

KODJA PLACE OPENING CEREMONY, 29TH SEPTEMBER 2002
Background information presented by Robert Sexton
Chairperson of The Kodja Place Advisory Committee

The genesis of the idea of the Kodja Place sprang from a desire of this community to create something of lasting importance to mark the turning of the century and the Centenary of Federation.

The Council of the day were discussing requests from the Kojonup Tourist Association for new premises, at the same time the Kojonup Historical Society were looking for a permanent place to display equipment, simultaneously the CEO presented a report to the Council that a regional rose garden be established.

Subsequently the Council was successful in receiving a major Centenary of Federation grant, the project was underway, the year was 1998.

The major components of the grant were to comprise an Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Centre, Historical Interpretive Centre and a Regional Rose Garden. These themes have been developed by a great many people in conjunction with an advisory committee that reported to the Shire Council.

The way forward was not always smooth, we have many different ideas that needed to be accommodated, we have many different personalities that sometimes strike fire from one another, however, we have a strong culture of dialogue and respect for one another's point of view that has overcome any obstacles in our path.

The importance of the project was always well understood and the determination to see the project completed embodying all the aspirations of the proponents was always present. Though many long, sometimes tiresome, meetings were held with many different players in the project, the intent was never in question, that intent was to build something of lasting importance that would help carry us into the future.

The vision of the advising committee and the Council to commit to reconciliation with the Noongar community has never wavered, the determination that the Kojonup Aboriginal Corporation be a partner in this project has been a major step forward for our peoples, and a triumph for advancement without subjugation.

The input of the Noongar people to the design of this building was simple but profound "there are no straight lines in nature, could this building not have the straight lines of convention". The outcome has been quite unique, not only have the architects of this building designed us a structure that fits the feeling exactly, it fitted exactly the feeling that a new approach to the way we engage with one another be made. It is a demonstration that the people guiding this project were determined to be all inclusive of ideas.

The building is in the shape of the Kodja, the name given to the stone axe by the Aboriginal inhabitants and from which Kojonup takes its name, (place of the stone axe), it is fitting that this precinct be called the Kodja Place.

The blade end of the axe, the heavy part with the cutting edge, is where we show our achievements, and it is where we will work at our art and culture. Like all cutting edges it will need to be renewed from time to time, like the Aboriginals of the past we will need to flake off the old dull edge and expose the new edge, the new edge of ideas will give confidence and energy to the holder of the axe.

The Kodj Gallery represents the haft or handle of the axe; this is the strong flexible part that transmits the power to the head. We will tell our story here, it will be our collective story of past times, and it is our history, our strong and resilient history. The storylines of the three pioneer women cross here; their strength and resilience reside here.

The foyer, the entrance, the tourist area is where the axe is grasped, the people collecting at this point will provide the energy to power the hand that holds the Kodja.

The rose maze, a major part of this Kodja Place, is part of the genesis of this idea to create something unique and lasting, a place of restful beauty, a place of exploration and wonderment, it will achieve all of these things. The rose maze was intended to show what could be achieved as a community - it has met all those goals in very good measure indeed. The maze will take on its own identity as times passes, it will develop as all gardens do, be renewed and invigorated by new people with new ideas and technologies. As intended, it will provide a place of solace, beauty and wonderment, well past the allotted time span of its creators.

This Kodja Place, this symbolic stone axe, will help cut our way to the future. In the past the Kodja was used by the Aboriginal inhabitants of this place to assist in providing nourishment for their community. This new Kodja can serve the same purpose; this Kodja Place can assist us in providing food to nourish the cultural soul of Kojonup.

This Kodja place will provide for us what was intended at the genesis, that is a new direction, a unique place of beauty, learning and enjoyment.

For us in Kojonup we cannot overstate the fact that the major change in direction for us in Kojonup was the decision taken by the Noongar Community to tell their history alongside the history of the Europeans. This has meant that we will tell our history as it was, with equal input. This new direction will ensure that the Noongars can live their lives in the modern community with the confidence that their position as original inhabitants is acknowledged and their heritage retained. By definition it means that the whole community, who are mostly European descendants, are strengthened by the inclusion. We will, in the future, be in a far better position to deal with whatever challenges that we may encounter.

The major part of the complex and its surrounds were completed about a year ago. Since then a veritable army of volunteers, helpers, staff and paid professionals have worked constantly to bring us to the point that you will see on the 29th September 2002.

The rose maze is quite unique in its construction and content. As the name suggests the whole area is in the form of a maze with the paths drawing the visitor through the gardens so as to enjoy the beauty and follow the storylines of the pioneering women.

The uniqueness of this garden is that the two thousand five hundred roses that make up the complete garden are all Australian bred. This type of garden and its content will not be found anywhere else in Australia. The design of the maze, the 750 metres of paths and 14 pergolas and the 2000 roses which comprise the entire maze were put in place entirely with local labour, given freely and generously. It will stand in perpetuity as their gift to the community.

Again, it is not possible to overstate the effort that has been made by so many to ensure that a high standard of excellence by maintained whilst still making the deadlines.

At our opening ceremony a greeting will be given by three women, who are, respectively, descendants of the Noongar, British and Italian peoples. These women represent themselves and their ancestors who played such a big part in our development. It is significant that they will make their greeting together on the same platform. The story lines of these women recur throughout the building and its precincts, crossing and converging as our history is told.

The Italian community in Kojonup has played a significant role in the development of this district. The recognition of this fact is in their participation in the opening ceremony.
