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Country-Connected Housing: First Nations Design Framework

A community-led, ACCO-governed housing framework: designed from Country, for community, with self-determination as the non-negotiable structural principle.

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Cultural Safety · Community-Led · ACCO Governance · Country-Connected ·
Self-Determination · SEWB Model

Beginning With Country

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up 3.4% of the NSW population (2021 Census) and experience homelessness at 8.8 times the rate of non-Indigenous Australians (AIHW, 2021 Census). Aboriginal children make up 46% of children in out-of-home care in NSW. Standard social housing design (individual units, nuclear family assumption, bureaucratic access, non-culturally informed management) is systematically misaligned with the lived realities and values of many First Nations communities.

A note on authorship: this framework is written by a non-Indigenous researcher. It is offered as a starting point for Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to lead, change or set aside, not as a model to be applied to them. Design begins with consultation with local Elders and community members; not as a compliance step, but as the primary design process. The architect and service designer serve the community's vision. The framework below identifies structural principles that consistently emerge from First Nations-led housing design processes. Specific implementation will vary by community and Country.

Critical Structural Departure: The Unit of Housing

For many First Nations families, the nuclear family unit is not the relevant social unit. Extended family, kinship networks, and responsibilities of care operate differently. The campus is designed to accommodate this: with larger units, communal cooking infrastructure, and governance that reflects community rather than individual tenancy.

ZONE 1 • RESIDENTIAL: COMMUNITY AND KINSHIP

- Larger unit mix: 2, 3, and 4-bedroom units prioritised over studio and 1-bed
- Flexible occupancy policy: kinship care and extended family visitors accommodated
- Outdoor communal cooking infrastructure: fire pit, large BBQ, covered outdoor dining for 30+
- Cultural garden: native planting, bush tucker species, medicinal plants; designed with community
- Smoking ceremony space: designated outdoor area, clear sight lines, appropriate drainage
- Art and craft space: indoor-outdoor, water access; printmaking, weaving, painting
- All design decisions made in partnership with local Elders and community

ZONE 2 • GOVERNANCE: SELF-DETERMINATION

- First Nations Community Council: majority governance body; decision-making authority, not advisory
- All staff employed through community council: preference for First Nations staff in face-of-service roles
- Elder-in-Residence programme: an Elder is part of the campus community; cultural guidance, mentoring, ceremony
- Housing management delivered by ACCO (Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation) in partnership with Homes NSW
- Data sovereignty: community data remains with community; not available to external agencies without consent

ZONE 3 • COMMUNITY HUB: CULTURE AND CONNECTION

- Language programme: local language revitalisation; classes, signage, resources
- Cultural education: open to broader neighbourhood; building understanding, reducing stigma
- Aboriginal Medical Service (AMS) partnership: culturally safe primary care on-site
- Aboriginal Legal Service (ALS) regular visiting clinic
- Children and youth: culturally grounded after-school and holiday programmes

- Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB) model: not standard clinical mental health framing
- Grief and loss support: culturally appropriate, community-led; death in custody support available

Non-Negotiable Design Principles

- Community leads: architect and service designer serve the community's vision, not a pre-designed model
- Nuclear family unit assumption must be abandoned: kinship and extended family are the relevant social units
- Cultural safety is the first filter through which every design decision passes: not an add-on
- ACCO governance is not a subcontract: it is the primary management structure
- Country-connected design: outdoor space, native planting, fire infrastructure are clinical requirements
- Social and Emotional Wellbeing model (seven interconnected domains; Gee et al., 2014; National Strategic Framework 2017–2023) replaces standard mental health framing throughout

NSW population share	3.4% (2021 Census)
Homelessness rate	8.8 times the non-Indigenous rate (AIHW, 2021 Census)
Out-of-home care	46% of children in care in NSW are Aboriginal (December 2024)
Unit mix (indicative)	6 × 2-bed, 6 × 3-bed, 4 × 4-bed, 16 units, to be set by community
ACCO partner	Local Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation

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