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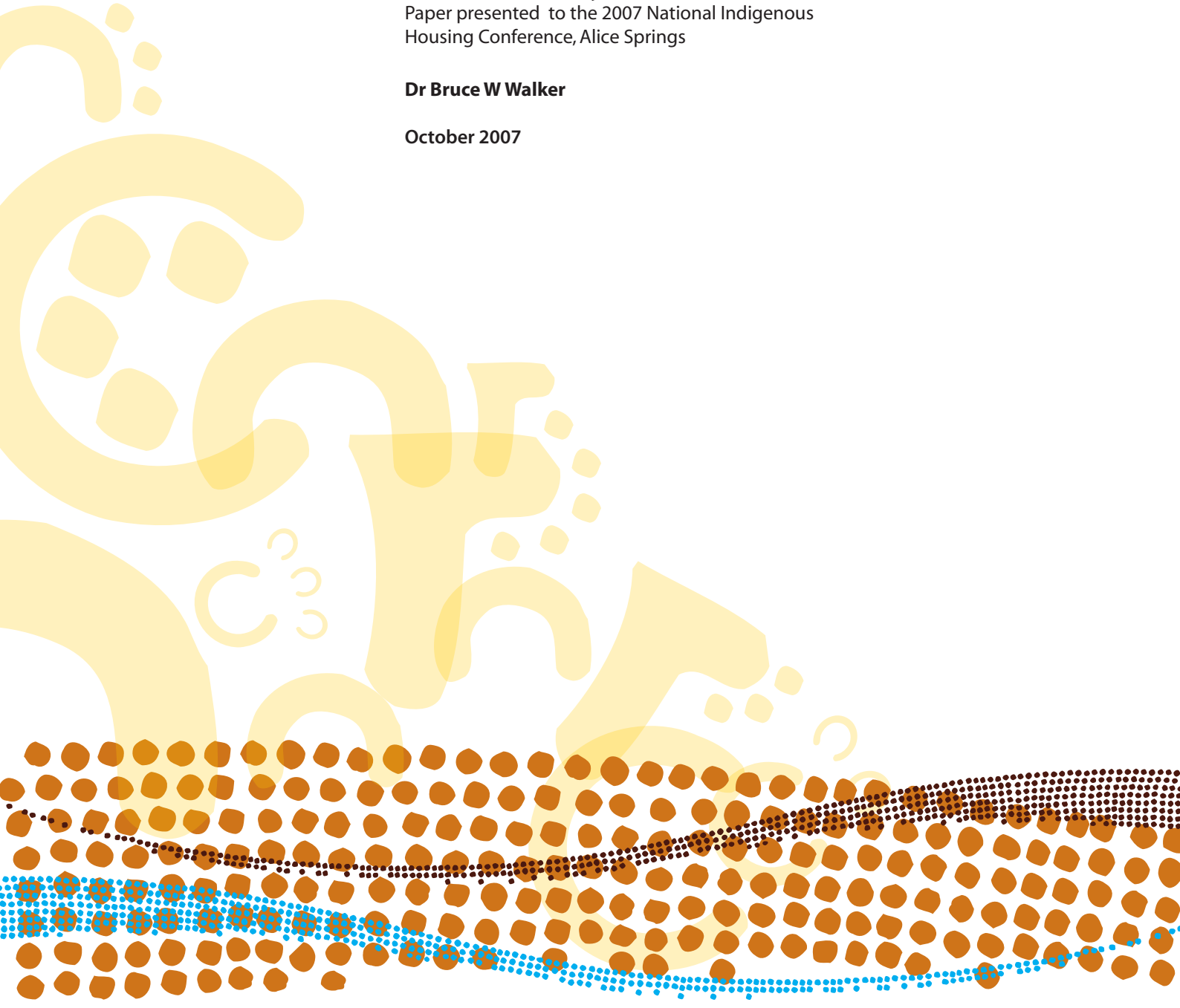
Centre for Appropriate Technology Paper

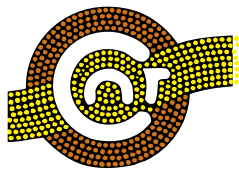
Tomorrow is Today

Paper presented to the 2007 National Indigenous
Housing Conference, Alice Springs

Dr Bruce W Walker

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Centre for Appropriate Technology

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TOMORROW IS TODAY

Paper presented to the 2007 National Indigenous Housing Conference
Which Way – Directions in Indigenous Housing

Alice Springs 26-27 October 2007

Dr Bruce W Walker

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Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow

From a very early age notions and values of house are embedded in our minds. Think of the nursery rhymes that helped shape your world view as a child.

One of my earliest learnings concerned the structure and fabric of housing. At that early age I just knew that the pig in the stone house would prevail over the wolf.

Overcrowding was an issue for the old woman who lived in a shoe, she had so many children she did not know what to do. In a shocking revelation of child abuse, the rhyme went on to say 'she whipped them all soundly and sent them to bed'.

When Baby Bear cried "Who has been sleeping in my bed?" I immediately became aware of a shortage of bedrooms.

And the description of the complexity and context of the house and its place in society was well established when mother goose described the things that took place around 'The House that Jack Built'.

My ongoing concerns about the quality of construction is based on the poem, "There was a crooked man who... *inter alia* ...built a crooked house." There is nothing new in a dodgy builder.

Non Indigenous people associate with notions of house from a very early age and these notions shape our choices. But how do Indigenous people acquire their sense of house? What are the processes, values and expectations embedded in their early life that allow them to appreciate and make choices about houses?

And while we are considering choices, the modern day fairy tale hero Harry Potter reminds us that:

"it is our choices that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities."

The title of this conference – “Which Way” - is very apt because we stand at a cross road.

Ultimately the choice of - which way - depends on perceptions of what the problem is or more correctly what the options are. Indigenous housing may be viewed through many prisms depending on your place within the housing system.

From my perspective it has never been clear whether initiatives in Indigenous affairs are developmental in nature or intended to merely eliminate disadvantage. This has always led to confusion in relation to Indigenous housing.

- Is it public housing or private housing?
- Is it a house or a home?
- Is it about access to services and security of goods?
- Is it merely about overcrowding, to be reduced by increasing the number of bedrooms?
- Is it about Australian-ness and equity of access to housing?
- Is it about providing remote Australia with a stable construction industry base?
- Is it the largest training and employment opportunity in a community?

Unfortunately it is about all of these and more. These are complex choices.

Over the years housing choice has been driven by a prevailing philosophy like assimilation or health or self determination etc.

Today’s mantra is normalisation, although this is a worrying term that will hopefully have a very short life. It is difficult to know what might be regarded as normal in remote Australia where the very nature of the location is defined by extremes and significant variability and unpredictability across a range of measures.

This session asks:

Are we building for today or tomorrow?

I am not sure we are faced with a choice about today or tomorrow, as I suspect this is an artificial dichotomy, but we do need to live today as if there is a tomorrow. To the extent that we reap what we sow, then tomorrow is today.

Yesterday

Two important and relevant reports have recently summarised the bulk of learned experience over the past 20 years or so.

In March 2006 the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs commissioned a study of **Alternative Housing Systems for Indigenous People in Remote Communities**.

The report documented essential lessons from the history of Indigenous housing provision and argues that a focus on 'housing systems' for housing provision is necessary because many high cost factors and inadequacies in housing provision can be found or caused by matters beyond the mere construction of a physical dwelling.

It concludes alternative systems and designs for housing should be adequate (in terms of health and safety outcomes); appropriate to the context (physically, culturally and socially) and affordable (cost effective) in order to support the wellbeing of Indigenous people and communities.

It cautions, however, that at the same time as seeking to minimise the capital costs of housing provision, it is also important to maintain minimum standards for design, particularly in the area of health and safety.

The second is the AHURI position paper¹, "**Flexible guidelines for the design of remote Indigenous Community Housing**." This paper summarises concepts and design principles to supplement the focus on safety, health, quality control and sustainability in the *National Indigenous Housing Guide*².

It goes on to analyse the range of factors that have impacted upon Indigenous housing policy and design in remote areas in recent times.

The paper notes that, to date, there is little evidence of life-cycle analysis and whole-of-life costing being integrated into the design system for remote Indigenous housing.

Their review of past activity reveals three distinct approaches to design practice

The "Cultural Design" approach - based on the belief that the study of Aboriginal behaviour underpins any understanding of Aboriginal housing needs.

The 'Environmental Health' approach - based upon the need to address the problematic environmental health impacts typically associated with poorly designed and constructed Indigenous housing and associated issues of overcrowding and poor sanitation.

¹ Fien, J., Charlesworth, E., Lee, G., Morris, D., Baker, D., and Grice, T. **Flexible guidelines for the design of Remote Indigenous Community Housing**, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, RMIT-NATSEM Research Centre, June 2007, AHURI Positioning Paper No. 98

² Department of Family and Community Services (2003) *National Indigenous Housing Guide*, 2nd edition, Department of Family and Community Services, Canberra.

The 'Housing as Process' approach - extends on Cultural Design to also take account of a community's capacities in housing management and views determining an appropriate design process for Indigenous clients as part of a larger cyclical process from consultation to housing delivery.

Today

Regional Capacity in the Australian desert

I would like to switch from this national review of yesterday to a focus on today in one specific region, desert Australia.

The region of desert Australia

The environments of outback Australia are characterised by climatic, temporal and social features which are highly variable and unpredictable and demand explicit attention in design, management and policy³.

Aboriginal settlements in this region of Australia experience an extreme economic context, arising from a lack of economic opportunities in remote settings, the small size of settlements and large distances between them, the lack of human and institutional capital, and the high level of mobility between and within settlements.⁴

The recent development of the Desert knowledge movement attempts to understand how these unique characteristics or syndromes play out across the desert region economy.

Views of Construction Industry in Desert Australia

In acknowledging the work undertaken nationally on alternative housing systems and flexible design guidelines, two reports on the desert region suggest the real housing challenge is reliant on regional capacity among private sector contractors and the technical capacity of local and regional communities.

A recent study conducted by CAT sought the views of the construction industry, predominantly in Central Australia, about their perceptions and practices of dealing with planning, costing, logistics and risks, and comparisons of building technologies used in community housing. In particular, the study set out to explore the regional drivers of the cost of remote Indigenous housing.

³ Stafford Smith, M. 2003. Living in the Australian environment. Pages 9-20 in L. Botterill and M. Fisher, editors. Beyond Drought in Australia: People, Policy and Perspectives. CSIRO Publishing, Melbourne.

⁴ Taylor, J. 2002. The Spatial Context of Indigenous Service Delivery. Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

Of the 96 currently registered builders in Alice Springs⁵ only 8 or 9 are working in remote communities regularly. The yearly average number of Indigenous houses delivered to remote communities in Central Australia has been around 22-25 for the last few years.

In the face of a requirement for 3300 houses across the NT and at least a trebling of funds available, this is a striking capacity shortfall.

Current and planned construction activity in the Northern Territory exceeds the available workforce and will continue to place upward pressure on wage costs. Further, the construction of new houses is not keeping up with the deterioration of the housing stock.

This combined with the ad hoc nature of housing renovation and repair works, makes it an even less attractive market for builders working in the remote central Australian communities.

Anecdotally many builders left the Indigenous housing field because they got 'badly burnt', having been locked into unrealistically low prices. An Alice Springs builder reported their bush work has decreased by 30-40% over recent years. *"The biggest issue is that trade skills are increasingly poor, there are quality issues not because they want to cut corners but because they are unable to do it well; most work is done by unskilled labour with minimum trade supervision". "People do not want to work in remote sites, and they do not have to as there is too much work in town"* (builder)

In their response to the recent focus on transportable structures, the industry view was that for remote Indigenous housing, the cost, durability and ease of repair of prefabricated versus on-site construction are untested over the long term.

In relation to using community labour, considering the present levels of community capacity and the pressure to deliver large numbers of housing quickly and at lower cost, Industry members questioned whether housing construction programs are the best vehicle to fulfil this function.

Human and Social Capital in Desert Australia

The second report⁶ from the National Centre for Vocational and Educational Research (NCVER) highlights the state of Indigenous human and social capital in the desert.

⁵ <http://www.ipe.nt.gov.au/whatwedo/building/processBean.jsp> (accessed 21 March 2007).

⁶ Young, M., Guenther, J., and Boyle, A. (2007). 'Growing the Desert: Effective educational pathways for remote Indigenous peoples.' (National Centre for Vocational Education Research and Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre: Adelaide, Alice Springs.)

There is a renewed enthusiasm to attach employment and training opportunity to new capital. This drive persists despite numerous reviews over the years finding this was not a successful way of achieving better long term training and employment outcomes. A 1998 evaluation of the NAHS projects found substantial training/employment was generated. 35,000 days, but this did not translate into sustained jobs nor a skills base for maintenance and management of housing. It failed to provide a pathway into regional economic activity.

So what of the human capital necessary to cope with this renewed emphasis on employment outcomes linked to housing investment? At a time when people are being urged by a carrot and stick approach to access greater mainstream opportunity we find ABS figures pointing to a drop off in participation in training and a mis-match between peoples skill base and educational attainment and the opportunities that are around.

Participation in vocational education and training across the desert has experienced a downward trend since 2002 and in 2005 the labour force participation of Indigenous people in the NT fell by 16%. Nationally the number of remote indigenous people not in the workforce has doubled since 2002.

In addition to the downward participation trend in training there has been a progressive demoralisation and dismembering of a number of community based indigenous organisations that in the past have provided support for community based housing operations.

In terms of building for tomorrow we need to consider how one might need a skilled consumer and a vital community sector to deliver employment and mentoring support as people engage with the new welfare reform and work opportunities.

Without a serious alignment of incentives the private sector will not respond in a way that will impact on the numbers of people we will be seeking to employ nor will the market opportunities develop in the timeframe that has been set.

Similarly the policy shift from community housing today to public housing tomorrow will challenge existing regional capacities. It is also questionable whether the public housing sector is equipped to deal with the specific issues raised in the Indigenous housing sector.

What do we know today?

1. Unmet housing need in remote Indigenous settlements is compounded by generally short lifecycles of housing, and growing community populations.

2. The rate of Indigenous homelessness is by far the highest in the Northern Territory⁷.
3. Approximately a quarter of Indigenous community houses in the Territory needed either major repair or replacement (CHINS 2001).
4. An average of 5 people lived in each permanent dwelling in 2006.
5. In December 2006 the need in the NT was a staggering 11,610 new bedrooms⁸.
6. According to NT government estimates at December 2006, \$1,292,588,889 is necessary for the elimination of current housing shortage in remote communities⁹.
7. At CAT we know over the years we have responded to demand and funding constraints by trialling cluster housing, self built housing, houses made of new innovative materials, prefabricated service infrastructure, housing maintenance with community training and labour input, simple outstation roof structures that shelter from the sun and rain. Technology is a means to an end but not the end itself.
8. Remote housing prices increased dramatically over the last ten years.¹⁰
9. It is remarkable how the cost of practically identical scope of work has more than doubled in the last 3 years from an average \$182,000 to \$335,000.
10. We know from the work of FHBH what works and what doesn't work and where to focus to ensure improved quality of house design, supervision of construction and the benefits of ongoing maintenance in key healthy living areas.
11. We know that today we are driven by cost, coverage, speed of construction, bedrooms, bedrooms, bedrooms, the logistics of delivery and the crisis intervention to remove or eliminate deficits that have been established through normative processes.

⁷ Census 2001; SAAP Client Collection, 1996 & 2001; Census of Homeless School Students, 1994 & 2001.

⁸ Based on 1.8 standard Australian occupancy rate.

⁹ Information obtained from the DLGHS in March 2007; NTG calculations are based on \$100,000 per bedroom average cost.

¹⁰ <http://notes.nt.gov.au/Tender.nsf/Main?OpenForm&Awarded> (accessed 12 April 2007).

In summary, Industry is drastically under capacity at a time when better paying projects pull people away leaving new and inexperienced players to produce hundreds of houses in difficult and risky conditions. Indigenous people are least prepared at this moment to take advantage of this recent increase in attention and funding to housing.

Unfortunately this is not a fairy tale with a magic ending, but it does shape the values and nature of the response required for tomorrow. It also calls into question the context in which the new Indigenous Housing agenda is framed.

Thoughts for Tomorrow

What do we know about tomorrow?

If we were building for tomorrow we would no doubt be concerned about capacity, sustainability, training, development and maintenance, security of income and management systems to support infrastructure and livelihoods and importantly models of investment that lead to a better tomorrow.

What don't we know about tomorrow?

- How will people respond to the welfare reform agenda and the workplace tests post CDEP. Will demand for housing fluctuate as people move chasing temporary employment opportunity and move again when skills and capacities don't align with the local labour market?
- How will people negotiate the barriers and pressures that are related to this increased mobility?
- Given community housing was organised around cultural groupings, the shift away could be problematic. Public housing models do not have a strong track record of targeting culturally and linguistically diverse groups. How will a public housing model cope with regional dynamism of mobility, unstable tenancies and the increased need for supported tenancy arrangements?

The recent announcement of increased funding for Indigenous housing in the NT provides the basis for a significant investment in response to the housing shortage faced by Indigenous people. If we want this investment to count, then knowing where people will choose to live, to earn the money that they will need to own and maintain their home, is critical information.

Assuming we got the design right and that there was sufficient money to construct and maintain housing stock, the two significant limiting constraints remain with the capacity of industry and the users of the end product.

The challenge – Which Way – in my mind is to position housing in a regional development context and make investment decisions around the capacity of the industry to deliver and the capacity of the users to manage and sustain the service they obtain through the house. This should be the most important decision that a government could take to secure their future investment in the health, education and safety of Indigenous people.

In addition to understanding the pattern of settlement across outback Australia this task will entail finding alternative procurement models that match the broader regional development policy framework. It will also be driven by the choices consumers take, rather than plans remote governments make.

It will require a shift from a primary focus on normalising services and minimising disadvantage to a process that is principally driven by investment potential in a regional economy.

Bedrooms built in the wrong place won't reflect well on today's policy.

In summary, in the past we have allowed design and technology of house to dominate what I have argued is increasingly an issue of regional capacity.

I believe we are entering a new phase of our experience where the dominant drivers will not be culture, health, technology, or cost. All will be necessary but not sufficient. But choosing a location where you can have the economic freedom to pursue livelihood options that allow you to live well in your house will be the significant driver of choice. I hasten to caution against any assumption that this equates with urban drift.

To date Indigenous housing has seen:

- The cultural design approach
- The environmental health approach
- The housing as process approach

We are now entering an era where investment in livelihood opportunity will be the main driver of Indigenous housing design and supply.

The house will increasingly be an investment in livelihood. This will necessarily bring an increased focus on settlements and regional development. It will no doubt also reflect the desire of a great number of Indigenous people to invest in social capital and social assets and may result in counter-intuitive outcomes.

To invest in tomorrow we need to know how the total regional system works including the influence of the externalities across a region.

- We need institutions to broker and manage human capital with new forms of engagement and a reformed community sector.
- We need indigenous entrepreneurs of social capital to manage and exploit opportunity and drive the dialogue on cultural change and collective reform.
- We need new investment modalities that are inclusive of regionally resilient responses.
- And finally we need a range of new policy frameworks that enable people to make the adjustments and trade offs that contribute to an affordable and viable livelihood wherever they choose to pursue it.

These are the drivers of tomorrows Indigenous housing agenda.

We might have the political will and some technical ability to deliver change in Indigenous housing, but do we have the breadth of understanding to choose housing options that creatively invest in sustainable livelihood opportunities for indigenous people?

These are the decisions for today, for a better tomorrow.