



The 'Blackster' solution

Plans to set up more Aboriginal 'visitors camps' in South Australia modeled on the Lakeside Visitors Centre outside Port Augusta beg the question: are these a solution to Aboriginal mobility or a return to the days of segregation? This report examines the visitors' centre as a response to Aboriginal transient populations and alcohol consumption, and the appropriateness of the model to its target market

by *Elizabeth Grant*

LAST DECEMBER, STAGE 1 of the Lakeview Visitors Centre at Port Augusta opened to accommodate transient Aboriginal peoples; it is located 6km from the city centre adjacent to Davenport Community, a self-governing Aboriginal community outside the Port Augusta City Council jurisdiction. It is an interesting and controversial project - commonly dubbed 'Blackster' after the nearby Baxter Detention Centre - which demonstrates a design and planning response for the Aboriginal transient population as the result of the implementation of highly debated legislation.

Port Augusta is known as the 'gateway to the outback', with a reputation as a hard-drinking town. Aboriginal peoples comprise 15 per cent of the total population; consisting of Aboriginal people who live within the city limits, and those residing on the outskirts of Port Augusta at Davenport Community. There are also fluctuating populations of Aboriginal peoples originating from outside the city.

The Visitors Centre was the response to a declaration made by the State Government, at the behest of the Port Augusta City Council in December 2005, whereby all public areas in Port Augusta were declared as dry zones (where the possession or consumption of alcohol is prohibited). The centre is intended to serve the short-term accommodation needs of Anangu (Western Desert Aboriginal peoples) traveling from remote areas and to move this group from occupying and sleeping rough in the public spaces in Port Augusta. Along with the construction of the visitors' centre, there was a media campaign targeting Aboriginal users with a clear message not to come to Port Augusta to consume alcohol.

Historically, there has always been a movement of Aboriginal peoples to Port Augusta

from the north and west of the state and beyond, according to a number of 'lines' or 'paths'. The annual migrations generally occurred with the heat of the summer and are protected by the 1836 Letters Patent guaranteeing the rights of indigenous peoples in the state (and their descendants) by continuing access to the lands, which they occupied at the time, including Port Augusta.

Today, Aboriginal peoples migrate to Port Augusta for a variety of reasons. Mobility along the 'lines' or 'paths' continue, reflecting attachments to place by birth, kinship ties, and traditional ownership of country by the individual, their partner, children and siblings. Mobility also continues for a multitude of other reasons. Service delivery in the health, education, employment, and criminal justice sectors promotes mobility and Aboriginal peoples travel to Port Augusta to access a multitude of services not available in remote areas. Across South Australia, there are more than 2000 hospital separations annually where the inpatient has originated from a remote Aboriginal community. Families move to Port Augusta to support relations, especially those admitted to Port Augusta Hospital, reliant on health services or incarcerated in the Port Augusta Prison. These people may have chronic and complex health issues, limited financial capacity and be present in the community for extended periods of time.

Kin and community form the core of Aboriginal life, with the importance of attending family and community events paramount. Port Augusta is the focus of many cultural and community events, with attendance at these events frequent and culturally important. The scattering of Aboriginal peoples across South Australia as a result of past

Far left

The administration block at the Lakeview Visitors Centre outside Port Augusta

Right

One of two ablutions/laundry buildings



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government policies has dispersed individuals, families and cultures. There are also a myriad of social reasons to travel to Port Augusta. Life in remote communities further to the north and west is tough. Domestic violence, petrol sniffing, suicide and poverty are everyday realities. Whilst there is a cultural necessity to be close to country, there are important social and survival reasons to travel periodically.

The origins and reasons for transient Aboriginal populations have been seldom documented. It is known that more than 25 different language groups, with many more dialects and clan groups, are present in Davenport Community; however, there is no research as to the numbers of Aboriginal peoples traveling, where they come from and the purpose of the trips.

Within the long history of migration to Port Augusta there has been an associated tradition of Aboriginal peoples gathering in public spaces. The grassed foreshore of the beach has always been a popular retreat: there are shops and public amenities nearby, the wind cools the evening and youngsters can swim and play safely. Gladstone Square has been a popular gathering place, with the courts and other government services located nearby. While the gathering of Aboriginal peoples in Port Augusta's public spaces has resulted in cultural clashes and the criminalisation of Aboriginal peoples due to their visible presence, the issues of gathering have compounded with alcohol consumption.

For some Aboriginal peoples, Port Augusta provided opportunities to consume alcohol. The Aboriginal lands to the north and the northwest of the state prohibit the import or consumption of alcohol, and traveling to regional centres provides opportunities for alcohol consumption. Historically, Aboriginal peoples were denied access to, and restricted or discouraged from, gathering in hotels; this moved their consumption of alcohol into public spaces. Due to a myriad of reasons, it is often preferable to consume alcohol while gathering with a social group in an outside public space. Port Augusta hotels have serviced the purchase of alcohol to Aboriginal drinkers. It has been possible to buy fortified wines unrestricted during hotel opening periods, and Port Augusta is the one of the only regional centres where 'Monkey Blood' (fortified port) can be purchased. Port Augusta hotels have allowed the purchase of alcohol from drive-through outlets without a vehicle, whilst many regional centres may not permit this. Easy access to 'preferred' alcoholic products have compounded the issues of gathering in public spaces, with the result that disorderly conduct became highly visible within the city centre.

The issues of migrating populations and disorderly conduct have also impacted on the Davenport Community. Fluctuations in the community population are related to migrations, with people often staying with family, camping in the community and in the adjacent sand hills. The criminalisation of Aboriginal peoples in the public areas of Port Augusta has also moved people into the community and adjacent areas. The fluctuations in population have impacts on family and community resources, housing and the delivery of other services. Periodically, housing has been built to cater for the transient groups. Invariably, the harsh environmental conditions and a lack of 'fit' between the user group and the housing type or location have led to short housing life-spans.

The inception of the Lakeview Visitors Centre was seen as a way of resolving the complex issues of Aboriginal mobility and alcohol consumption; the concept was drawn

Right top
Visitor accommodation in the form of wiltjas ('spider' tents)
Right bottom
Children's play area at the Lakeview site
Far right
Twin prefab administration buildings



from an initiative instigated in Ceduna in the late 1990s. Lakeview consists of two prefabricated buildings housing a kitchen, dining area and other administrative functions. From the administration block, visitors are provided with two meals daily, bedding, access to transport and health services. Adjacent is an open site with a playground, two prefabricated ablution/laundry blocks and individual accommodation. A three-metre-high fence topped with barbed wire, secured and floodlit at night, surrounds the site.

Twenty or so wiltjas ('spider' tents) are provided as accommodation. Originally designed for short-term housing for communities awaiting permanent housing, the wiltjas are now commonly provided in South Australian Aboriginal communities as 'overflow' housing to relieve chronic overcrowding. The wiltjas consist of galvanized legs fitting into a central fixing plate and covered by a heavy-duty canvas cover with two zip openings. They were designed to be mobile, to allow erection to take account of prevailing winds and climatic conditions, and to be periodically moved to a new site when the ground is fouled. Within the visitors' centre they are fixed; tarpaulins are provided as floor covering. Each wiltja has an adjacent a fire pit.

The temporary style of accommodation at the centre has caused concern for some observers. The chronic and complex health issues of many Aboriginal peoples may be aggravated by the potentially crowded, confined, unventilated spaces. The style of accommodation may increase the risk of contagion diseases and exacerbate respiratory and pre-existing health and medical conditions. The permanent siting of the wiltjas within the confined site is also a concern: climatic conditions are unable to be maximized and there is likely to be a buildup of excreta and other matter leading to potential infections. The reduction of dust is of particular concern: visitors sleep on foam mattresses on the ground in the wiltjas and there has been little landscaping to control the movement of dust around the site and beyond. Similarly, reducing negative contact between people and animals, vermin and insects

are difficult under such living conditions. Controlling the temperature of the living environment has also not been addressed. With temperatures of 38 C upwards in summer, the wiltjas provide little relief. Safety issues are also of concern - the open fires provided adjacent to the wiltja sites are a cultural response that at the same time substantially increases fire risk. The securing of the compound at night prevents egress at critical times and may delay the attendance of emergency vehicles. Emergency egress and fire fighting equipment accessible to all is vital.

The suitability of the accommodation for diverse users has also been questioned. The issues of accessing the buildings, using the wiltjas and moving around the site may be difficult for the mobility impaired. Similarly, no suitable bedding or nappy change areas have been provided for the very young. Young children are likely to be in continual contact with dust and other environmental hazards. Security offered by this style of accommodation may not be adequate for the visitors and their possessions. While all visitors undertake not to be involved in aggressive behaviour at the centre, levels of violence are high in many Aboriginal communities and the unknown mix of languages groupings and clans accommodated at the centre has the potential for conflict to arise. The temporary structures provide little physical security for the visitors or their possessions.

To provide culturally appropriate housing for Aboriginal peoples, architects often employ the cultural design paradigm of working with end-users to increase knowledge of culturally distinct behaviour that will inform design. No end-user consultation occurred for this project and it is difficult to say whether the housing meets the end-users cultural needs. The flexibility of the structures may enable socio-spatial arrangements to be adapted as long as the management recognises the importance of allowing the movement of wiltjas around the site to meet the social, cultural, climatic and hygiene needs of the users. The siting of the ablutions blocks may need reconsideration. The female block opens to a full view of

the main road and could be relocated to a more sensitive location.

Objections have been raised by Port Augusta residents and others to the three-metre-high fence topped with barbed wire which has led to the centre being dubbed locally as 'Blackster'. One resident noted that "this sets you back 40 years, it's all about segregation, racism and discrimination". The current fence appears to be at odds with the intent of the project and would look more at ease in a custodial setting. More aesthetic perimeter barriers could be found. Other styles of fencing with the addition of landscape elements would enhance the aesthetic appeal, provide greater privacy for residents whilst creating shaded areas on the hot site and reduce the movement of dust around the site.

The site of the Lakeview Visitors Centre is multifaceted and complex, wedged between a significant male cultural site to the west and a female site to the east. It overlooks the Lake Umewarra, a significant site for Aboriginal peoples from the area and inland groups. Dreaming tracks lead to the lake and the importance is so great that one tradition has Lake Umewarra as an integral link between the northern and southern oceans. The site is enclosed from the west by sand hills that have been intermittently used for camping and gathering by Aboriginal peoples for

generations. It was also the site of the ill-fated Bungala Housing Estate that opened in 1976. The housing estate did not receive the full support of Davenport residents at the time on the basis that it was a traditional sacred site (some suggested a burial ground, others a ceremonial ground). A suicide of a man by firearm, followed by a discovery of the corpse of a petrol sniffer at the site were the first indications to Aboriginal peoples of the irreverent use of a sacred site. Finally, in 1989, the spilling of petrol over a fireplace by a sniffer resulted in a house fire and the deaths of seven people. Within two days the housing estate was abandoned and bad feelings surrounded the site. Since that time, the football oval, its adjacent facilities, and a number of industrial buildings have been the only continuously used at the site. Campers have frequented it for short periods of time, nestling anonymously among the sand hills. Intermittently, as previously mentioned, transient housing and ablutions have been constructed to service the needs of campers. In more recent times, this style of housing has been constructed within Davenport to allow greater access to services. There is an anomaly in regard to the siting of the dry camp as it relates to the implementation of the dry-zone legislation. It was perhaps an inevitable consequence of placing the camp away from

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the city centre that it be near the Davenport Community, which exists on Aboriginal Lands Trust land, that is private land, and to which public dry-areas declarations cannot apply. Although the visitors' camp is designated as a dry area, it is so only by reason of an internal rule of the establishment, not by a declaration. Also the main road leading to Davenport is under the Port Augusta City Council jurisdiction and within the dry-zone legislation. Between these two areas is an access road and a nature strip under the jurisdiction of the Davenport Council - outside the dry-zone legislation. Therefore, a ludicrous situation exists where people can (and do) sit on a nature strip outside the visitors' camp consuming alcohol. This is not only a threat to the peace and safety of the residents, but to the safety of the drinkers occupying a two-metre-wide strip with traffic moving in either direction.

The siting of the project at this location is interesting from a number of perspectives. The cultural significance of the site should not be ignored. The benefits of siting the project at the location are considerations for the traditional owners of the land. However, it may be considered that a site with such cultural significance may be best reserved for a project with a ceremonial or sacred purpose. The sad history of the site must also be considered: many Aboriginal peoples associate the past distressing events with the inappropriateness of previous developments and feel great sadness at the site. Around Australia, similar sites may contain reflection spaces or remain vacant rather than be thrust into use for the next purpose.

There is no doubt that end-users need to access services from Port Augusta. The siting of the project at least 6km from services appears to be contrary to the expressed intention of providing best practice for the end-users. The centre runs an ad hoc bus service, and private taxis shuttle between the site and township. The on-going expenditure both for the centre and individuals may have been allayed through the sensible siting of the project adjacent to existing services within the city, thus ensuring greater ongoing economic sustainability.

Design practitioners should also examine the process of consultation for the Lakeview Visitors Centre. Designers and planners accept the importance of directly consulting endusers, yet marginalised groups such as Aboriginal

peoples are rarely directly consulted regarding their needs. Consulting and needs analysis are typically determined through consultations with stakeholder groups. A variety of stakeholder groups were consulted regarding the needs of the end-users for this project, including the Davenport and Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankantjatjara (APY) Councils. In the consultation process, certain cultural practices impacting the project were not identified. Aboriginal groups will generally defer to the traditional owners of the land regarding decisions outside their traditional lands. This causes a dilemma in determining end-user needs. In this instance, the APY Council appears to represent the potential end-users; it is likely to defer decisions to the Davenport Council.

Given that patterns and characteristics of the transient population of Port Augusta are not documented, it may be possible that that the end-user group consists of a greater diversity of people than the groups consulted. It has been suggested that many of the users of the visitors centre may originate from the west of South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory.

CONCLUSIONS:

Stage two of the Lakeview Visitors Centre is planned and includes the 10 prefabricated buildings for medium-term accommodation. There are also discussions for the visitors' centre model to be implemented in Coober Pedy and at other South Australian locations. While the model appears to address some of the needs of transient Aboriginal peoples, deeper consideration needs to be given to a number of issues prior to its general acceptance and application.

The centre has a number of obvious benefits. It provides accommodation to transient people who may otherwise be sleeping rough and takes pressure from the resources of the Davenport Community. While these elements are important, the facilities and location of the centre require further consideration. Types of accommodation at the centre need to reflect the diversity of users, their vulnerable health status and mobility issues. The centre needs to provide basic safety and security elements that would be expected from any project in the mainstream arena. Design elements (such as the fence) need to reflect the primary purpose of the project with consideration given to siting the project within the city centre to allow

easy access to services, and away from the current multi-layered complex site.

The model does little to address public intoxication and alcohol consumption by Aboriginal peoples. At present, there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that the public intoxication issues are being transferred to other regional centres. Alice Springs Correctional Centre has observed greater numbers of Anangu within their prison population since the legislation of the dry zone at Port Augusta. The level to which other regional centres are being impacted needs to be measured. It would appear that the issues of public intoxication might be better addressed with initiatives at a local level, namely proper implementation of the Public Intoxication Act 1984, with its therapeutic model of dealing with public intoxication rather than punitive dry areas legislation. Local initiatives may include 'wet', 'damp' and improved sobering-up centres, night patrols and a range of other services delivered with an aim to divert Aboriginal peoples from the criminal justice arena, and keep drinkers within their families or cultural groups if possible.

The need for Aboriginal peoples to continue cultural connections to land and practices are well established as the basis for Aboriginal well-being. The impacts of the dry zone policy on migration patterns needs to be researched, as there is a potential for Aboriginal peoples to divert to another centre, leading to changes in cultural practices and connections. Similarly, numbers of people diverting to other centres to access health, education, employment, and criminal justice services need to be evaluated, as changes in populations may have considerable impact on the type of services required in Port Augusta and other regions. Conversely, while the dry zone may divert people from Port Augusta, the presence of the Visitors' Centre may attract others, or change the periods of time transient people choose to stay. This may impact the capacity of health, education, employment, and criminal justice agencies to deliver services.

The model also appears to duplicate existing services. Port Augusta presently has an Aboriginal hostel (Lois O'Donoghue Hostel) located within the city centre providing accommodation for transient people. Given the strong demand for the visitors' centre during its short period of operation, it appears that the demand and cost at the hostel may exceed the needs of transient Aboriginal peoples. It would appear more cost effective to adapt or enlarge existing models rather than reinvent the wheel.

There is a long history of Aboriginal peoples being subject to policies and initiatives. The implications of the Visitors Centre and the dry zone legislation at Port Augusta need to be critically evaluated and discussed with Aboriginal groups as the impact on a vulnerable sector of the population may be far-reaching. ©PLACE

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Finally my sincerest thanks are extended to the Awards Committee and DIA SA Council for ensuring The Design Institute of Australia, The Laminex Group South Australian Design Awards 2006 is again a wonderful celebration of the creative spirit.

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