

**Paper presented by Craig McVee and Margaret Robertson to the  
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## **The Kodja Place: One Story Many Voices**

**Craig McVee (1), Margaret Robertson (2), and Penny Young (3)**

### **Introduction**

*(Presented by Craig McVee, Chairperson of the Kojonup Aboriginal Corporation)*

I come from a place called Kojonup, a small rural town in the south-west of WA. The name is made up of two words, being 'kodja' – the traditional stone axe - and 'up' meaning 'place of'. So 'Kojonup' means place of the stone of the kodja. It's spelt 'kodja' but pronounced 'koitch'.

We've given the name Kodja Place to our new cultural interpretation and tourism complex in Kojonup. The overall budget for the Kodja Place project was about 2 million dollars, with about \$400,000 of this allocated to the interpretive centre component. In 1998 we applied to the Centenary of Federation for our first grant and in September last year we officially opened.

Kodja Place contains a cultural interpretive centre, a visitor centre, and a rose maze. The rose maze also features extensive cultural interpretation of three women and their stories of survival and life experiences since Federation. The fictional women are Yoondi - Noongar, Elizabeth - English, and Maria - Italian.

Kodja Place is the story of the creation and development of Kojonup, and the achievements of the different cultures. It highlights the fact that different cultures of people have worked side by side to develop Kojonup. The displays also relate back to some of the hard times, like the Reserve days and the government policies that affected Noongar people, the local Aboriginal people.

The opening of Kodja Place has highlighted the existence of the different cultures in Kojonup and provided a place where they can all be together. But even in Kodja Place there is still a limit to the sharing – there may always be limits because of the different ways the cultures see things. There are things Noongars know that we may never share. However, Kodja Place is making steps towards building greater understanding.

The significance of Kodja Place is that in a lot of rural country towns you see Aboriginal people and in some you don't, but there is always an Aboriginal link to each specific town. However, you hear very little of the positive outcomes of local Aboriginal people. A lot of what is portrayed about Aboriginal people comes from the media and tends to focus on the negative. Kodja Place has now given local Noongar people the opportunity to shout "Hey! We're here and

we're willing to tell our story, history, traditions and achievements along side and integrating with that of the Wadjela community (non-Indigenous). The Noongar people are extremely happy with the displays, although it was very difficult to highlight in a photographic sense our actual involvement in the early days of farm and other employment.

Kojonup has a mix of Noongar, Italian, Maori and Wadjela people, as well as farmers and townies. Kodja Place has created a very unique reconciliation process by the fact that people from different cultural backgrounds were given the chance to sit down and talk about various components of proposed displays. Without realising, this in itself was a first step in reconciliation.

## **Process**

*(The following section of this paper was presented by Margaret Robertson)*

The process we followed to create the interpretive centre evolved during the project, but we were always working to a philosophy of community involvement and local skill development, and a commitment to excellent design. There were 4 key aspects to the process.

### ***Relationship-building***

The first involved relationship-building between Noongars and Wadjelas, so we could develop the project together. It meant a four year long period of talking, in gatherings, in the bush, on video shoots, in the Kodja Place kitchen, in homes, and at the footie. It wasn't easy to build sufficient trust for Noongar community members to want to contribute stories, and for a long time we weren't sure if we would succeed. We had to accept that it 'takes as long as it takes', which meant being flexible and open to change. For instance, just three months prior to Opening Day some of the most important material in the exhibition was handed to us – government files on a local Noongar Elder's father and grandfather.

### ***Community driven***

The second important aspect to the process is how we chose to put locals in the driving seat by adopting community-led curating and locally-driven project management. Adopting this approach enabled us to work within our community in a collaborative way, with ready access to local information and people. We built a team of volunteers and matched skills and interests to the tasks required. Concept development, research, materials collection, construction and various components of material production were handled locally, largely by volunteers, in concert with the Perth-based designer.

We adopted strong protocols regarding use of people's quotes and photos, to strengthen trust.

The key was developing, and sticking to a strong conceptual framework for displays, with clearly identified messages and themes. Working from a previously commissioned conceptual framework, we spent a year discussing and exploring different approaches and themes about Kojonup – what life here is like for different groups, what's special about it and the place. We looked for

sub-themes that displayed the common ground of our different cultural groups, or that illustrated important points of difference. The display messages then guided the teams of volunteers bringing in the raw display material.

### ***Partnerships***

Our third crucial move was to partner with professional designers, Phil Gresley & Nick Walker from Arbor Vitae. We developed a strong working relationship with the designers. Phil took on a mentoring role in the design process. He helped to synthesise display briefs and content into a framework that worked well for visitors, and allowed for ongoing local involvement through readily changeable media.

The key issue for us was finding ways to involve our large team in the design process without compromising the design. This was achieved by committing to clearly identified decision-making stages. The design briefs were community-written, and turned into concept plans by the designers. They were then agreed to by the Noongar community and the team of volunteers, with the designers then trusted to develop the final products.

We had two concept plans working in parallel – the display plan from the professional designers and a similar but more detailed curating plan drawn from our messages, and collected material, to guide collecting and curating. Penny's role as the key design liaison point was to develop the plan, sheepdog the teams ideas towards the concepts and, after group curating, prepare design briefs for each of the 20 displays.

Another critical tool during the graphic design stage was to implement a local curatorial group which signed off on the content of the graphic material to be designed and produced externally. These tools and processes were a way of managing local decision-making about design and content, while preserving the design integrity and sanity of the designer.

### ***Local skill development***

Engaging in local skill development was the fourth key aspect of our process. A key goal was to enhance our use of new media and technology across the project. It also involved discovering the surprising depth of talent in our community. A local farmer soon became the multi-media guru, one of his many qualities.

We worked hard to develop the new skills and technical self-sufficiency that we needed to both develop and continually renew the exhibition. This meant drawing on outside skills and ideas, and taking on new challenges, including video production, interviewing, web-page development, photo editing and databasing.

These became different story collecting methods for the volunteers, with newly 'graduated' video producers and practiced interviewers collecting material across the display categories.

Because we came at the collecting task in a multitude of ways, it strengthened our ability to present many stories in a variety of different media.

Our intensive interpretive centre focus is heading towards its third birthday. Twice we pushed the Shire Council to extend the opening date because the project team recognised the process was as important as the finished result. And further to that, part of the ethos of the project has been that it is never finished - we want it to grow and evolve so that it will continue to reflect present-day Kojonup, including the changing people and landscape that are always redefining the place.

### **Why we did what we did**

The character of the exhibition, and the processes outlined above, also grew from the goals of the people involved and the issues we had to grapple with as a team.

### ***Reconciliation***

Reconciliation was the most complex and difficult aspect of the creative process. A primary goal was to achieve displays that the Noongar community would be happy with.

All three of us believe in the power of the interpretive centre as a form of communication that helps drive social change. It's exciting to create a material "thing" – an exhibition - that moves the process of reconciliation forward.

Fairly early in the process it was planned to have the Noongar story sitting parallel with the Wadjela story – side by side historical interpretations using common themes.

But, as one Noongar woman said "We all shop at the Co-op", which is a way of saying we'd be going backward if we didn't present a combined storyline. As a consequence, the interpretive centre became an integrated approach of "**one story - many voices**".

### ***Modern and inclusive***

Amongst the volunteers there were people with a strong belief in the importance of local history. There was also recognition of the need to re-jig the identity that Kojonup projects, to make it modern and inclusive - Kojonup as "we" see it now.

Penny asked "How do you create an interpretive centre that can be easily updated and kept relevant, so that people new to the community can see a place for their story in the story of Kojonup."

One of our responses was to take a different perspective on everything. The messages became 'This is what we do, this is who we are', and what had happened - the historical perspectives - became the context for understanding this present-day viewpoint. For example, instead of a message being "How people changed the landscape and developed the farms", it became "This is

how we are engaged in ongoing landscape change and farm development". We are part of the ongoing story of Kojonup, and the visitor is experiencing the "here and now" in this exhibition, with the context provided by the historical perspectives also on display.

Our contemporary viewpoint also stemmed from local Noongar people not wanting to be portrayed as traditional people, in the sense of the original hunting and gathering lifestyle. Local Noongar people still have very strong traditions, but wanted to convey their lives as contemporary members of the community – "Our kitchens are like your kitchens. And we've helped to develop Kojonup".

So we had to break away from Wadjela expectations and historical and cultural clichés. A Noongar Elder told us that he didn't know about what happened back then – meaning long ago. He wanted us to pretty much stick to the things in his lifetime.

It seems better this way - the Noongar guides at Kodja Place can be themselves and talk about their life and experiences. And it means all of the current community can be included – to make the displays dynamic and inclusive.

Each cultural group, each person in Kojonup, has different experiences and knowledge, but we share in the place "Kojonup". Creating the exhibition as a united story gave us reason to start tapping this knowledge and hearing each other's stories. To see the learning and greater understanding across the cultures was one of the deepest rewards of the work – there were many profound and delightful surprises.

What we've banked on working for the visitor is the way each of the stories and anecdotes link together across the display themes to create a rich, fun and poignant experience of life in Kojonup.

### ***Personal stories***

We worked hard to find a way of curating the displays that would not threaten the Noongar tradition of respecting cultural knowledge. There were two aspects to this – realising that Noongar knowledge and traditions are not a public resource to be used by Wadjelas, and the fact that Noongar people don't speak for others in their community, just for themselves. It took time just to understand this tradition.

So we took a display approach that seemed to suit both the Noongar and Wadjela way of sharing culture in contemporary Kojonup: told from the present-day point of view and as individuals' stories, rather than a detached "expert" view. Some of the local Noongar people said they didn't trust history written by Wadjela and there is at least one significant part of local history where Noongar and Wadjela interpretations of events are at odds. So instead, we interviewed a wide range of community members and used personal quotes in the displays to convey many perspectives on Kojonup. Perhaps it's the richness that comes from this approach that gives the exhibition its specialness.

There are other rationales for the personal stories approach. Noongar people wanted the exhibition to “tell it the way it was”. But some things were too painful or embarrassing to talk about publicly and we needed a way to respect that. For example, some Noongar people felt embarrassed about the way they had lived on the Reserve, and the Wadjela felt embarrassed that the Noongars had been forced into that position. By using personal stories, people could choose what they wanted to say.

The material we had access to touches on deep-felt emotions and experiences of Kojonup people and families and was to be displayed in that same community – there was no detachment or remoteness from the material and the people involved and the Kodja Place.

The displays include an arrest warrant for Craig’s grandparents and their six children, including his Mother. It’s dated 1947. They were to be forcibly moved to Carrolup Native Settlement, in the north-east corner of the Kojonup Shire.

The displays are also about celebrating our daily lives and include graphic photos of home butchering, complete with the wry observation from Mrs Dorothy Bignell that:

*“No-one was that keen on liver.”*

We also wanted to communicate some of the changes in attitude. This, from farmer Mr Dick Mathwin, is a favourite among visitors:

*“Bloody hell, I spent the first 40 years of my working life knocking down trees and now you want me to plant them again.”*

Personal stories were a way of showing what’s common or shared across the cultures, like a love of sport, and some of the struggles that have taken place in cross-cultural relations, such as the recollection of a local Noongar footballer, Mr Nick (Crow) Dyson, that:

*“We were always stuck in the back bar, that’s the way things were in those days. But after a match one night in ’73, the coach called Stephen Michael and me into the front bar and said to the publican “these are two of the best in the League. This is just not on - these blokes are going to drink in the front bar with all the rest of us”. And that was the end of it. After that we all drank together.”*

## **Conclusion**

It’s hard to say what would have happened if we hadn’t chosen to manage the project locally. If the project had been managed externally by professionals it would surely have been a very different display. By working within the community we have presented stories that really give the essence of Kojonup. It was certainly easier for us to know how far we could take things with the local community in terms of humour, confronting material and the weird – the

blowflies embedded in the kitchen laminex and the floor lights highlighting the sheep poo. We were able to keep the doors open to new input until very late in the production process. And just by being local we were able to listen and observe our own community continuously over a relatively long period of time, gaining access to people, information and situations that would have been hard for external consultants to achieve. It also allowed us to develop a flexible thematic framework that evolved with the collection, and is still being applied through the layers of stories being added to our card files, multi-media displays and website.

One of our foremost goals in developing the exhibition was to make it work as a visitor experience. It was also an effort to embrace or effect some social change. By drawing together the diverse experiences and life of people in the community we may have actually articulated a new identity for Kojonup - a small rural district – one that is more inclusive and yet tries to acknowledge and celebrate the differences that you find in any multi-cultural community.

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(1) **Craig McVee** - Chairperson of the Kojonup Aboriginal Corporation, local artist, and founding member of The Kodja Place complex project steering committee and the curatorial group for the interpretive centre. His leadership role in the project has involved helping to formulate display concepts, and providing Noongar advice and feedback on content and design issues throughout the implementation of the project.

(2) **Margaret Robertson** - grew up on a farm at Kojonup, where her family still live, and went to the local primary school, with Craig, before living out of the community for 23 years. Margaret was invited back to project manage the development of the Kodja Place interpretive centre. Her role revolved around community participation and liaison with the Noongar and Wadjela communities, as well as managing implementation of content and design plans with a large team of volunteers. Her environmental oral history studies and team-building and community experience provided relevant skills for developing the exhibition.

(3) **Penny Young** - an artist/designer living in Kojonup and a member of the Kodja Place team. She has been able to develop a fresh interpretation of history in a culturally inclusive manner, working for over two and half years to develop the exhibition concepts and liaise between the design company and the local community. She has a particular interest in developing the multi-media capacity of displays to allow for local input; as a means of layering information; and as a guide for collecting material - photos, stories, video footage - that can be interpreted on the web.