



Ancient Culture, *new design*

TEXT RACHAEL BERNSTONE | PORTRAIT DAVID WHEELER

A desire to share Indigenous heritage with a new generation saw the emergence of Balarinji, a design agency that collaborates on projects across Australia.

If you’ve seen the Qantas jumbo jets painted with Aboriginal art – there have been five of them flying international skies over the past 25 years – you’ve come into contact with the work of Balarinji, a multi-disciplinary, Aboriginal-owned design agency based in Sydney. You may not realise, though, that the studio also works with architects and designers and is moving into the residential sector, as a way of telling important stories about Australia’s past and present.

Founded in 1983 by life and work partners John and Ros Moriarty, Balarinji was named for the skin name of their two sons, and it emerged from a desire to celebrate the Indigenous stories and heritage of their three children.

John Moriarty was born in the remote community of Borroloola in the Northern Territory in 1938, but was removed from his community under the government’s assimilationist policies of the Stolen Generations when he was four years old. He was taken first to a children’s home in Mulgoa at the base of the Blue Mountains of New South Wales, then to St Francis Boys Home in Adelaide, South Australia.

John reconnected with his mother as a teenager in a chance meeting in Alice Springs, only to be immediately separated again. He was finally able to be reunited with his family in Borroloola when he was 30. When the couple's first child was born in Melbourne, John sketched turtles and Ros screen-printed them onto bedroom textiles. Friends asked to buy them, leading to the founding of Balarinji.

That was 36 years ago – John is now 81 – and the business has forged many strong and trusted relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people throughout Australia, thanks to its commitment to authentic engagement with people, culture, art, stories, and identity.

Today, the studio employs 15 people and its output spans public art and curatorial; urban regeneration and infrastructure; and branding campaigns and digital projects. In 2012, the couple also established the Moriarty Foundation, which provides early years programs for very young Aboriginal children and a football (soccer) program for six-to-16 year old boys and girls.

Speaking at #collectiveagency, the Institute of Architects' national conference in June 2019, non-Indigenous Ros Moriarty outlined the company's ethos "to deepen understanding of Aboriginal Australia for major projects nationally". In the case of buildings and public spaces, she hopes that local Indigenous stories will be incorporated into all new projects. "At Balarinji, we've gone beyond engagement and consultation, to really collaborating deeply with the Aboriginal community," she says. "These stories are foundational – and fundamental – to our identity, to who we are as Australians."

At the conference she asked: "Who in this room – or who in architectural practice – is going to create Australia's very first major public building expressing an Aboriginal sensibility, displaying us to the nation and the world, in terms of our foundational narrative?"

Balarinji is making some headway in this regard, having completed public art and interpretation for the Jezzine Barracks project in Townsville in 2014 with Place Design Group.



OPENER | (L-R) BALARINJI WAS FOUNDED BY ROS MORIARTY (MD) AND HER HUSBAND JOHN MORIARTY (CHAIRMAN). THEIR THREE CHILDREN HAVE ALL WORKED IN THE STUDIO AT VARIOUS TIMES AND SON TIM MORIARTY IS BALARINJI'S PROJECTS CREATIVE DIRECTOR. ABOVE & OPPOSITE | JENNY MULCAHY'S RETURN TO COUNTRY SCULPTURE (ABOVE) AND THE BROLGA SCULPTURE (OPPOSITE) BY JEREMY GEORGE AND RURIK HENRY ARE PART OF THE JEZZINE BARRACKS PROJECT IN TOWNSVILLE, QUEENSLAND.



Ros sees opportunities for Balarinji to influence the development of new housing, initially through multi-residential projects in collaboration with architects.

ABOVE | THE NEW ENTRY TO SYDNEY'S REDFERN STATION ON THE CORNER OF GIBBONS AND LAWSON STREETS FEATURES ABORIGINAL ART AND DESIGN THAT REFLECTS THE LOCAL COMMUNITY AND ITS ABORIGINAL NARRATIVES. OPPOSITE | THE QANTAS DREAMLINER EMILY KAME KNGWARREYE WAS THE FIFTH AIRCRAFT IN THE BALARINJI-QANTAS FLYING ART SERIES. IT WAS INSPIRED BY THE LATE ARTIST'S 1991 PAINTING YAM DREAMING.



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Current projects include the Redfern Station Upgrade in Sydney (with Sydney Trains and Jacobs), the Sydney Metro West projects (with WSP and AECOM), and the M12 motorway (with RMS and Arcadis).

In partnership with Woods Bagot, Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners, and Western Sydney University, Balarinji was shortlisted for the new Western Sydney Airport; a project that was recently awarded to Zaha Hadid Architecture and Cox Architecture.

As well as large infrastructure projects, Ros sees opportunities for Balarinji to influence the development of new housing, initially through multi-residential projects in collaboration with architects. “That’s the easiest first step, so we are linking with architecture practices that are in a position to engage in new types of conceptual thinking,” she says. “This is not just about Indigenous history and visual imagery, but the whole idea of Aboriginal society and culture and wellbeing: the importance of family, the principles around living close to Country, these can all be interpreted in housing design.”

A central premise of co-design, she explains, is that the local Aboriginal community must speak for each place, which can range in size and complexity from city blocks to precincts; highway corridors to stretches of coastline.

“That can be complex and we rely on our wide networks and deep history,” she says. “Because Balarinji has been operating for 36 years, we have a reputation for engaging with integrity, and we can seek out and activate that voice from local people.”

Balarinji’s multi-disciplinary approach helps smooth the way; the firm interfaces with interior designers, architects and landscape architects, and has historians, art directors, graphic designers and project managers on staff.

ABOVE | THE QANTAS EMILY KAME KNGWARREYE DREAMLINER PICTURED ARRIVING IN ALICE SPRINGS FOR THE FIRST TIME. THE ARTIST WAS A SENIOR MEMBER OF THE ANMATYERRE CLAN, A CEREMONIAL LEADER AND A CUSTODIAN OF DREAMING SITES IN ALHALKERE.



“We encourage architects and designers to explore the unique ways of thinking that exist here.”

They bring together local Indigenous artists, storytellers, poets, performers and others on projects. The studio pays market rates for Aboriginal engagement to honour the value of their Intellectual Property, before brainstorming ideas about stories and working out how they might be represented, in an iterative process.

Ros cautions against only seeking out Dreaming stories, or past-tense tales. “Often these stories are very contemporary – stories of resistance and survival – so we look at new frames of creativity that architects can explore,” she says. “Also, Aboriginal people generally have a different world view to non-Indigenous people – they are less materially bound, they have a different philosophy that revolves around people and Country and the cosmos – and with the right process, design professionals can tap into these cultural connections.”

Co-design offers exciting opportunities for design professionals who might have typically looked to the USA and Europe for inspiration, she says. “We encourage architects and designers to explore the unique ways of thinking that exist here, and to explore how they can enrich their practice within a ‘ground-up’ and very Australian context.”

“This approach is no less global or sophisticated than those other alternatives, but there is a uniqueness in starting to describe our foundational story,” she adds. “And the design community is well-placed to be the catalyst to unlocking that, with the right pathways and a respectful approach.”



Balarinji | balarinji.com.au