

# WILCANNIA HEALTH SERVICE



**Supporting long-term wellbeing by involving the local Aboriginal community in the design and development of their healthcare centre**

**Better fit:**

The new wing follows the line of the river, and opens out into this landscape via a wide verandah.  
Image: Brett Boardman.

## QUICK FACTS

**PROJECT TYPE:**

Public building: creating a community health centre, including adaptive re-use of a 19th century hospital

**LOCATION:**

Ross Street, Wilcannia

**REGION:**

Far West

**ABORIGINAL CUSTODIANS OF THIS COUNTRY:**

Barkindji people

**CLIENT:**

Far West Local Health District

**PROJECT SCALE:**

Medium:

**SITE AREA** 13,500 m<sup>2</sup>

**PROJECT COST:**

\$3.2million, including funding from the Far West Area Health Service, Australian Government

Coordinated Care Trial Program, and the NSW Government Minister's Centenary Stonework Program

**YEAR:**

Started 1988; completed 2002

**PROJECT TEAM:**

**ARCHITECTURE AND INTERIOR DESIGN**  
Government Architect's Office  
Merrima Aboriginal Design Unit

**LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE**  
Department of Public Works and Services

**STRUCTURAL, CIVIL, ELECTRICAL AND HYDRAULIC ENGINEERING**  
Department of Public Works and Services

**PROJECT MANAGEMENT**  
GHD Group

**QUANTITY SURVEYING**  
Page Kirkland Partnership

**CONSTRUCTION**  
Lahey Constructions

**PROCUREMENT PROCESS:**  
Open tender

**AWARDS:**

- 2003** Australian Timber Design Awards, Winner: Environmental Commitment
- 2002** Royal Australian Institute of Architects NSW Chapter Awards: Blacket Prize
- 2002** National Trust NSW Heritage Awards: Energy Australia Award
- 2002** NSW Premier's Public Sector Awards: Gold Winner, Rural Services

## **Wilcannia Health Service is a remarkable public building project, adaptively re-using a historical hospital building set on the banks of the Darling River and making substantial additions to deliver essential healthcare services to the local Aboriginal community.**

The original Wilcannia Hospital building was designed by Cyril Blacket and built in 1879. Located on the edge of the town, on a bend in the Darling River, it was built of locally quarried sandstone and oriented north towards the street, away from the river. The building was inadequate as a modern health facility, but together with its site provided the starting point for a new approach to community health and wellbeing.

The old hospital has been redeveloped as a modern, multipurpose health centre, bringing together in one place a broad range of health-related community services including appointments with visiting specialists, 24-hour emergency care, an ambulance service, health education, outreach and home visits, inpatient and respite care, and residential aged care. The centre also has a mortuary.

Extensive consultation with the community throughout the design process, involvement of local people in the construction of the building, and the total reworking of the building's relationship with the landscape, has created a community service that is empowering, accepted, place-specific, and sensitive to cultural needs.

### **Better look and feel:**

The site has been reconfigured to incorporate the surrounding landscape as an important element of the overall experience. A large fig tree denotes the main entry. Image: Brett Boardman.

### **Involving the local community at every stage**

The project team took a holistic, consultative approach to the design process that maximised community engagement and was firmly grounded in the socio-cultural reality of the place. For the project to belong to the local people, it was considered necessary for them to be integrally involved with its creation. In this way the process was as important as the product. A key achievement of this approach to design is that it responds in a genuine way to the local community's concerns and beliefs, incorporating a sense of identity and ownership, and expressing this aesthetically.

Opportunities for indigenous training and employment were maximised. A training scheme was established for three locals to learn bricklaying and carpentry. A further six workers provided labour assistance, site maintenance, and landscaping. A separate funding program was used to provide an introduction to stonemasonry for a local Aboriginal person. Imparting these skills and experiences was seen as the commencement of a larger repair and restoration program for the town. The hospital now employs Aboriginal staff delivering the health services.

### **Developing multiple design options**

The design process for the health service was intensive. Seven options were prepared and investigated together in order to identify the best option to meet the brief and approved budget while fulfilling community expectations. Once the design concept was resolved, the project was fully designed and documented, and the project team remained involved with construction and project management until hand-over.

The selected option chose to keep and re-use the existing hospital, preserving memories and associations with the building, while reorienting and making the place anew.







#### **Better for community:**

The new health centre was built by involving the local community at every stage, creating a public place that has become an intrinsic part of the life of the town. Image: Brett Boardman.



#### **Better fit:**

The building is designed to sit sympathetically in its landscape, adjacent to existing trees and the river.



#### **Better performance:**

The design of the new wing is adapted to the climate and location, shielding the indoors from direct sunlight and taking advantage of cooling breezes from the river. Image: Brett Boardman.

## **Re-using a 19th century hospital building**

The original 1879 hospital building had been added to in the 1950s in a manner unsuitable for upgrading to current healthcare standards. The initial design move therefore was to remove these ad hoc extensions and restore the building to its original cruciform plan. This building, along with several outbuildings, was then seen as a “framework” providing the cues for siting new interventions.

The original wards of the hospital building have been converted to modern administration offices with consulting rooms and ancillary spaces. Restoration work focused on repairing the integrity of the existing building through repointing the masonry walls, re-roofing, plumbing, and painting. Complete renovation was unviable, so original features such as metal and timber ceilings, masonry chimney flues, and window surrounds, were carefully left intact and concealed by new fit-out works, leaving open the possibility for them to receive attention at a later date.

## **Integrating with the natural environment and landscape**

Alongside the old building, stretching along the tree-lined banks of the Darling River, significant new additions more than double the size of the facility. This distinctive new building follows the river alignment, set at an angle to the old building using a change in geometry which clearly distinguishes the old from the new. A short, glazed link connects the two, becoming a welcoming new entry foyer leading to the new reception area.

The eastern wing of the new building provides respite rooms and a shared lounge area. The western wing contains the nurses station, emergency outpatients area, staff facilities with balcony, kitchen, laundry, and storage areas. A mortuary facility is located at the far end, expressed as a separate mass and with its own discrete access. It has a screened external terrace which allows families to gather quietly and privately. A wide central corridor acts as a spine connecting the diverse uses.

The spaces between the buildings create landscaped outdoor “rooms”. A large open courtyard integrating an existing mature fig tree becomes the primary approach point from the street edge, leading visitors towards the new foyer. A separate, smaller protected courtyard provides a sunny sitting space for respite patients and their guests. A broad, shaded communal verandah provides a view out over the river. The external spaces are as important as the building itself.

Although the new component is large overall, its form is comprised of several smaller parts with different planes and alignments that are in tune with the landscape, rather than an imposition. The building has an open, robust, straightforward character with details that appear simple, reminiscent of outback buildings.

## **Responding to climate impacts**

Low-maintenance, high-performance materials are used – a combination of timber, corrugated metal cladding, and baked-earth bricks locally manufactured by trainee craftspeople. Masonry walls offer excellent heat insulation, while lightweight skillion roofs and plywood window hoods work to exclude hot summer sun. Inside the building is cool and shady with controlled sunlight and ample natural cross-ventilation taking advantage of cooling breezes from the river. Very little artificially generated cooling or heating is used.

# Design objectives for NSW

Seven objectives define the key considerations in the design of the built environment.



**Better fit**  
contextual, local  
and of its place



**Better performance**  
sustainable, adaptable  
and durable



**Better for community**  
inclusive, connected  
and diverse



**Better for people**  
safe, comfortable  
and liveable



**Better working**  
functional, efficient  
and fit for purpose



**Better value**  
creating and  
adding value



**Better look and feel**  
engaging, inviting  
and attractive

Find out more  
[ga.nsw.gov.au](http://ga.nsw.gov.au)

## **Better working:**

The new wing uses simple, robust materials that are functional and efficient.  
Image: Brett Boardman.



## **Expressing identity and respect**

The new centre represents a totally new approach to caring for health. Services are designed to support Aboriginal people in a holistic way – providing integrated healthcare in one place, in a manner that is suited to individuals and to the community, and offering opportunities for healthy living and community support.

This approach is reflected in the buildings' relationship with the landscape. The new centre addresses and connects with the river – the Barka – acknowledging the river's spiritual and cultural significance for the local Barkindji community. The buildings and landscape have been designed to create an expression of identity and place that is appropriate and respectful.

## **Good process: involve the community from the outset**

The key to this design approach is to include Aboriginal people in decision-making regarding their built environment, from the outset and throughout the project. This self-determination was enabled by a sustained dialogue with the community to create an architecture that respects and sustains cultural practices and pays close attention to the significance and meaning of Country. The project was facilitated by the Wilcannia Community Working Party with representation from community Elders, youth, government agencies, and the local land council.

## **Key considerations**

The design was not constrained by the limitations of the original building, instead rethinking how the existing building could best be valued and re-used. This approach provided the opportunity to deliver the complex functional requirements of the new facilities in a purpose-built form that builds on the old while optimising the benefits of the site with its riverside location.

## **MORE INFORMATION**

### **GANSW policies:**

Better Placed: An integrated design policy for the built environment of NSW

### **GANSW guides:**

Urban Design for Regional NSW

Design Guide for Heritage

Implementing Good Design: Implementing Better Placed design process into projects

### **GANSW advisory notes:**

How to develop a design brief

Collaboration

Strategic visioning

1. Horton D (creator) & AIATSIS (1996), AIATSIS map of Indigenous Australia, Aboriginal Studies Press, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), and Auslig/Sinclair, Knight, Merz.

This case study has been developed in conjunction with the Urban Design for Regional NSW guide.