

# *A Blueprint for a Brighter Future- Land, Culture & Progress*

**Jeff McMullen**

In the magnificence of the Sydney Opera House, without doubt Australia's most famous building, a great honour has been bestowed on the Djakanimba Pavilions, a much smaller but powerful expression of Aboriginal Culture, creativity and progress.

This growing cultural precinct is the pride and joy of Wugularr (Beswick), about 120 kilometres south of Katherine in the Northern Territory.

For a remote community, still under the dictates of federal control after the Northern Territory Intervention, to triumph in the 2013 National Architecture Awards is a blueprint for a brighter future where land, Culture, Aboriginal control and development fit perfectly.

In the Concert Hall of the Opera House, the actor, musician and community builder, Tom E. Lewis steps up on stage to accept the prize, along with the design architect, Tania Dennis of *Insideout Architects*.

Back in the community, Old Man Victor Hood walks under the stars with a smile on his face, knowing with the wisdom of almost nine decades of life that things around him are coming back into balance. The glow from the Pavilions tells him that all the rooms are full at the mini-hotel, the Ghunmarn Art and Cultural Centre is also doing good business in Beswick and the rented shop in Katherine is providing steady employment and income. Even the *Lavazza* coffee machine, pulled out onto the Beswick shop veranda, is a little gold mine as travellers on the Central Arnhem Highway drop in for the best beans in many miles.

Old Man Victor feels that everything good flows from the success of *Walking with Spirits*, the annual corroboree at Beswick Falls, because when the music, songmen and dancers are strong, when the ladies in their bright dresses are shuffling bare feet on the sand where this has happened for thousands of years, the younger ones know who they are and where they are. This is their land.

In the Opera House, Tom E. Lewis nudges me and whispers. Old Man Victor, the father who raised him, will be very happy tonight to know that the cultural precinct is being recognized. Tom is overjoyed to see his elders realise their dream of seeing their Culture respected.

Fleur Parry, Tom's partner, who has worked relentlessly on the cultural precinct while juggling all of the crises family and community life throw up, fully appreciates that the Nicholas Murcutt Award for Small Project Architecture is much sought after, because it carries the revered name of a family of architects who have helped establish a genuine Australian vernacular, a style of building that is *of the country*, like Aboriginal people themselves.

The judges in the 2013 National Architecture Awards eloquently note that the Djakanimba Pavilions have an “*elegance, a refinement derived from being exactly fit for purpose on minimal means...elevated on stilts above the flood plain...creating a delightful string of indoor and outdoor spaces hovering in the scrub.*”

While the whole of Australia goes through a new debate about how to meet the growing crisis because of the shortage of affordable housing and accommodation, especially for young people and families under thirty years of age, there are lessons to be learned from this Aboriginal enterprise.

Community infrastructure, communally owned and managed, can provide the core local business to build the wellbeing of everyone who lives here. Rather than forcing remote communities to sign 99-year leases, essentially handing over control for more than three generations, a sustainable future is more likely to be based on good investment in locally controlled enterprise. Why should Aboriginal people sell off their community control when they have the clearest idea of what the future should look like?

Wugularr’s Pavilions are designed to provide working space and flexible accommodation as this remote community transforms itself through eco and cultural tourism. Their progress so far is based on sharing their knowledge and creativity with tourists and visitors who can contribute to the ongoing development of better housing, sustainable agriculture and improved nutrition and health.

The mainly steel buildings of the Pavilions reflect the character of Wugularr, resilient, unpretentious and durable, even in a harsh climate. Through the clever use of sliding walls and fold-up beds, the Pavilions can be a space for temporary community exhibitions, education, training and small performances.

The precinct is surrounded by a softly landscaped bush garden and it melts into the land. The verandas and railings are decorated with Aboriginal designs of local plants and animals. The high walls of well ventilated rooms with shutters and wide doors display some of the brilliant painting and silk-screen prints produced by the talented Beswick mob.

This kind of shelter becomes *part of country* rather than the oppressive sweatboxes flung up by the alliance contractors now swallowing millions of dollars under the federal government’s lagging program for new housing construction.

In the next stage of Wugularr’s cultural precinct, there will be a commercial café providing healthy and delicious food to visitors and the community year round. Additional space will allow more local people to be trained for the growing employment and the number of guests will multiply rapidly as the Cultural Tourism becomes a sustainable local economy.

Old Man Victor is right, of course. None of this would exist but for the foundations laid when the community came together and formed the Djilpin Arts Aboriginal Corporation.

Here is a plan for genuine success. Aboriginal people control and manage the local enterprise. The land is leased to the members of the community by the Northern Lands Council for ten years. Aboriginal people always make the key decisions and choose their business partners...rather than the other way around.

The first small steps were taken back in 2002 when the *Walking with Spirits* Festival, a striking mix of music, dance and theatre out under the stars by a waterfall, began to attract hundreds of visitors from around the world to this small community

Victor Hood and Tom Lewis asked me to be Patron of the Festival and so I invited Ian Thorpe, other friends and families to become involved in rebuilding a collapsed tin shed known as the red barn. This became the Ghunmarn Cultural Centre where young people can be trained in the arts, music, filmmaking and storytelling. Later Djilpin Arts rented a gallery in Katherine to extend the ability of the remote community to sell directly to the public and keep money flowing to its artists.

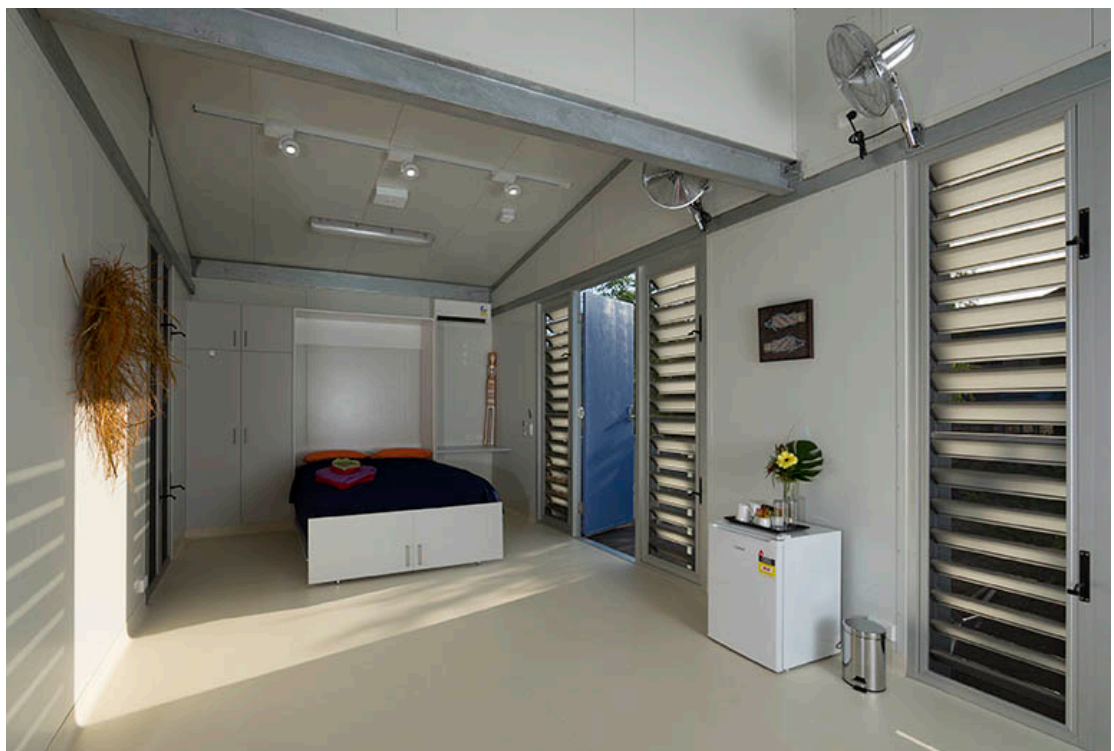
As well as Ian Thorpe's Fountain for Youth, Caritas Australia has invested time, money and committed human support for Wugularr's cultural and educational progress. Djilpin Arts also has made partners at different times with the Australia Council, Fred Hollows Foundation and both the Federal and Territory Governments, showing that it is possible to get everyone onto the same page, with the right respect and spirit.

The 2013 National Architecture award to the Djakanimba Pavilions points to the enormous future potential of other local Indigenous economies, small businesses and clever partnerships, that can offer a much brighter future.

[Jeff McMullen, a regular columnist for THE TRACKER is Honorary CEO of Ian Thorpe's Fountain for Youth]



*Djakanimba Pavilions at Wugularr (Beswick) NT.*



*Cross ventilation, strong, clean and flexible rooms*



*Tom Lewis, Fleur Parry and Victor Hood celebrate with community the opening of the Pavilions at Wugularr*



*The Old Man at Wugularr, Victor Hood and Tom Lewis*