

# Changing the change

Design Visions, Proposals and Tools

An international conference on the role and potential of design research in the transition towards sustainability

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## Communicating Shared Traditional Knowledge A model for the future: the role of design research as a contributor change.

### Abstract

One of the many challenges facing the global community is that of finding ways to work in research and practice that allow appropriate action and critical interrogation of action to enable and support change in a respectful and responsible process. The hybrid scenario created when design and design practice arrives in a traditional research framework can provide opportunities and provoke change that reverberate within the academy and at the same time support change within communities that engage with design in a practice led research context.

Design research in the university context provides a platform to create a space of engagement that delivers on-ground results and a site of research to understand design, designing and the designer. In this vision the university becomes a permeable and porous membrane that is a node in a network which facilitates and mediates engagement across the disciplines of the academy. In this scenario different faculties, consultants, corporate organisations, cultural and government bodies, undergraduate and post graduate students, researchers, volunteers find a hub – a place to gather resources and work together. For the design researcher it provides a site of research for long-term engagement in complex designing situations.

This paper uses as a case study Communicating Shared Traditional Knowledge Project - a partnership between Design UTS and the Traditional Knowledge Revival Pathways.

The Traditional Knowledge Revival Pathways has developed a methodology that delivers a practical solution to the threat of endangered knowledge for the indigenous communities of Cape York. The initial pilot which operated under the guidance of two Kuku Thaypan elders and their community, set out to develop a model that aimed to:

1. Research, record, document and utilise inherited traditional knowledge systems
2. Show the significant contribution of traditional knowledge to natural and cultural resource management
3. Provide training and employment opportunities for indigenous people across the Cape York Peninsula in order to break the welfare dependency.

The Traditional Knowledge Recording Project moves beyond existing approaches. The Elders have been central to the development of a strategy that utilises video as a medium for capturing their chosen content. It further shifts away from mainstream projects in recognising the difference between sacred and shared knowledge.

The partnership initiated in 2004 between the School of Design UTS and the Traditional Knowledge Revival Pathways focuses on the latter – the shared knowledge.

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Over three years, working in a variety of modes, the partnership has brought significant outcomes such as online and on-ground training in video recording, interviewing, editing and web and database data entry for the communities in remote locations. Support has been provided for infrastructure development in the area of web platform development, database development through on-ground user-testing and data storage solutions and product and communication design development such as books, educational material, training manuals, videos, dvds and music. These processes have demanded the integration of research into postgraduate and undergraduate course outcomes, field trips for researchers, training staff and students; the utilisation of digital technologies for communication including video conferencing, skype, ichtat, email and phone. Collaborations have been wide and varied with a range of participants including lawyers on intellectual property and legal issues, corporate responsibility managers with links into global corporations, information technology specialists and cultural funders.

In line with the Elders' and traditional owners' vision the project is underpinned by a commitment to an engagement that ensures mutual benefit - the self determination and economic independence of the indigenous communities that have adopted the TKRP methodology and an engagement through design. The engagement is participatory and collaborative with an emphasis on training and sharing knowledges and understandings. Design methods of participatory engagement, user centred design, action research in the context of emergent frameworks and experiential reflection have been utilised.

Drawing on the shared processes, experiences, outcomes and knowledge that have emerged during the partnership this paper elucidates a vision for the university where practice led research in design contributes to change. This change emerges through a commitment to an understanding of mutual benefit where the goals of self determination and the interrogation of the role of design, designers and the designed can find a place simultaneously in order to advance understanding in a respectful and responsible way.

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