

## Botany Road Corridor

# Statement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Significance

**Date:** 20 August 2020

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Cox Inall Ridgeway, a specialist Indigenous agency, has been engaged by the City of Sydney Council (the City of Sydney), to undertake an Indigenous Engagement and Heritage Study for an area defined as the Botany Road Corridor (or the Study Area), which extends from Redfern to Alexandria.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a long history with the inner Sydney suburbs of Redfern, Waterloo and Alexandria, and the place defined as the Botany Road Corridor for the purposes of this project. The connection runs deep, the spirit of place is alive still. It is both a connection on the land, but also of the land. People and culture, language and history are entwined, as roots of the giant Moreton Bay figs which stand tall throughout the region.

This history extends back long before 1788 and reaches even further beyond 1770, to a rich tradition of 60,000 years of people, culture, custodianship and ownership, of the place now known as Australia. This history provides a rich source of tradition, wisdom, stories and knowledge. It demonstrates the longevity of the connection of Aboriginal people to the place they call home. This place and wider landscape have been constant in its ability to nurture and nourish the Aboriginal soul. It is also a place to affirm cultural identity and instil a great sense of enormous pride.

As the Botany Road Corridor and the surrounding areas experience change and growth, the City of Sydney is keen to better understand the significance of the Study Area to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people but in particular the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community comprised within the suburbs of Redfern, Waterloo and Alexandria, including identified local Aboriginal organisations as well as key Aboriginal community influencers and leaders.

The City of Sydney is keen to ensure that the importance of the heritage and cultural connection that Aboriginal people hold, to the defined Study Area is prioritised and informs future planning for the project.

Cox Inall Ridgeway has been engaged to undertake archaeological, cultural heritage and historical research, and seek advice and feedback from the Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council, the City of Sydney Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Panel, Gadigal Elders, local Elders with knowledge of the area, historic and current Aboriginal organisations based in or near the Study Area, and the wider community.

The research and consultations is informing advice that will be provided by Cox Inall Ridgeway to the City of Sydney about opportunities to put Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices, views and aspirations at the centre of future planning for the area.

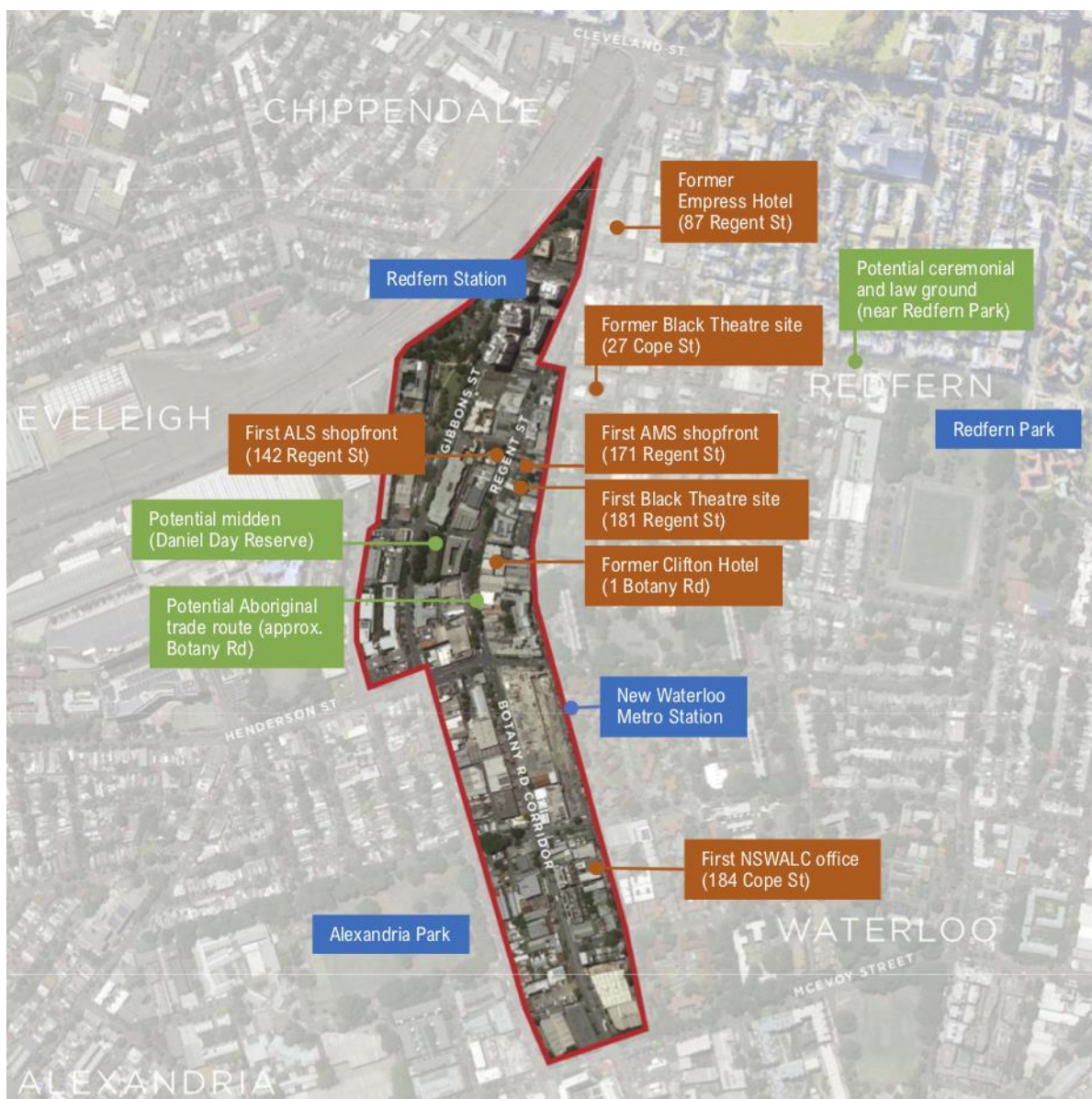
The advice will reflect 'Designing with Country' principles and approaches, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander understandings of place.



The Statement of Significance below presents a preliminary, high level assessment by Cox Inall Ridgeway of the significance of the Study Area for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

It is supported by updated cultural heritage, historical, archaeological and social mapping (currently being finalised) which incorporates information from the community engagement and the historical, archaeological and cultural heritage research undertaken by CIR for this project.

Also included below is high level, background information examining: the current framework for recording and evaluating cultural heritage significance for the purposes of planning and development; and how putting an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander frame can challenge traditional or dominant approaches to understanding cultural heritage and Country. The current planning framework and opportunities to move to First Nations-centred approaches will be explored in more detail in the report and recommendations provided to the City of Sydney at Stage 3 of the project.



CIR Study Area Map featuring selected places, as included in the Discussion Guide (July 2020)

## PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE BOTANY ROAD CORRIDOR

CIR has assessed the Botany Road Corridor Study Area as holding strong significance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, not only locally but across NSW and Australia.

### *Pre-invasion and early contact history*

Located on the traditional lands of the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, the Study Area was highly used by Aboriginal people prior to invasion and colonisation by the British. The Study Area and surrounds were a waterscape of permanent and semipermanent wetlands supporting waterbirds, freshwater fish and turtles, forests of paperbark and swamp mahogany, sedges, reeds, ferns and lilies. The highly productive area was used for hunting, fishing, harvesting native plants and collecting fresh water. The Gadigal, or spear grass people, crafted spear shafts from Casuarina trees and glued them with resin from Gulgadya (the grass tree).

They were adept and skilled at living and hunting on the land. The land was also the sacred container and the blank canvas for their stories, artistry and culture. This intimate connection between people and place can be hard to understand from a 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective. But it was like walking through a forest and along a beach where every part of the landscape is vibrating with meaning, and there is an unspoken, yet deeply felt, two-way conversation between people and place.

In the early days of the colony the place itself protected the people. The wetlands, forests, and banksia shrubs of the sandhills provided refuge to the Gadigal and other clans from the colonists who were seizing their coastal territories.

The Study Area continued to be the stage for many events that followed in the colonial area. The Study Area is surrounded by known sites where Aboriginal people camped, held ceremonies and resolved disputes in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century, including near what is now Redfern Park, Victoria Park and Prince Alfred Park. Although the existence of recorded archaeological sites (including the midden currently recorded as near or within Daniel Day Reserve) are not confirmed within the Study Area, the history of this part of Country means that there is a high potential for as yet unrecorded archaeological resources in the area.

Botany Road itself was likely to have been established along an early Aboriginal trading route or track connecting Aboriginal clans and nations between Sydney Harbour and Botany Bay. The Study Area is crossed east-west by another early track running along the ridge/ high ground, along which Redfern Street was formed. With further archaeological research it is likely that other routes could still be found.

### *[Invisible] shared history of inner-city Sydney*

Country, including the creeks and waterways running through or near the area remained important for Aboriginal people into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the intensification of urban development led to the draining, redirection or pollution of remaining creeks and wetlands.

Despite the passing of time, and the changing nature of the landscape, Aboriginal people continued to play an active role in what became inner-city Sydney during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Significantly impacted through displacement, disease and frontier conflict, Gadigal people and

other clans and nations based in the Sydney basin adapted and responded. Indeed, Aboriginal people were part of the working life of the colony.

Much of this history is not documented or recognised in official histories of Sydney. In many ways, this project is part of this process of reclamation and the re-storying of place, where the Aboriginal voice can be restored to a more central place in the narrative.

### ***Aboriginal Redfern***

This is highly relevant when considering that the Study Area is a central part of what has, for the last 100 years, become the most well-known and significant urban Aboriginal place in Australia - 'Aboriginal Redfern'. Aboriginal Redfern can be understood to include not only the suburb of Redfern but surrounding suburbs including Waterloo, Alexandria, Everleigh and Darlington.

Aboriginal Redfern is widely recognised as the 'birthplace of Aboriginal rights.' From the early 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards it was the place where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from across Australia, but from NSW in particular, came together to work, live and build communities.

It was a key site of protest and the home of successful campaigns for recognition of land rights, human rights and civil rights, and of the first community-controlled organisations, such as the Aboriginal Medical Service. It was the place where Aboriginal people came together to hold important meetings, such as the first NSW Aboriginal Land Council meeting, and attend large social events, such as the Koori Knockout, and a place to find and re-connect with family for those impacted by assimilationist policies such as forced child removal.

It is probably no coincidence that 'Aboriginal Redfern' played such a significant role in shaping 20<sup>th</sup> century Aboriginal history. The place itself is imbued with cultural meaning. Located specifically within the Study Area are a large concentration of individual sites where important historical, political and social events, activities and organisations were formed or flourished, and where significant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people or families were born or lived. Some of these sites in the Study Area have current heritage listings; though these listings do not include reference to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander significance.

These people, events and organisations were instrumental in driving significant change for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, and for all Australians. They played a key role in changing the law, and shaping Australia's understanding of First Nations people and itself as a nation.

Aboriginal Redfern was also a key birthplace of important contemporary artistic and cultural movements including Aboriginal theatre, dance, music, art, radio and film. Several of the first Aboriginal-controlled artistic institutions were based in or directly adjoin the Study Area. Like the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander political and sporting organisations which were formed in the area, these movements and institutions have had a national impact which continues today.

### *Ongoing connection and cultural significance*

Aboriginal Redfern, and the Study Area, continues to be a key urban centre of Aboriginal and Torres Strait rights and identity today.

A large number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live, work, study in or visit the area. Important Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, services, cultural bodies and businesses continue to be based in the area, including those that grew from the historic first organisations formed there.

Areas in or immediately adjacent to the Study Area are highly used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including those working or visiting the community and cultural organisations based in the Botany Road Corridor, or clustered in Cope Street adjoining the Study Area.

Places represents layers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, connection and significance. People visit the Aboriginal Medical Service in Redfern Street (whose first and second shopfronts were in the Study Area) where people involved in establishing the first Aboriginal Medical Service still volunteer or are members of the Board. When people visit the National Centre for Indigenous Excellence, which borders the Study Area, they recall their experience as children attending the former Redfern Public School on which the site is built, and which was a hub for community activities. Public spaces like Alexandria Park are highly valued and used by the community, not only because they are key green spaces, and connect to the Alexandria Park Community School which many local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families attend, but because the history of Koori football and the community activities connected with it (the Koori Knockout remains largest annual event for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia).

The strongest visual representation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage in the area comes through the many public murals, in nearly all cases developed by the community or by community organisations. Some of these are painted by local children, some by Australia's best known Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists, some are community safety or education projects, and some take the form of ever changing street art – like the constantly refreshed 'Aboriginal' tag facing Jack Floyd Reserve. The '40,000 years mural' which greets people at Redfern Station is one of the more iconic and well known murals, declaring to all that arrive that this they have arrived on Aboriginal land. It is land that has a long and rich history, often marked by struggle.

There is a very strong sense of ownership and cultural connection by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to Aboriginal Redfern and the Study Area. This sense of ownership and cultural connection exists very strongly for those who have lived or have family who lived in the area, who worked in the area, or were part of organisations formed out of or based in the area.

Strong local connections extend to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families based in nearby inner-Sydney suburbs of Surry Hills, Glebe, Newtown, Erskineville, as well as other parts of Sydney where large groups of Aboriginal people lived or were moved following colonisation, such as La Perouse, or were relocated as a result of more recent government policies relating to public housing and gentrification, such as Mount Druitt.

Beyond this, Aboriginal Redfern, and the Study Area, is a place which holds significance and connection for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across Australia, because so many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have personal or family connections, or have been part of or impacted by organisations, campaigns or significant events held in the area.

The significance and history of the area is actively and explicitly passed on by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through generations. Parents continue to bring their children to Aboriginal Redfern to educate them about the history, and to foster strong connections with the area within communities for the future.

The roots put down by Aboriginal people over generations continue to flourish and blossom today. The land itself, beyond the buildings and roads, beneath the footpaths and concrete, still contains the stories of ancestors, and the wisdom of Elders. It is this deep connection to culture and customs that regenerates and innovates in the rapidly changing world.

## **BACKGROUND – CONTEXT AND FRAMEWORKS FOR ASSESSING SIGNIFICANCE**

As summarised in previous research provided to the City of Sydney Council by Cox Inall Ridgeway for this project, there is currently little legal recognition of culturally significant places for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within the Study Area.

Throughout the research and community engagement for this project, and through other recent projects, Cox Inall Ridgeway has heard consistently that the story of Aboriginal Redfern continues to be largely untold and unrecognised, especially by the wider community, for example through place naming, signage, plaques, public place design, or heritage listings, the rich history and significance of place is recorded in the living memory of Elders and families who are from or connected to the area, in community oral history projects, in the writings and other works of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander historians, film makers and artists, and in the lived experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who live in, work, volunteer, study or visit the area.

The final studies and reports which will be provided to the City of Sydney by Cox Inall Ridgeway from this project will aim to bring together known and less well-known histories. Noting the short time frame for this project, Cox Inall Ridgeway will also provide advice about further recommended research and pathways to further explore and record the significance of the area.

### **Current legal framework for identifying and recording ‘heritage significance’**

The Study Area can be understood as significant because it is part of a highly significant cultural landscape, which can be referred to as ‘Aboriginal Redfern’. Although the Study Area includes a very large number of important ‘sites’ of tangible and intangible cultural heritage, its significance is more than the sum of those sites.

Planning law, decisions and standards in NSW, including urban planning and design, is enacted under the *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979*. This legislation provides the framework for land-use planning in NSW, along with various planning instruments (such as LEPs), which control the development and use of land and inform the assessment and decision-making processes. The Act also sets out the way that the community is informed of, and participates in, planning and development decisions. As well as, defining the role, focus and decision-making responsibilities of various government departments, agencies and local councils across the state.

The planning laws, preceding legislation and historic practice going back over the last 250 years, has developed on the basis of a British colonial and euro-centric worldview of the ownership and use of land.

This has happened at the same time that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander title for the ownership and use of land, was not recognised and as such, prior titles for ownership were not recorded. This has meant that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were dispossessed of land, robbed of title and over time, restricted in their abilities of making use of their lands and other resources.

In comparison to the colonial system, the absence of a recognised title or integration of such into the colonial system, meant no way of being able to record and account for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' ownership, use and occupation of land and other resources. The colonial system of no Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander recognition in land on the one hand, and the giving of title to others, has rendered the (legal) connection of Aboriginal people to land, as largely invisible.

As such, the ability to access this 60,000 year of history and the centrality of culture and identity vested in the land and waters for Aboriginal and Torres Strait people, does not see the manifestation of original title represented in the records, and therefore, the built environment. It is for this reason that legislation like the *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979*, and the subsequent processes for assessment and decision-making, will invariably fall short of identifying, capturing and systemising the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander title and history to land.

The focus and its requirements under existing planning law, are site-specific and because land title and land-use has developed in a particular way over the last 250 years, Aboriginal people are severely disadvantaged and in most cases, are not included in land planning decisions other than in relation to the possible existence of Aboriginal heritage being contained within a proposed area.

A site-specific assessment process has limited ability to recognise and identify the value and significance of those things important to Aboriginal people. Sometimes this is because of the narrow nature of assessment (i.e. lot, plan, county, etc.) and if anything is found to be of significance to Aboriginal people, this usually happens as a reactive part of the system, that is, when cultural material is physically found in relation to a specific site, thereby triggering heritage protection requirements now needing to be met.

Besides the inherent bias in existing planning law, site-specific assessments can be seen as being narrow in their application, artificial in terms of what they actually assess, having limited to no ability to properly consider Aboriginal cultural heritage and values, as well as having capacity to consider the broader issue of the 'cultural landscape' upon which Aboriginal cultural heritage and values (including in contemporary settings) are more likely to be identified.

The key is to consider new ways and new practices to better identify and recognise how those things of significance and value to Aboriginal, are properly considered in any assessment process and in a proactive, meaningful and forward looking way. Initiatives such as 'Designing with Country' seek to move beyond site-specific understandings of cultural heritage, and emphasise

instead the connections and relationships to Country, to people and to the wider cultural landscape. It is to be hoped that the Botany Road Corridor project can be part of reflecting new ways, new practice and new opportunities which reflect this understanding.

## **END NOTE**

### **A note on the use of terms in this document**

The focus of this project is to assess the cultural significance of the Study Area for both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It is noted that Aboriginal, rather than Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, is used at times in this document.

Where this is done it is to reflect that: the Traditional Owners of the area were Aboriginal people; many of the first organisations established in Redfern were Aboriginal organisations (such as the Aboriginal Medical Service); and the term 'Aboriginal Redfern' is commonly used today by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Cox Inall Ridgeway acknowledges that Torres Strait Islander people, and people with both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage, were actively involved in many historic Aboriginal organisations and movements in the area.