

8

AUTHORIZING ABORIGINALITY IN ARCHITECTURE



Jacobs, J. Dovey, K. & Lochert, M.

in: Lokko, L. (ed) White Papers, Black Marks  
London: Athlone, 2000

INTRODUCTION

Australia is a nation founded upon the spatial violence contained within the eighteenth-century declaration of *terra nullius*—land unoccupied. In the struggle to occupy and settle the land, indigenous Australians were dispossessed, displaced and decimated. Nineteenth-century imperialism was based upon a construct of social development which positioned Europe at the endpoint of a social evolutionary teleology. The indigenous peoples of Australia were viewed as primitive residuals in a modernizing, imperial world. The lack of an identifiable architectural tradition was evidence of this ‘primitive’ state. Yet this lack of a formal ‘architectural tradition’ in Eurocentric eyes contrasts with the more recent recognition of the varied and complex spatiality of Aboriginal culture. Within that culture, the investment of spatial meaning was more often in constructions of landscape, than of shelter.

The nation’s struggle to turn away from its colonial past towards a post-colonial future is currently at a crucial stage. The *terra nullius* judgement has been legally overturned, yet many gains are under threat. There are sites which speak to the quest for such a future, in particular, the many tracts of land which have been successfully reclaimed by indigenous Australians since the introduction of land-rights legislation in the 1970s. However, the benefits of these legal provisions have been experienced unevenly. In practice, it has been those Aborigines who conform to pre-existing stereotypes of ‘traditionality’ who have been most successful in reclaiming their land. In this sense, the land-rights provisions in Australia reflect a broader predicament: underlying many of the legal and social provisions are assumptions about what constitutes authentic Aboriginality. Even the most recent and radically reformist Native Title legislation, which has dispensed with the notion of *terra nullius*, tends to favour claims by those who can prove traditional links.

Australia’s ambivalent attitude towards its post-colonial future has been exposed during this process of land reform: some of the more significant tracts of land to be claimed were only ‘returned’ on the condition that they be released to the

Frontispiece  
photo credit:  
Gagadju  
Crocodile Hotel,  
seen from the  
air. Jacobs,  
Dovey & Lochert

government for use as national parks. The far-north park of Kakadu was one such tract of land, with a staged handback from 1979. Kakadu is both officially recognized as Aboriginal land, but is also a national park, which is available, by law, for 'public enjoyment'. It is both a place of particular significance to local Aborigines and is also a World Heritage site. Nearly a quarter of a million visitors per year are attracted to the area's extraordinary escarpment landscapes, wetlands wildlife and Aboriginal rock art sites.

In contexts such as this—where Aboriginal lands coincide with large-scale tourism—'new' forms of architecture are emerging. At a functional level, this architecture essentially serves the needs of tourists by housing accommodation and visitor interpretation facilities. Yet it is an architecture which is also asked to represent, at some level, Aboriginal identity or Aboriginal culture. The architectural fraternity shows considerable interest in some of these buildings which are lauded for their formal expression of Aboriginal themes. These themes are framed by the media as being both sympathetic to Aboriginal interests and harbingers of an emergent 'indigenous' national architecture. In one sense, these buildings are called upon to frame spaces of cultural exchange, to 'bridge between cultures', to serve as gestures of reconciliation. In another, the architectural discourse celebrates them as examples of an emergent 'indigenous' architecture, defined by a certain creative hybridization of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal style. It is an architecture which is both understood as peculiarly 'Aboriginal' but which is also incorporated into a growing body of work which seeks a distinctive architectural expression for the nation.

Yet, at the same time, there are other buildings which are produced under similar conditions and for similar purposes which, somehow, do not 'qualify' as worthy of attention in this search. These are buildings that rest uneasily between Aboriginal 'tradition' and non-Aboriginal adjudications of 'kitsch'. These buildings are often zoomorphic, although this in itself is not the problem. Indeed, one of the most celebrated buildings in this emergent 'indigenous' national architecture is the Uluru Kata Tjuta Cultural Centre, designed by Greg Burgess in collaboration with traditional

owners, which takes the form of two snakes about to do battle with each other.

This chapter concerns itself with the complex cultural politics of this emergent 'Aboriginal' architecture with a focus on three buildings in Kakadu National Park: the Gagadju Crocodile Hotel, the Bowali Visitor Centre and the Warradjun Cultural Centre. These buildings all serve different functions within the context of the park, yet each of them speaks to the vexed intersections of Aboriginal interests, architecture and the tourist industry. Aboriginality is expressed architecturally partly through its form and partly through the symbolic associations of that form. We examine the ways in which the forms of these buildings are at once recognized as 'Aboriginal' but also placed within non-Aboriginal adjudications of aesthetic value and architectural integrity. We also examine the significance of the often unseen processes of producing these buildings: the consultations, the budgets, the design histories. Consideration of these processes opens out the questions which arise around 'Aboriginality' being expressed in architecture. In particular, it directs attention towards the important question of who authorizes the production of 'Aboriginal architecture'.

#### GAGADJU CROCODILE HOTEL

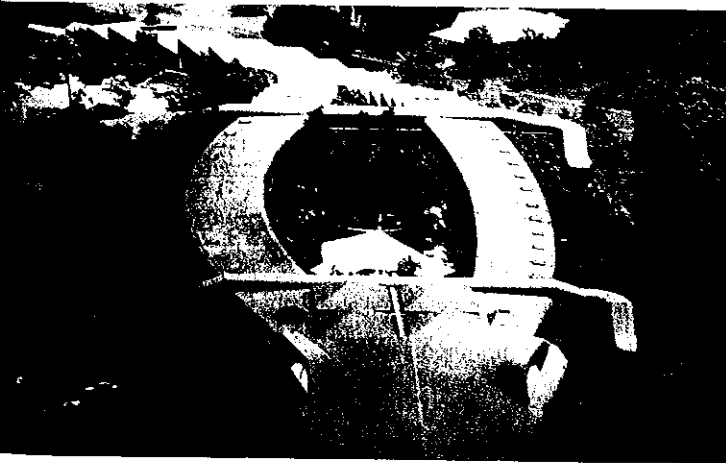
The Gagadju Crocodile Hotel is a 110-bed tourist hotel built in 1989 in Jabiru, a small town within Kakadu National Park. The building is a literal representation of a saltwater crocodile, about 250 metres long. The main entry is through the 'jaws' forming a port cochère with splayed steel columns as symbolic 'teeth'. The foyer is the 'head', shaped to read as a crocodile from the ground. Large vents represent 'eyes', which glow with a red light at night. The 'trunk' of the crocodile is formed by two-storey wings of hotel rooms flanking a central courtyard. The 'legs' are staircases leading from the rooms to the car park, designed as a series of 'egg nests'. The 'jaws' effect of the main entry is repeated in these 'legs' where the 'teeth' become 'claws'. A slate-coloured and crimped roofing steel wraps the building like a 'skin'.

The courtyard is landscaped accordingly. The swimming pool is the 'heart' and

the creek an 'intestine' which winds its way through the elongated courtyard. It is paved with striped tiling patterns derived from a widely recognized style of local Aboriginal art. The 'tail' of the building, housing the services, is formed of a sawtooth roof, representing the distinctive protrusions on the tails of saltwater crocodiles. Inside the hotel foyer, high-quality Aboriginal artworks hang on the walls, waiting to be sold. A large ornamental rock, chosen especially by the traditional owners, stands as the 'natural' centrepiece. Didgeridoo music plays in the bistro/bar.

The form of the crocodile is not immediately apparent at ground level. Yet the publicity material always depicts it from the air where the zoomorphic form is obvious and tourists would rarely visit without such a preconception. One brochure frames the building as a 'reptile lurking beside the banks of Lake Jabiru'. You enter the complex by the jaws, then through to an expansive marble foyer that resembles a cool green oasis. Here the 'reptile by the lake' is constructed as 'natural' rather than 'Aboriginal'. The crocodiles are a major natural feature of the park, human predators which are seen at close distance on boat tours. The film *Crocodile Dundee* has played a key role in framing tourist expectations of this part of Australia. The hotel symbolically enacts the thrill in this encounter with the wild—to be consumed by the predator. The metaphor of the 'oasis' also suggests an opposition to the landscape: it keys into the marketing

Photo credit:  
Gagadju  
Crocodile Hotel,  
seen from the  
air. Jacobs,  
Dovey & Lochert



of the international hotel as a protected space from which one can safely explore the exotic. The 'crocodile' both consumes and protects.

Yet the 'nature' suggested by the way this zoomorphic hotel is framed never quite stands alone from the Aboriginal presence in Kakadu. Another tourist

brochure promoting the hotel, headed with a reproduction of an Aboriginal painting of a crocodile, explains the significance: 'Ginga, the giant crocodile is the spirit ancestor of the Gagadju people and commands great respect in their lives.' The Gagadju Association, the body which formally represents the traditional owners of this northern part of Kakadu National Park, was the client for this building. The original land-rights claim included the Ranger Uranium Mine, which has delivered royalties back to the traditional owners, much of it invested in tourist-related developments. The Gagadju Hotel was the flagship venture of this kind. From the beginning, then, the building was asked to be more than a hotel: it had also to stand for emerging Gagadju initiatives in the tourism industry.

The saltwater crocodile is not only an important animal to local Aborigines, it is also the official logo of the Gagadju Association, appearing on letterheads, uniforms and other markers of this modern Aboriginal bureaucracy. In this sense, the crocodile image was already circulating between these poles of the traditional and the modern. In such circumstances it was entirely understandable for the new hotel venture to engage with the possibility of a crocodile form. Traditional owners had input to the emerging design, including the courtyard and car-park landscaping. There was some initial resistance from those who saw a 'spiritual' image being misused but the design proposal was formally approved at an Annual General Meeting of the Gagadju Association. The hotel remains in the ownership of the Association with the management sub-leased to a professional hotel chain.

The architects were Wilkins, Klemm and Morrison and their architects' statement published in *Architecture Australia* in 1989 argues that they perceived a challenge to create an instantly recognizable 'symbol for the Territory'. A solution was proposed using the symbolic configuration of a crocodile similar to the stylized rock art and bark paintings of the Kakadu region. Thus they base the authority for the design on Aboriginal rock art and not the client community. The hotel is from the outset 'Aboriginal' and at the same time it also aims to collapse the landscape of the 'territory' into an iconic image for the tourist industry.

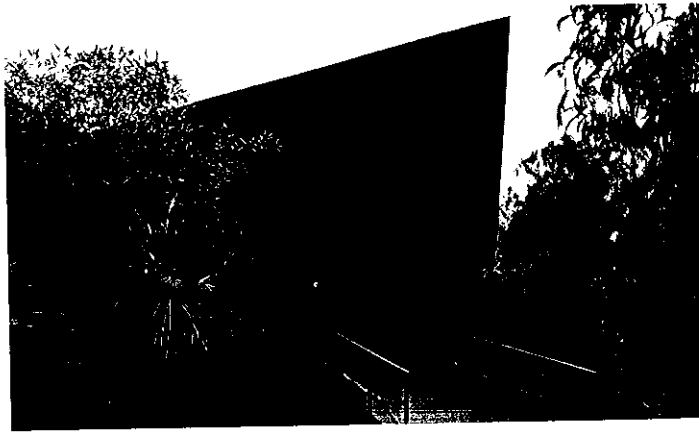
The building has met with limited architectural approval. Despite a minor award for innovation, the building fails within the professional paradigm where it was (and is) regarded as commercial kitsch. From this view, it is like the roadside architecture of Venturi's 'duck' in the Australian bush. Apart from short pieces in *Architecture Australia* and *Bauwelt* the building has not appeared in the architecture media. Kitsch generally means a pretentious and shallow form of expression which aims for popular appeal, but it is a highly problematic term, generally relying on a presumed hierarchy of taste cultures. Overturning such hierarchies has long been the task of the avant-garde but no such task is taken up here. The zoomorphic conception makes the building interesting, yet it has been simplified and reduced to meet the tourist market. With its 'jaws' propped permanently open for tour buses, the building has a certain fascination. But the imagery is expressed too literally, functional relations are not resolved and the design composition and detailing are poor.

The building seamlessly conflates three meanings of the crocodile in the mind of the tourist as wild predator, as 'spiritual totem', and as landscape icon. It becomes a signifier of Aboriginality which collapses those meanings into a neat package for consumption. One consumes and is consumed by the 'crocodile' too easily: in Barthes' terms, it is too 'readerly'. It reinforces a dominant ideology about Aboriginality which operates to distance the tourist from the landscape and its lively Aboriginal traditions. Its foyer and courtyard are sectioned off as international hotel space but they are dressed up as Aboriginal. After a humid walk to the rock art, one can return to swim in the heart of the totem, the 'belly of the beast'. This is not to suggest that this would be a better building if it were stripped of Aboriginal references: it would then be reduced to a cheaply designed, modernist hotel. The failure lies not in the impulse to architectural difference, but in the failure of architectural engagement. The rock art sites are major attractions in Kakadu National Park. Some have layer upon layer of paintings, with later paintings obscuring earlier ones, one style succumbing to another. They range in age from 12 to 60,000 years. With Aboriginal rock art, the act of painting is as important as the artwork itself. Rock art paintings were never static, they

were overpainted, renovated and erased, many eroded and faded away. The architects of the Gagadju Hotel may well have taken inspiration from such artwork, but they took little of the flexibility which inheres in such practice. The hotel is a finished design that cannot be added to, functionally or semantically. It fixes meanings in a static and tectonic manner, at odds with its stated source. It lacks the fluidity and flexibility of the ongoing palimpsest.

#### BOWALI VISITOR CENTRE

The Bowali Visitor Centre was completed in 1994, designed by Glenn Murcutt and Troppo Architects in collaboration. It is a major addition to an existing visitor centre and park headquarters. This building was primarily intended as an environmental interpretation centre for the park and not to display or represent Aboriginal culture. Yet the programme asked for the design



to incorporate an 'understanding of the cultural, environmental and management aspects of the park', a visitor centre that would 'complement' the cultural display of the Warradjun centre.

The scenic beauty of the park derives mainly from a dramatic escarpment of rock walls, extending for hundreds of kilometres, and from the profusion of wet-season wildlife. The Bowali Visitor Centre responds to this landscape with great imagination and skill. The building is linear in plan form, organized along a spine of open walkways more than 100 metres long. Major internal spaces are hung off this spine and surrounded by the circulation space as covered shelter with cross-ventilation



and views into the bushland. Most of the formal inspiration is from the Kakadu escarpment. The linearity of the plan reflects the linear rock walls and the roof form is inspired by rock shelters. The roof collects water in a huge valley gutter, a 'creek' which shoots out into waterfalls at the extremities of the building. The rain also disgorge through the buildings into a pool and down rusty steel panels in the rammed earth walls. The rainstorms here are torrential and this building offers visitors both shelter from and close proximity to such large volumes of water pouring through, off and under the building.

Photo credits:  
Bowali Visitors  
Center. Jacobs,  
Dovey & Lochert

The success of this building stems from the formal quality of response to the landscape. However, it was 'Aboriginalized' in the architectural press even before it was built. In an interview published in *Architecture Australia* in 1992, Murcutt

described the building as both 'for the Gagadju people' yet 'not a cultural centre'. He described the design primarily in terms of Aboriginal occupation:

*The aboriginal [sic] people...lived at the escarpment. In the shelter they told their stories and passed their culture to their children, and the times spent under shelter were the times likely for initiation. The cave was approached from above or from the end, never from the front. You went to one end and called out to the guardian spirits, announcing you're there and could you please come inside. So this has a big influence on how I go about designing this building...you'll be experiencing this building essentially between the wall, as it were the escarpment, and the landscape. You'll go through the initiation which will be the core, in terms of understanding the Aboriginal's perception of the landscape...the building will read as an interpretation centre for the landscape.*



Murcutt thus throws a certain Aboriginal authority over the building as he casts its visitors on to the path of Aboriginal approach. He begins to conflate 'interpretation' with 'initiation'. For him, to 'stand under' this great slanting roof is in a sense to 'understand'. Murcutt casts himself as the mediator who brings an Aboriginal vision to the tourist.

There are several ways in which the Bowali Centre has become 'Aboriginalized'. The rammed earth wall of the central café area has been sprayed with a series of hand outlines in a literal representation of Aboriginal rock paintings. The effect is to represent the rammed earth as more than simply rockface. These hand paintings were intended by the architects to be undertaken through the authority of traditional owners. However, this did not happen and the hands were stencilled on the wall during an opening party, causing consternation in both Aborigines and architects. The toilet signage directs visitors to male and female toilets with images of 'hunter' and 'gatherer', with spear and dilly bag, respectively. Designed by the display designers, these images are cut from plates of steel and hung silhouetted against the landscape with the Aboriginal figures framed by the rusty steel plate. Unsawn timber branches are used as balustrade railings, door handles and entry portals, enforcing a tactile encounter with natural forms from the landscape. The internal pool is conceived as a 'billabong' and features a traditional Aboriginal canoe. Photographs of this canoe within the building are a very common representation of the building in the design literature. The building is publicized not just as landscape but in terms of Aboriginal occupation. A set of natural and cultural signifiers throughout the building serve to construct and complete a continuum of significations from escarpment to trees to Aborigines. Although conceived in terms of landscape, the building becomes easily enculturated and issues of authority are easily swept aside.

Traditional owners were consulted closely on the display but their participation on the building design was limited. Aborigines do not use the new building unless they work there or attend meetings. They avoid the public areas where they become subjects of the tourist gaze as cultural display: their term for it is 'feeling humbugged'.

The main Aboriginal use is a meeting room which opens to a separate verandah area and overlooks the bushland.

In 1994, this building won architectural awards for the best building in Australia, at both state and national level. Judges comments did not mention any connection with Aboriginality. The building has been published elsewhere and the Aboriginality of the oblique entry is often mentioned but it does not dominate the discourse. It is a very fine building which shows results of a good collaboration between architects, display consultants and clients. The fascination for landscape sources for architecture which Troppo and Murcutt share is very evident in the design. Yet it is a building designed neither in collaboration with, nor for the use of, Aboriginal people. The nature/culture division does not hold and it is layered with cultural signifiers.

#### WARRADJAN CULTURAL CENTRE

The Warradjan Cultural Centre opened in May 1995, thirteen years after the idea was first promoted by traditional owners and the director of national parks. The main impetus for the project was the traditional owners' desire to tell their story to their children and to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people visiting the park. Although the most recent of the three buildings we discuss, it was the earliest in conception. Through all stages of the project, there was a highly participatory process which was considered as 'important, if not more important than the finished product'. The 'open' time frame allowed Aboriginal protocols, including those around authorization, to be followed. Funding was from the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service. While it was agreed that the Gagadju Association would manage it, the cultural centre was also very much the concern of all clans.

The process of choosing a site and designing the building progressed together. The original concept for the cultural centre included a 'Keeping Place' but the problem of keeping secret and sacred items in one clan's country created an impasse.

The project was only able to proceed once it was agreed that the Keeping Place would be treated as a separate project (which remains under discussion). The site for the centre in the Yellow Water–Cooinda area, 50 kilometres south west of Jabiru, was chosen from an aerial search. It is a geographical centre of the park and brings attention to the importance of the wetlands for the traditional owners. The cultural centre is a focal point on a number of levels.

The architects for the building were decided by tender and won by Australian Construction Services, a government agency. Design meetings included the project architect Graham Lockerby, the display designer David Lancashire, the traditional

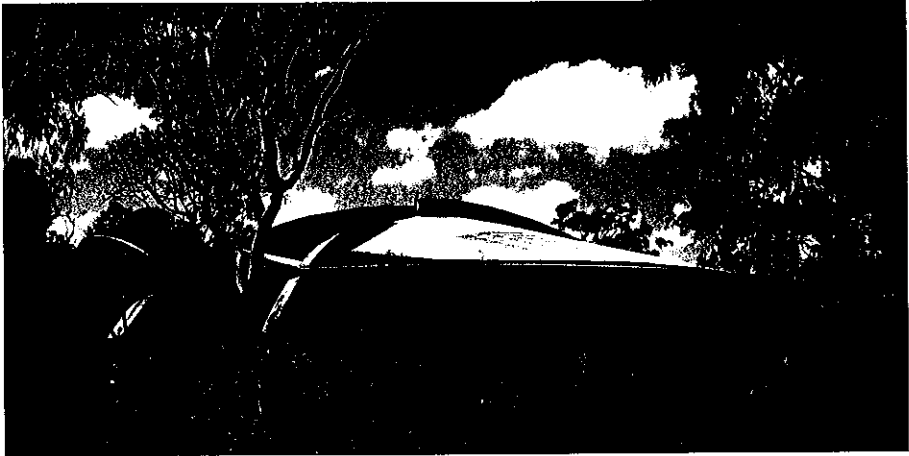


owners and park's staff. The suggestion was made that a circular building would reflect the manner in which the participants tended to sit in a circle. A response to one of these early circular designs was that it suggested a *warradjan*—a freshwater pig-nosed turtle. The *warradjan* is important as a food source, and Kakadu National Park provides its only protected habitat. The architect developed this idea and applied *warradjan*-like features to the external aspect of the building. The reception to the idea of the *warradjan* was also influenced by the success of the crocodile hotel among both tourists and traditional owners. It may also have been influenced by the use of concept models which were indispensable in communicating ideas, but which privilege an aerial

Photo  
credits:  
Warradjun  
Aboriginal  
Cultural Center,  
Kakadu.  
Jacobs, Dovey &  
Lochert

perspective of the project wherein the zoomorphic form is highly apparent.

There were some concerns with using the *warradjun*, particularly for such a public building: 'traditional owners wished to be satisfied that there was no business (i.e. religious significance) for the *warradjun*, particularly in the context of ceremonies'. These concerns were checked with people experienced in ceremonial life from different areas and were cleared. Again, this raises issues of authorization already of concern in the production/reproduction of Aboriginal art. Such authorization is not only negotiated between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants, but also between different Aboriginal communities. These negotiations take place in particularly



modern conditions such as the marketplace, or when a national park brings various and previously loosely connected groups together.

The *warradjun* is barely legible from ground level. Like the crocodile, there is a need for the mental image of the aerial perspective in order to see it as a turtle. The circular plan is formed from two 'D' shaped halves back to back. These 'also reflect[ing] the cultural imperative of the two halves of society, the Dua and Yirritja division of the cultural and natural landscapes of Bining cosmology'. The separation between the two halves forms a landscaped 'gully' between 'rock walls', evoking the nearby escarpment. These walls splay out to flank the entrance area as 'legs'. The roof,

which extends to create a verandah on all sides, represents the 'carapace' of the turtle and the 'head' is suggested by a tensioned fabric canopy over the entry foyer.

The path through the building leads visitors on a loop from the entrance through the display, which occupies one half, returning through the shop and service areas which occupy the other half. There is also a path around the exterior of the building under the verandah. The rear lobby faces the bush and provides an inviting resting place. Functionally, the building works well with the possible exception that it is very clearly a finished 'whole', making it very difficult to extend should the need arise. The building is generally disappointing in its level of detailing and in the materials used. Unlike the rammed earth walls at Bowali, these rather flat external walls are clad in compressed fibre cement with a textured finish 'to suggest both the light underbelly of a turtle and the sandstone rock walls found in the park'. These verandah walls have also been signed with ochre-coloured hand stencils. But, in this case, the authors were members of the ten clans who participated in the project.

There is a sense in which the architecture of the Warradjan Centre is not as important as the story it encloses. Traditional owners are telling their story in rather than through the building. The building holds the stories and protects the artefacts in an air-conditioned, internal and private environment, which cannot be glimpsed from outside. From our discussions with park's staff, this is a successful cultural centre from the tourist point of view: it answers their questions about Aboriginal culture. But the role the building plays in this is unclear. The state Tourism Commission had lobbied during construction to ensure that the centre: 'does not become another museum and there are "live" exhibits and displays by traditional people. It is important that the mechanism is in place for visitors to be able to have direct contact with aboriginal [sic] people through this centre'. This is a revealing quote which situates architecture as part of a 'mechanism' which places Aborigines in 'direct contact' with visitors. The intention was for arts and crafts demonstrations to be held on the surrounding verandah during peak season, making this the most likely site within the park for such contact. Yet servicing a market for 'authenticity' has certain contradictions. Given the

problem with traditional owners being 'humbugged', this seems likely to be a staged economic exchange. What is being learnt, by whom, and in whose interest, remains unclear.

This non-Aboriginal desire to fix the Aboriginal in a tourist gaze has been reflected in the architecture. This is not only on the verandah space where Aborigines have been programmed to appear, undertaking 'traditional' activities, but also in the fixity of the turtle imagery. The disappointment here is that an opening was created for a highly participative process: preconceptions were not imposed, but neither were ideas developed with sufficient creativity. The design does not fit definitions of kitsch: there is no semantic replication, yet it slides easily into such a judgement. Despite winning an award as a tourist development, the Warradjan Cultural Centre has thus far attracted no interest in the architectural press. Like the crocodile, it evokes a sense of closure. It is finally, and only, a turtle.

#### DISCUSSION

There is no simple way to close this discussion. It is perhaps more interesting to speculate on the questions these buildings have begun to open. Under what conditions, both architectural and managerial, are traditional owners willing to conduct forms of cultural and economic exchange with tourists? What are the prospects for an architecture which both engages with Aboriginal cosmology and constructs a place of ongoing cultural exchange, responsive to the complex cultural politics of post-colonial reconciliation?

The hotel, the visitor centre and the cultural centre: each construct certain notions of 'Aboriginality' in architecture. The 'crocodile', 'escarpment' and 'turtle' are each metaphors of 'nature' which slide seamlessly into 'culture'. This division between 'nature' and 'culture', which has been constructed into the architectural division between Bowali and Warradjan is problematic. And the contrast is further revealed in that the budget for Bowali was far more generous than that for Warradjan, a

distinction which shows in the quality of both design and construction. The lowest acceptable tender from the range of architects was enforced for Warradjan; higher bids by award-winning architects Troppo/Murcutt and Greg Burgess were rejected. By contrast, the Bowali budget was substantially increased as Troppo Murcutt were able to demonstrate the potential of the project. While the budgets are not directly comparable because these are quite differently sized buildings, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the cultural centre was the poorer cousin.

The primary traditional form of shelter in Kakadu was the rock escarpment: not a constructed space or artefact but a shallow cave. Yet this space was constructed semantically through ritual use and the various forms and layers of rock art. It was the 'rock wall as shelter' that inspired the Bowali centre. Ironically this was the one building which was not programmed to represent Aboriginality, hence the low levels of Aboriginal participation, authorization and use. Architecturally, it is the most successful.

The higher levels of Aboriginal authorization at Gagadju and Warradjan have yielded totemic imagery in the crocodile and the turtle—derived from the rock art rather than the rock wall. Yet the architects have found this engagement difficult. The literal zoomorphic figure is, in one sense, the antithesis of the abstract figure of the 'modern' which has dominated twentieth-century architectural discourse. Yet the 'totemic' architecture of Kakadu is also a modern development, conceived under modern conditions of bureaucracy, land rights and tourism.

These buildings tell a story in process, and they embody in their architecture some aspects of broader race relations in Australia. While purporting to speak with an Aboriginal voice, they often say more about the non-Aboriginal. Buildings are commissioned and designed under conditions of Aboriginal authorization, but they are also (and inevitably) constructions of the architectural and tourist markets. They can be read as both an emergence of Aboriginality in architecture, but also as an ongoing appropriation of Aboriginal culture. These are liminal buildings, at once modern/postmodern, authentic/kitsch, black/white. While their forms are fixed, their



meanings are slippery. They raise more questions than we can currently answer about the possibilities for an 'Aboriginal architecture'.