

Plan for new Indigenous cultural precinct in Canberra unveiled by Morrison government

Proposed centre, to be called Ngurra, will be built on the shores of Lake Burley Griffin and include a national resting place for ancestral remains



The minister for Indigenous Australians Ken Wyatt says the new Ngurra cultural centre in Canberra will facilitate 'significant acts of truth-telling'.

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The federal government has pledged \$316.5m for a new Indigenous cultural precinct in Canberra that would include a long-awaited national resting place for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ancestral remains.

The proposed centre, to be called Ngurra, which means home, country or place of belonging in different Aboriginal languages, will incorporate a learning and knowledge centre and the relocated Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (Aiatsis).

It will be built on the shores of Lake Burley Griffin on Ngunnawal country in Canberra within the parliamentary triangle that includes other prominent national institutions.

The prime minister, Scott Morrison, said the centre would become a “place of national pride and significance” and hailed its proposed location as demonstrating the “importance and reverence this institution should hold”.

“Ngurra is the realisation of a long-held desire to have a home for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories at the heart of our nation,” Morrison said.

“It will be a national landmark of the highest order, standing proudly for us all to celebrate, educate, reflect and commemorate.”

A national resting place for ancestral remains was formally recommended to government in 2014 when an advisory committee for Indigenous repatriation completed the national resting place consultation report.

Two parliamentary committees have since endorsed the recommendation.

The project, which underwent a \$4.7m business case process after the May budget, would be built “fully in accordance” with the proposal developed by Aiatsis.

The Aiatsis chief executive, Craig Ritchie, said he was “super excited” the project was going ahead and he hoped work could begin by the end of the year.

He said the aspiration of the precinct was to shift the story of Indigenous Australia away from a focus on disadvantage to one that highlighted the “richness of our cultures, the sophistication of our world views and its relationship to country and place”.

“There is a deeply ingrained way of thinking about Indigenous Australia that is defined by disadvantage, and that challenge is real, but it is not who we are,” Ritchie told Guardian Australia.

“We wanted the opportunity to do more than just recite grievances, but really showcase the brilliance of First Nations cultures in a way ... that all Australians have access to.”

Morrison said the centre would give Australians and international visitors “a deeper appreciation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ diversity and cultures, and the richness this offers our country”.

“This new world-class facility will contribute to our continuing journey of reconciliation, where Indigenous Australians can tell their stories, in the way they want, for all visitors to have a greater understanding of our shared history,” the prime minister said.

The minister for Indigenous Australians, Ken Wyatt, said the new learning and engagement centre – and the exhibitions, research and curation that would occur at Ngurra – would result in “significant acts of truth-telling”.

“At its heart will be a national resting place where the remains of Indigenous Australians taken from their country will be cared for until they are able to be returned to their communities,” Wyatt said.

“In instances where provenance has been forgotten or erased, they will be cared for in perpetuity with dignity and respect.”

The relocation of Aiatsis, which has spearheaded the project, will also make accessible the world's largest collection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural and heritage items.

“Ngurra will provide a new perspective on our shared history, as a significant moment for truth-telling, and a new place where the diversity of Indigenous Australia and one of the world's oldest living cultures will be celebrated,” the minister said.

The earmarked site is on Commonwealth Place on the primary axis in the parliamentary triangle – between Old Parliament House and the Australian War Memorial.

An architectural design competition will be held to find an “iconic design” that “reflects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ aspirations, achievements and deep connection to country”.