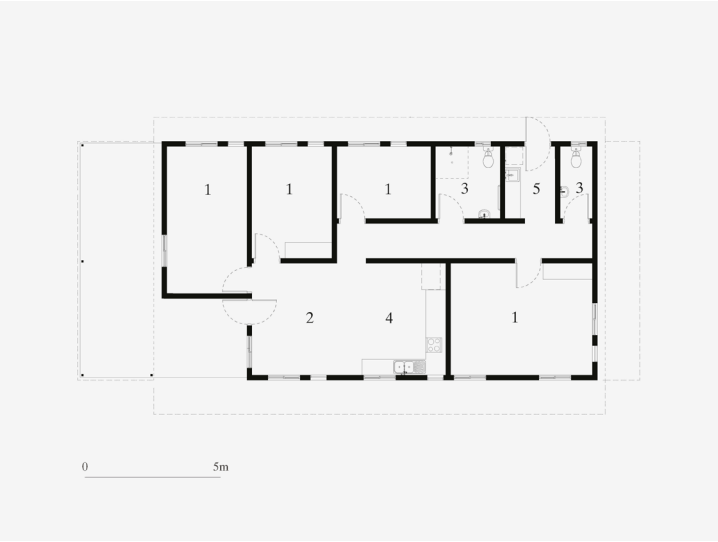
The town of Jurnkkurakurr (Tennant Creek) is located on Warumungu Country in the Northern Territory, Australia. Drawing by the author.

Satellite view of Jurnkkurakurr. 1. Marla Marla; 2. village camp; 3. Kargaru; 4. Mulga; 5. Wuppa; 6. Tingkarli.

The consequences of this seemingly irreconcilable Western understanding of home and forms of domesticity can only be fully understood by tracing their roots to the legacy of colonization and the imposition of Western housing models on First Nations peoples, specifically, the Warumungu community of Jurnkkurakurr (Tennant Creek), where emerging efforts, such as the Wilya Janta housing initiative, seek to reclaim cultural autonomy through community-led, climate-responsive, and culturally attuned housing design. It is projects like this that challenge 'Western' designers to reconsider what it means to design with, rather than for, First Nation communities.

HOUSING INJUSTICE FOR THE WARUMUNGU PEOPLE OF JURNKKURAKURR (TENNANT CREEK)

The Stuart Highway stretches 2,720 kilometres from north to south through central Australia, linking the cities of Darwin and Port Augusta. Just north of its midpoint lies Tennant Creek, a regional town with a stark divide in living conditions. Two streets back from this key transport route lie the replicated government homes of Aboriginal families, some of which still lack basic services like running water or electricity. This is in complete contrast to the housing provided to regional doctors, nurses, and teachers within the town. The more fortunate Aboriginal families live in government-built blockwork homes; however, these standardised designs—replicated across vastly different environments and communities, from the arid desert of Central Australia to the tropical north 700 kilometres away—have little consideration for climate or cultural context. Despite their poor quality, these houses are often severely overcrowded, with more than 20 people living in the three-bedroom homes. This is not an isolated issue: across remote communities, Aboriginal people are forced to live in housing that fails to reflect or support their cultural values and ways of life.



This government house was built in 2021 and is home to at least 13 residents.
Left: The floor plan does not allow for cultural avoidance principles to be followed, nor does the building respond to the climate or site. Drawing by the author. 1. Bedroom; 2. Living room; 3. Bathroom; 4. Kitchen; 5. Laundry.
Right: Photograph by the author.

In Tennant Creek, no Aboriginal resident has ever been consulted about how they want to live or what their home should be. The result is housing that not only undermines physical wellbeing, fuels poverty, and overcrowding but also contributes to the erosion of culture.[2] Poorly designed spaces with limited circulation prevent occupants from observing essential protocols like cultural avoidance relationships or responding to seasonal rhythms. What should be a place of refuge can become a source of severe anxiety, sickness, and harm.[3] These homes are not simply inadequate—they are a physical manifestation of ongoing structural violence that continues to damage the lives, health, and cultural integrity of Aboriginal people in Tennant Creek and beyond.

DOMESTIC PATTERNS OF FIRST NATIONS PEOPLE PRE-INVASION

The violence inflicted upon First Nations people across the Australian continent began with British settlement at Sydney Cove in 1788. This initiated widespread land dispossession, unrecorded massacres, and assimilation policies that disregarded the rich and complex domestic spatial systems of Aboriginal communities.[4] Before colonization, First Nations people's domestic patterns were shaped by their connection to the environment, movement across Country, and deep responsibilities to it. Unlike Western notions of domesticity as permanent and private, for Aboriginal people it was relational, mobile, and deeply embedded in Country.

2 Over 10,000 Indigenous households in the Northern Territory rely on prepaid power meters that cut off electricity when credit runs out. This disrupts safe food and medicine storage, home temperature control, and overall health, causing broader social and economic harm to communities. "Prepayment Meters and Solar—A Trial Evaluation," Original Power, https://www.originalpower.org.au/prepayment_meters_and_solar_-_a_trial_evaluation.

3 Otis Filley, "Could Aboriginal-Designed Housing Help Solve the Health Crisis in Remote Communities?" *The Guardian* (October 21, 2024), https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2024/oct/13/could-aboriginal-designed-housing-help-solve-the-health-crisis-in-remote-communities.

4 See: *Colonial Frontier Massacre Map*, Colonial Frontier Massacres in Australia, 1788–1930, Stage 5 (The Centre for 21st Century Humanities, 2024), https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/colonialmassacres/map.php.

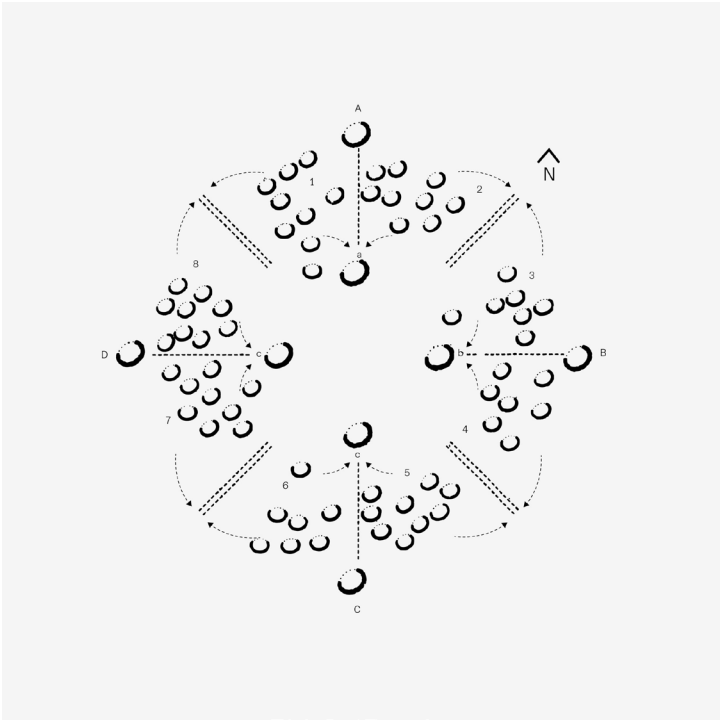
This map illustrates the diverse language, social, and nation groups of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia. Depicting over 250 distinct groups, it reflects the richness of cultures, customs, and languages across the continent. Drawing by the author, adapted from David R. Horton, *The AIATSIS Map of Indigenous Australia*, 1996.

This purposeful movement across their Country was in rhythm with seasonal cycles, food availability, and rituals. Prior to the British invasion, it is estimated that there were 250 distinct language groups,[5] all of whom followed strict territorial rules and religious obligations.[6] And amongst these language groups are clan groups, which have varying territories, social structures, and obligations. While each group is diverse, with distinct cultural practices, histories, and relationships to land, there are similarities that can be drawn upon. Obligations to ancestral beings, kinship ties, and knowledge of Country all influenced when and where people moved, giving rise to various forms of domestic life. For much of the year, small local groups lived in dispersed camps across their territories, deeply attuned to the resources and spiritual meanings of each site. Larger gatherings occurred during favorable seasons, often at water sources, bringing together multiple groups (nations) for feasting, trade, marriage, initiation, and reconciliation. These camps, which could exceed a hundred people, would become intense sites of domestic, ceremonial, and diplomatic activity.[7] In both cases, strict spatial relationships were practiced, with the most complex of those behavioral rules spatialized in the larger camps.[8]

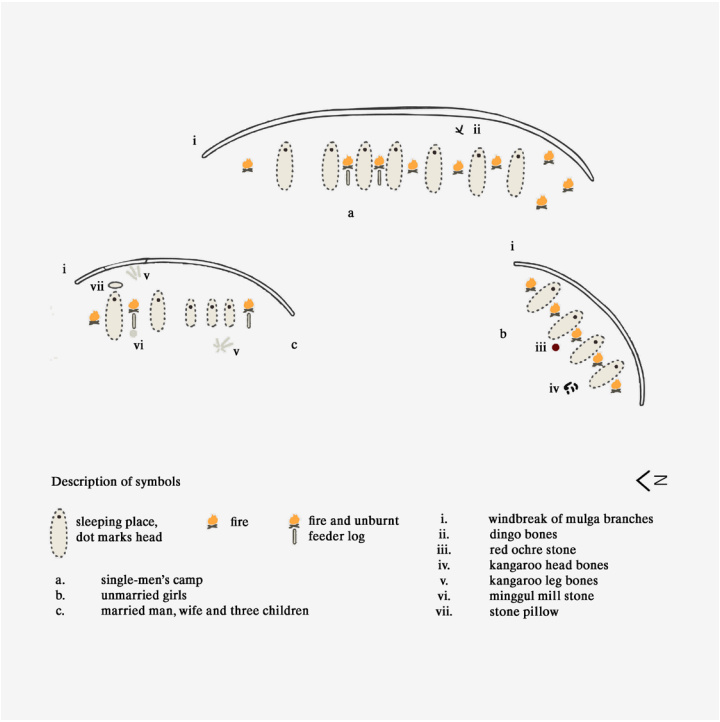
For many Aboriginal groups, kinship relationships govern all aspects of social life, including marriage arrangements, ceremonial roles, and behavioral expectations, as well as determining the spatial location of families and individuals within a camp or community. These obligations are

5 See: "Languages Alive," Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, last updated September 4, 2024, https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/languages-alive.
6 Alison Page and Paul Memmott, *Design: Building on Country* (Port Melbourne, Vic.: Thames & Hudson, 2021), 40.
7 Paul Memmott, *Gunyah Goondie + Wurley: The Aboriginal Architecture of Australia* (Cremorne, Vic.: Thames & Hudson Australia, 2022), 218
8 Ibid., 41.

lifelong, guiding how individuals interact from birth, to initiation, through to death. Camp life is deeply structured by these kinship rules, resulting in socio-spatial arrangements of shelters and daily life.[9] Inhabitants are subject to numerous obligations that govern access to and sharing of food, water, and other material resources. This spatial behavior informs how individuals position themselves in relation to one another within domestic settings, influencing orientation, proximity, and physical contact dependant on the kinship relation. For instance, the arrival of a new person in a camp can trigger a reconfiguration of spatial arrangements, depending on their kinship ties with others present.[10] Individuals adhere to strict boundaries between certain relatives, such as men and their mothers-in-law, or women and their brothers. These rules are often expressed through limited physical proximity, avoidance of direct communication, or separate movement paths. Although these practices vary across regions, there is notable consistency in the importance placed on these spatial expressions of respect and social order. In all these ways, kinship is a dynamic lived system that continuously shaped daily domestic life, spatial organisation, and the very fabric of community interaction.



Plan of an Arrernte camp showing eight subsection groups, each centered around nocturnal windbreaks primarily occupied by nuclear families of the same male social class. Subsection pairs form subcamp clusters led by patri-couples. The camp includes four men's and four women's diurnal meeting shelters. Movement between camps follows strict directional protocols to maintain cultural avoidance. Drawing by the author, adapted from A. Page, P. Memmott, *Design: Building on Country* Cremorne, Vic.: Thames & Hudson Australia, 2021).



Layout of a small Western Desert camp recorded in 1957, consisting of three domiciliary groups: a nuclear family, a men's group, and a women's group—each with its own separate windbreak. Drawing by the author, adapted from A. Page, P. Memmott, *Design: Building on Country* Cremorne, Vic.: Thames & Hudson Australia, 2021).

9 Paul Memmott, "Sociospatial Structures of Australian Aboriginal Settlements," *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 2002, 1 (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2002): 69.

10 Paul Memmott, "Customary Aboriginal Behaviour Patterns and Housing Design," *TAKE 2: Housing Design in Indigenous Australia*, eds. Paul Memmott and Catherine Chambers (Red Hill: The Royal Australian Institute of Architects, 2003), 29.

While domesticity was embedded in these socio-spatial relationships, which mainly occurred outside, rather than inside, the architecture, the material form of the camps was largely shaped by their domestic habits. Cooking, childcare, repair work, and storytelling took place in and around shelters tailored to each situation. Though often impermanent in material form, shelters were part of larger, enduring patterns of occupation based on seasonal migration. Families returned to the same sites year after year. Shelter frames were sometimes left intact or roofing materials stored nearby for reuse.[11] The architecture was therefore an extension, rather than a container, of domestic life—woven into practices of movement, memory, and care. Camp layouts varied in size and complexity, from small temporary camps to large gatherings. Yet all reflected an acute sensitivity to social order. At night, families clustered together, with additional spatial rules regulating proximity between certain kin. During the day, camps reconfigured around activities such as hunting, gathering, rituals, and repair work, often along gender lines. When visiting groups arrived, shared social rules were adhered to, triggering shifts in layout based on kinship relations.

An Eastern Arrernte man from central Australia sitting in front of his temporary shelter made from spinifex grass. Photograph by Herbert Basedow, date unknown.

These socio-spatial dynamics often produced complex camp formations, sometimes nested in clusters according to patriclan, moiety, or skin group.[12] Camp architecture, in this sense, was not simply shelter but rather a spatial expression of social identity. Far from being rudimentary, Aboriginal architecture included stone houses, elevated platforms, and carefully arranged shelters—structures that reflected a deep environmental understanding and spiritual connection to Country.[13]

11 Paul Memmott, *Gunyah Goondie + Wurley: The Aboriginal Architecture of Australia* (Cremorne, Vic.: Thames & Hudson Australia, 2022), 218
12 Ibid., 121.
13 Ibid., 2.

OLD WAYS OF LIVING FOR WARUMUNGU PEOPLE

Like many other Aboriginal groups before colonization, the Warumungu people of Central Australia lived in a variety of shelters, all of which were informed by and deeply attuned to the climate.[14] Warumungu Country is semi-arid and experiences extreme environmental conditions which they adapted to. Summer temperatures often exceed 40° Celsius and in winter, the nights can drop below freezing. Seasonal mobility patterns were adopted and shelter systems that responded to these climatic extremes developed. Warumungu people's daily lives were largely spent outdoors and movements across the land was in tune with seasonal cycles. As such, their shelters were made from simple but effective structures like windbreaks, shade screens, and night-time enclosures suited to particular conditions, each having various functional roles and temporalities.

Ethno-architectural shelter types from Arnhem Land, recorded by Donald Thomson. Variations of these forms were found across many parts of Australia. Drawings by the author, adapted from Donald F. Thomson, "The Seasonal Factor in Human Culture Illustrated from the Life of a Contemporary Nomadic Group." *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 5, no. 2 (1939): 209–21.

Windbreaks are low walls woven from branches, bark, or spinifex to provide shelter from prevailing winds, especially in open country or desert environments. These were often used as temporary or seasonal shelters, sometimes in combination with a fire for warmth. Shade structures were essential for surviving the extreme heat and strong sunlight of the desert environment. Typically lightweight, temporary, and constructed using locally available materials, these structures form a core part of traditional

14 Paul Memmott and Carroll Go-Sam, "Synthesising Indigenous Housing Paradigms: An Introduction to TAKE 2," *TAKE 2: Housing Design in Indigenous Australia*, eds. Paul Memmott and Catherine Chambers (Red Hill: The Royal Australian Institute of Architects, 2003), 13.

domestic architecture. Designed to provide thermal comfort while allowing airflow and visibility, they reflect a deep knowledge of climate-responsive living. An enclosed shelter is a structure that could either partly or fully protect from the elements, again using spinifex, bark, and branches. These would be constructed in especially wet weather or as more permanent camps. The functions of the main shelter included sleeping, seeking privacy, obtaining protection from inclement weather, and storing sacred objects, goods, and equipment.[15]

For Warumungu people, theses temporary structures reflected a deep understanding of local ecological cycles, allowing communities to remain resilient in these harsh but familiar environments. Cooking was done on open hearths, and sleeping patterns were flexible, often segmented across day and night to accommodate hunting, ceremonies, and correspond to seasonal rhythms. Families would often regroup at night, while during the day, gendered groupings carried out specific tasks. Camps and shelters were organised in relation to strict and complex relationships to their environment, kinship obligations, social roles, and spiritual beliefs.[16]

HOUSING AS A TOOL FOR ASSIMILATION AND CONTROL OF THE WARUMUNGU PEOPLE

Colonization reached Warumungu Country with the construction of the Overland Telegraph Station in 1871, and the formal establishment of the town followed in 1927 after the discovery of gold. Aboriginal people were soon after prohibited from living within the township. In 1956, the government forcibly displaced the Warumungu people from their ancestral lands, relocating them to the newly established remote mission of Ali Curung, hundreds of kilometres to the south. Like many parts of Australia these missions were a key tool of the governments assimilation policy with housing at the core of it.[17] It was believed that the arrangements and planning of homes would assist in the change of culture and behavior towards a European way of living.[18] It wasn't until the 1970s that Warumungu people were permitted to return to Tennant Creek, and by then, much of their ancestral land had been taken over by pastoralists and miners, leaving them unable to return 'home.'

In response, town camps began to emerge—settlements created and funded by the federal government to house displaced Aboriginal people who were excluded from living within town boundaries due to the discriminatory laws. Although intended for Aboriginal families, the housing within many of these camps were designed according to Western architectural principles—dedicated bedrooms, internal kitchens, a single bathroom. Like the intention of the homes on the missions, these houses reflected an attempt to further assimilate Aboriginal inhabitants into Western ways of living, a process that would slowly erase their identity and embed them within a colonized society. As a result, families living in the town camps experienced significant hardship due to the profound mismatch between imposed housing designs and their lived cultural obligations. [19]

15 Paul Memmott, "Customary Aboriginal Behaviour Patterns and Housing Design," *TAKE 2: Housing Design in Indigenous Australia*, eds. Paul Memmott and Catherine Chambers (Red Hill: The Royal Australian Institute of Architects, 2003), 30.

16 Ibid., 29.

17 "The policy of assimilation means that all Aborigines and part-Aborigines are expected to attain the same manner of living as other Australians and to live as members of a single Australian community, enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same customs and influenced by the same beliefs as other Australians." 1961 Native Welfare Conference of Federal and State Ministers, as cited in H. Reynolds, *Aborigines and Settlers: The Australian Experience 1788–1939* (Sydney: Cassell Australia, 1972), 175. See: "Changing Policies Towards Aboriginal People," Australian Law Reform Commission, last updated August 18, 2010, https://www.alrc.gov.au/publication/recognition-of-aboriginal-customary-laws-alrc-report-31/3-aboriginal-societies-the-experience-of-contact/changing-policies-towards-aboriginal-people/.

18 Julian Wigley and Barbara Wigley, "Remote Conundrums: The Changing Role of Housing in Aboriginal Communities," *TAKE 2: Housing Design in Indigenous Australia*, eds. Paul Memmott and Catherine Chambers (Red Hill: The Royal Australian Institute of Architects, 2003), 19.

19 Ibid., 24.

Aerial view of the Warrabri Settlement, Ali Currung, where many Warumungu people were relocated to. Part of the Australian Information Service collection, 1958.

Since the 1970s, the imposition of Western notions of domesticity began to replace the sophisticated and culturally attuned living arrangements of Warumungu people. Standardized and replicable housing models became tools of control and assimilation, turning housing into a mechanism of governance. Western homes with their fixed spatial hierarchies and emphasis on privacy and uniformity stand in stark contrast to their domestic practices, which are fluid, relational, and embedded in a living culture shaped by kinship and spiritual belief. In Warumungu households sleeping, cooking, child-rearing, and socializing occur in shared, negotiated spaces that extend beyond the interior. Verandahs, yards, windbreaks, bough sheds, and other outdoor areas are not peripheral but central to their domestic life. These spaces support visual surveillance not only for safety but to maintain kinship responsibilities and spiritual awareness, with outdoor fires serving both practical and spiritual functions.[20] These spiritual beliefs have a fundamental implication for the occupation of housing for Warumungu people. For instance, *Sorry Business* is a term used by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Australia to refer to the cultural practices, protocols, and mourning processes that take place after a person dies. It is deeply significant and can vary widely between different communities. For Warumungu people, the home of the deceased is considered a place of strong spiritual presence. This practice is sometimes linked to the belief that the deceased's spirit is still present in the house, and a new family should not inhabit it until the mourning period is over and the space is both or either ceremonially smoked or swept. As a result, homes may be vacated immediately after death and avoided for a period of time—sometimes weeks or months—out of respect and spiritual caution. In the most extreme examples, the house is never returned to and may be abandoned.[21] Before the home can be re-entered or used again, it may need to be spiritually cleansed through a smoking or sweeping ceremony by designated cultural leaders. Despite the severe lack of housing and overcrowding these practices can still be observed. Although communities have found ways of preserving residence, it demonstrates the unwavering belief and obligations to their culture.

20 Jane Dillon and Mark Savage, "House Design in Alice Springs Town Camps," *TAKE 2: Housing Design in Indigenous Australia*, eds. Paul Memmott and Catherine Chambers (Red Hill: The Royal Australian Institute of Architects, 2003), 43.

21 Paul Memmott, "Customary Aboriginal Behaviour Patterns and Housing Design," 26.

Tennant Creek Town Maps Painted onto Car Bonnets.

When engaging with Aboriginal communities today, there is often a preference from these communities for housing that resembles Western typologies.[22] This should not be mistaken for assimilation, but rather understood as an assertion of dignity, equality, and agency. As has been demonstrated, cultural identity for Aboriginal people is not bound to architectural form but enacted through the spatialisation of complex relationships—a living culture mapped in plan rather than expressed through symbolic design. In this context, form follows relation. As such, it is in the architectural plan that the arrangement of Aboriginal households be properly considered, with the interior in complete coordination with the exterior and surrounding landscapes.

Over the past fifteen years, there has been negligible systemic progress in building better houses. The latest design guidelines used by the Northern Territory Government focus almost entirely on making these dwellings maintenance-free and indestructible to reduce ongoing costs, leaving an extreme deficit in design considerations. With no meaningful cultural consideration or community engagement in design, new remote houses are being built today are devoid of cultural considerations, thermally perform poorly, and are unnecessarily expensive.

NEXT GENERATION: WILYA JANTA (STANDING STRONG)

Established in 2023 by Warumungu Elders from Tennant Creek, Wilya Janta will be the town's first independent Aboriginal-led housing association, engaging directly with Aboriginal people and centering their voices.[23] It seeks to listen to the land and the people who have lived on it for over 60,000 years. The Country where the Warumungu people have thrived for tens of thousands of years

22 Jane Dillon and Mark Savage, "House Design in Alice Springs Town Camps," 43.
23 See: Wilya Janta (Standing Strong) Housing Collaboration, https://www.wilyajanta.org.

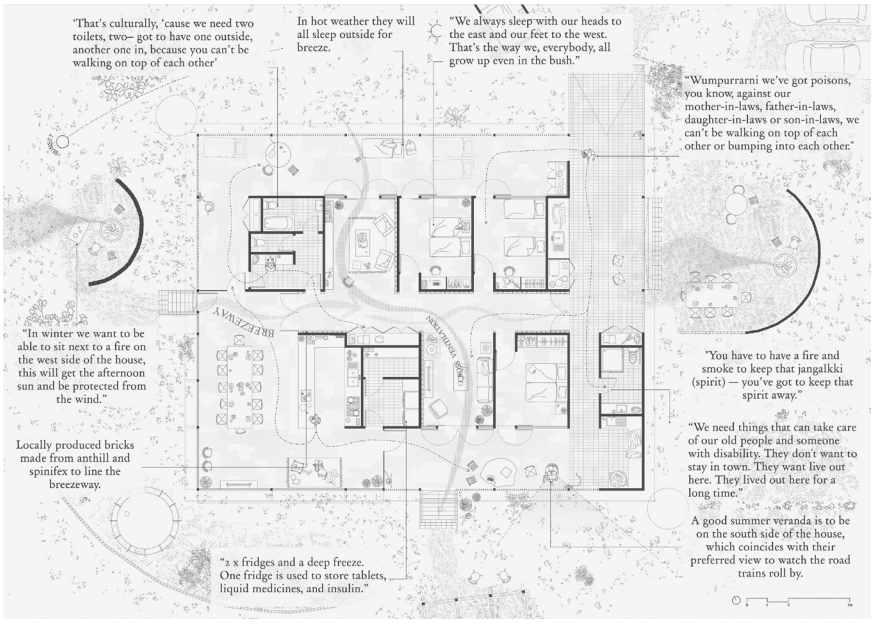
demands a design that not only responds to the harsh environment but also celebrates the traditions and cultural protocols that have been passed down for generations. While the devastating impact of colonization on Aboriginal peoples' traditional domestic lives is irreversible—and contemporary technologies have brought new forms of comfort—the Wilya Janta model seeks to honor and sustain ongoing cultural obligations and domestic patterns within modern housing design. Rather than replicating the past, it aims to create homes that are not only safe and functional but also culturally empowering and grounded in enduring Aboriginal values.

The design of the first home, developed over two years through ongoing conversations with a family and their two children, was born out of a collaboration with OFFICE, a Melbourne-based not-for-profit design studio.[24] It has been driven firstly by a close engagement with the cultural obligations and Country and an affordable and scalable construction methodology. The Wilya Janta team, comprised of Traditional Owners, a doctor, tradesmen, architects, and researchers, recognized early on that, given the remoteness of the site and the project's departure from the government-standard housing, engaging local trades proved financially prohibitive at the time. As a result, the team turned to interstate builders and modular construction methods. The constraints of transport, specifically the maximum dimensions allowable on the back of a truck, have informed the footprint of the home. Within the gridded layout, the arrangement of spaces reflects a deeper understanding of how the family wants to live and how their cultural practices inform their relationship to domestic life. As such, it was the culturally driven spatial relationships that needed to be reconciled with the construction system.

Working within these constraints, the home's design incorporates deep verandas that shield the building from the intense summer sun, creating comfortable outdoor spaces for sleeping, socialising, and observing the landscape. The verandas also facilitate strict cultural avoidance relationships, ensuring that people can move freely without bumping into those they are not supposed to bump into. In the evenings, when the temperature cools, the family can move their mattresses outside to sleep under the stars. When extended family members, sometimes up to fifteen or more, come to town for cultural ceremonies or a local football game, the verandas can also accommodate these guests. This flexibility with unprogrammed spaces is an essential part of the design; these spaces adapt to both cultural practices and fluctuation of visitor numbers.

At the heart of the Wilya Janta design is a commitment to sustainability and comfort. Natural materials like locally made mudbricks (crafted from anthill and spinifex) line the internal breezeway walls offering thermal mass to the lightweight construction, helping to regulate the interior temperature. The home is oriented to maximize airflow and take advantage of cooling winds. Large breezeways draw air through the house, keeping it cool, while the positioning of rooms allows for natural cross-ventilation. Bedrooms are strategically placed to align with the Warumungu tradition of sleeping with heads to the east and feet to the west—a cultural practice that helps ensure physical and mental balance. Two internal living rooms are slightly offset to allow different kinship groups to each occupy a space comfortably. The inclusion of multiple bathrooms, one accessible from the inside and one from the outside, also allows for these kinship practices to be upheld while also affording privacy for when relatives visit. The design is fully accessible with ramps, wide doors, and accessible bathrooms to ensure that elders can remain and age on Country, avoiding the need to move into town into specialised accommodation.

24 The author is a director of OFFICE.



Plan of the first Wilya Janta home design by OFFICE and Troppo Architects. Large verandas wrap the building with windbreaks to the east and west. Drawing by OFFICE.

Internal views of the first Wilya Janta home design by OFFICE and Troppo Architects. Locally produced mud bricks will line the internal breezeway with verandas offering much need shade. Drawings by OFFICE.

The integration of outdoor spaces reflects a strong cultural connection to land and community. The plans for their property include a bough shed for shade, a pond for ducks, a vegetable garden, and a grassed play area for children. These spaces are designed to encourage self-sufficiency and community interaction. The outdoor kitchen, where fresh food is cooked over an open fire, becomes a central gathering point for the family and their visitors, offering a space where traditional cooking methods are celebrated and the power of fire is used to ward off malevolent spirits. A mudbrick windbreak protects this area from the prevailing winds with a smaller windbreak on the western side of the house offering another place to sit and cook.

WARLUKUN (STARTING A FIRE)

Aboriginal communities cannot be thought to be homogeneous, with each group and family having different needs and obligations. The Wilya Janta project represents a larger opportunity to close the gap in remote housing by reimagining homes that not only provide shelter but enhance the lives

of the people who live in them. It is guided by two ways of working: Wumpurrarni (Indigenous) and Papulinyi (non-Indigenous). It is only by reconciling these two histories that we can envisage a new future. Through collaboration and innovation, these homes are built to thrive in harmony with the land and the culture, offering a model for future housing projects across the Northern Territory.

The Wilya Janta team collecting termite mounds to make mud bricks. Each brick is stamped with the Wilya Janta logo—two snakes—symbolizing their approach to working across Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge systems.
Photographs by Andrew Quilty, 2023.

The story of housing in Tennant Creek is emblematic of the broader struggle faced by Aboriginal communities across Australia, a struggle against a legacy of imposed systems that have long ignored culture, climate, and community. The enduring impacts of colonization are etched into the built environment, where standardized, inadequate housing continues to reflect structural violence and cultural disregard. Amid this challenging reality, initiatives like Wilya Janta offer a powerful celebration of First Nations domesticity and way of life. Unfortunately, the state governments have been slow to recognise the richness of this culture. The tendency to treat Aboriginal domestic life as inferior—rather than different—has led to cultural logics being ignored in the replicable designs which are rolled out across the Northern Territory. By placing cultural knowledge, environmental responsiveness, and community leadership at the centre of design, Wilya Janta redefines what housing can be—not a tool for assimilation but a platform for self-determination.

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Simon Robinson is a director of OFFICE, a not-for-profit design and research practice based in Australia. OFFICE works collaboratively with Wilya Janta and assists in their fight for housing justice.

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