

URBAN PRACTICES PAPER 4: cultural impact assessment



“Plan for services & retail outlets as sources of culturally relevant products & foods.”

AUTHOR: Richard Brecknock, MA, MPIA

2024

Introduction: This Discussion Paper addresses the issue that while cultural awareness competencies are critical skills in the ability to Plan and Design Culturally it is also essential to accept that all planning and design decisions can have either positive or negative impact on individuals or the wider community, therefore it is important to consider the process of Cultural Impact Assessment (CIA).

Cultural Impact Assessment

The term “cultural impact” refers to the consequences to human populations of any public or private policies and actions that significantly change their norms, values, beliefs, practices, institutions as well as the way they live, work, socialize and organize themselves as part of their cultural life. (Sagnia, B. 2004:5)

In the article, *Framework for Cultural Impact Assessment* (2004) for the International Network for Cultural Diversity’s Working Group on CIA, Burama K. Sagnia offered a definition of CIA and suggested that it is:

... a process of evaluating the likely impacts of a proposed development on the way of life of a particular group or community of people, with full involvement of this group or community of people and possibly undertaken by this group or community of people. A CIA will address the impacts, both beneficial and adverse, of a proposed development that may affect, for example, the values, belief systems, customary laws, language(s), customs, economy, relationships with the local environment and particular species, social organization and traditions of the affected community. (Sagnia 2004:9)

The term “Socio-Cultural” appears in social impacts discourse and references a broadening of the typical notion of social agendas and can, in the absence of a Cultural Impact Assessment, provide a useful addition to general SIA assessment processes. However, as Dessein, Joost. et al, suggest:

Until now the cultural aspects of sustainable development have mainly been discussed or elaborated as a part of the social pillar of sustainable development, or else combined with social sustainability (socio-cultural sustainability). In the former case cultural issues are solely considered as part of the social

Planning Culturally: A resource for Urban Planners & Designers

dimension; in the latter there is recognition that culture is different from social but the difficulty of separating them in practice or existing policy means that they are kept linked. (Dessein Joost, et al. 2016:24)

Writing in 2014 Paul James reminds us that: *Culture is a fundamental domain of social life. However, there are currently no developed guidelines for assessing the cultural impact, sustainability or vibrancy of cultural development. While well-established economic and environmental impact assessments exist, in the domain of culture there are no more than a series of beginnings in the fields of heritage and indigenous studies. (James 2014:3)*

The notion of including culture only as a domain of SIA raises the question: is this sufficient? Sagnia proposes that for Cultural Impacts Assessment to be successful:

A separate set of principles and guidelines that could provide common standards for addressing the cultural concerns of communities in a broad-based, holistic and participatory manner is what is required. (Sagnia, B. 2004:5)

Sagnia also suggests that: *On the basis of an examination of the cultural and socio-cultural impact assessment carried by certain agencies in selected countries, we are able to provide a tentative list of cultural variables under the following three general headings:*

1 – Cultural Life.

2 – Cultural Institutions and Organizations; and

3 – Cultural Resources and Infrastructure

The 2014 Agenda 21 article *Assessing cultural sustainability* by Paul James, proposes that Culture is the foundation rather than just another social domain. James goes on to suggest that in the current framing of Cultural Impact Assessments: (<https://www.agenda21culture.net/documents/paul-james>)

The cultural is defined as a social domain that emphasizes the practices, discourses, and material expressions, which, over time, express the continuities and discontinuities of social meaning of a life held-in-common. In other words, culture is 'how and why we do things around here.' The 'how' is how we practice materially, the 'why' emphasizes the meanings, the 'we' refers to the specificity of a life held-in-common, and 'around here' specifies the spatial, and also by implication the temporal particularity of culture. (James, P. 2014:5)

James proposes a framework for assessment and action with seven subdomains of culture, these being: 1. *Identity and Engagement*; 2. *Creativity and Recreation*; 3. *Memory and Projection*; 4. *Beliefs and Ideas*; 5. *Gender and Generations*; 6. *Enquiry and Learning*; 7. *Wellbeing and Health*

He also outlines a template model based on the *Circles of Social Life* as a practice framework and suggests that:

The Circles of Social Life approach offers an integrated method for practically responding to complex issues of sustainability, resilience, adaptation, liveability and vibrancy. The approach, which includes Circles of Sustainability, takes an urban area, city, community or organization through the difficult process of responding to complex or seemingly intractable problems and challenges. Circles of Social

Planning Culturally: A resource for Urban Planners & Designers

Life treats all complex problems as necessarily affecting all domains of social life— economics, ecology, politics, and culture. (James, P. 2014:14)

The Circles of Social Life model includes the following seven phases: Commit: Engage: Assess: Define: Implement: Measure: and Communicate.

Cultural Impact Assessment Models

It seems clear from research that Cultural Impact Assessment is generally an under-developed and poorly conducted field of enquiry and lacking in workable implementation models. This, I suggest, is a major problem given that, particularly First Nations people, and multi-cultural groups, adverse changes to the places they value and have significance to them may have considerable impact on their ways of life.

The literature since early 2000 would suggest there is an increasing acknowledgement of the need for dedicated CIAs. Moving beyond the “Social-Cultural” structure, the Mackenzie Valley Review board in Canada found, there is value in having a dedicated CIA rather than simply imbedding cultural issues in an overarching SIA with its already wide range of assessment categories.

Interestingly, the research has found that Countries where CIA is more of an accepted practice include Aotearoa – New Zealand (Jolly and Rinfret 2022), where there is evidence of numerous CIA studies considering development options through a Maori lens to meet the CIA statutory obligations under the Resource Management Act and Canada where Aboriginal culture has also been identified as an important CIA consideration. Jane Munday in her (2020) *Guide to Social Impact Assessment* has a core focus on her work reviewing large resource and infrastructure projects on Aboriginal land and the impacts on the cultural life of Australia’s First Nations People in the Northern Territory. While providing a useful guide to developing and applying SIA Munday also advocates for the need to undertake CIA studies. She provides the following definition:

Cultural impact assessment is a dedicated approach to defining how projects impact on both traditional and living cultures. Cultural impacts may include reduced capacity to pass on culture. They include impacts on commonly held values such as respect for elders, oral history, spiritual practices, language, values associated with the land and intergenerational relationship patterns, practices, knowledge and skills. (Munday, J. 2020:46)

As with a wide range of other current impact assessment models, Munday’s guide is based on cultural considerations being integrated into a SIA process. Currently within the built-environment professions the focus has been on the application of EIA and SIA policies and processes, for example the Planning Institute of Australia (PIA) position statement and the NSW and QLD government SIA guidelines.

Munday’s writing is focused on the development environment in the Northern Territory and therefore she addresses issues effecting Aboriginal cultural life and association to Country. Munday argues for the need to develop what she calls “Culturally Competent Systems” that she suggests is a system that has:

... the skills, knowledge and respect for other cultures. Barriers to cultural competence can be organisational (the degree to which leadership and the workforce reflect the composition of the population), institutional leadership (including diversity) and structural (bureaucratic processes, use of interpreters and communication).

Munday goes on to argue that a culturally competent system would include:

- *a mandate for cultural impact assessment, which considers a broader set of values and impacts than are covered in mainstream scientific studies.*
- *alternative governance structures that give Aboriginal people real input to decision-making.*
- *intercultural capacity, or the skills, knowledge and aptitude to incorporate Aboriginal knowledge systems, shared decision-making and co-managed natural resource management.*

Potential Cultural Impacts in the Built Environment

It is reasonable to assume that every urban development intervention in the built environment will have an impact on the community's cultural life. It is also important to remember that cultural differences influence perception by creating lived experiences that teach certain beliefs, values, behaviours, and communication styles. These differences influence the way that people view the world around them and therefore perceive potential impacts.

These impacts, both positive and negative, may be small incremental effects or major life changing effects. Therefore, it is critical that the planning and design teams involved undertake some form of impact assessment both during the project inception stage and during the various planning and designing stages to ascertain potential impacts. These assessments might be, as the NSW technical supplement identified, not just potential '*Physically observable impacts*' but also '*Rational or justifiable fears*' on the part of the community (2023).

Potential Negative Cultural Impacts

Negative social impacts may include but are not limited to:

- Land use changes that might negatively affect community character and people's sense of place, especially a sense of cultural loss for First Nations people etc.
- A reduction in the sense of place through the destruction of existing character in built form and replacement with new buildings and public spaces that lack local relevance etc.
- The loss of culturally specific services and retail outlets such as cultural precincts and or speciality sources of culturally relevant services and foods such as Halal or Kosha butchers etc.
- The loss of local cultural facilities such as community art centres and places of worship etc.
- Reduced access to public open space for group gatherings, community festivals, events etc.
- The loss of local tangible heritage through the destruction of First Nations sites, heritage buildings, monuments, public art etc.

Potential Positive Cultural Impacts

Identifying the positive Cultural impacts of proposed development are also important. This includes the assessment of the positive cultural consequences of change (e.g., improved sense of place and cultural expression resulting from increased public space). It is important to assess positive impacts impartially and not to overstate or understate them. Positive cultural impacts may include but not limited to:

- Developing a stronger sense of place and community cohesion through community investment in cultural infrastructure and public places.

Planning Culturally: A resource for Urban Planners & Designers

- Supporting community cultural development initiatives, capacity building and stronger community cultural institutions.
- Support for services and retail outlets as sources of culturally relevant products and foods.
- Providing improved access to and preservation of places of cultural significance and built heritage.
- Creating opportunities for the integration of cultural expression that reflect the diversity of community culture and creativity through the visual arts and design symbolism in the built environment.
- Assisting community members and visitors to decode local cultural symbolism and build awareness of community values, behaviours, and ways of life.

It is important to remember that impacts may be experienced positively by some and negatively by others and therefore we must consider how the identified impacts are distributed differently between different social groups, and each group's capacity to respond to these. This includes impacts on First Nations communities, with consideration of livelihood and wellbeing of those communities as well as traditional cultural impacts. It is important during the research and consultation phase of an assessment process to remember that; *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have different ways of making decisions and different community structures, and it is important for planning processes to take account of these cultural differences.* (Wensing 2011:13)

Depending on the project, it may be necessary to consider and assess reasonable and justified fears and concerns held by the community in relation to any of the above categories.

A CIA Framework for Urban Planning & Design

There is no question that changes, minor or major, will occur in the cultural life, institutions, resources and infrastructure of human populations and local communities because of urban development projects. Therefore, highlighting the need for Cultural Impact Assessment analysis at the early stage of a projects implementation to identify all those likely to be affected by a development. While there may be varying impacts for almost all affected by a proposed policy or action, the assessment has a special duty to identify those whose adverse impacts might need the greatest attention.

Cultural impact assessment works best as a planning tool to make sure a community is ready for development and that the proposed development fits into the community and region without creating adverse impacts or significant public concerns. (Mackenzie Valley Review Board, 2009)

Several of the sources researched, including the PIA, have proposed that Social/Cultural Impact Assessments should only be undertaken by trained Specialists using appropriate professional methods, to provide the best results. In the case of Cultural Impacts these specialists might include practitioners such as anthropologists, archaeologists, ethnographers, cultural geographers, social and cultural planners. This level of specialist involvement will realistically only happen on major urban master planning projects. Particularly in relation to land use planning, re-zoning, metropolitan master-planning, transport planning etc.

As quoted earlier James suggests that: *We need a self-evaluation tool for cities.* At a practical project by project level, there is also a need for a cultural impacts tool that can be used by planning and design professionals to undertake a practice level assessment of possible project impacts at an early stage of planning and designing, ideally during the stakeholder consultation phase. For example, the City of Hume in Victoria has the option for an initial assessment by the professional team in the form of a *Social Assessment Comment* (SAC). Therefore,

I am proposing the need for a Cultural Impact Toolkit with both full CIA Guidelines and a project specific self-evaluation tool such as what I have termed a *Cultural Impact Evaluation* (CIE) Guidelines. I envision the CIE as a more robust assessment process than that proposed for a SAC. These varying levels of assessment are aimed at assisting built-environment professionals in evaluating the potential / perceived negative and / or positive impacts of their planning & design proposals.

Cultural Impact Assessment (CIA) Guidelines

An alternative to the IAIA set of cultural domains this CIA could be structured around the following Domains:

- **Cultural Practices:** Relating to individual and community beliefs/values, behaviours/ways of life etc.
- **Cultural Expression:** Relating to the look and feel of a place through the community's use of art, design, and cultural symbols etc.
- **Cultural Heritage:** Relating to both tangible heritage such as architecture/landscape and keeping places, and intangible heritage such as stories, sacred/spiritual places etc.

Some projects may have impacts in all these categories, but others may only have a few. For example, an influx of new migrants may affect both 'ways of life' and 'community'. Neatly categorising impacts is not as important as identifying and assessing them. The categories simply provide prompts to consider possible additional cultural impacts.

For example, consider how benefits and impacts are distributed differently between different community groups, and each group's capacity to respond to these. Built environment professionals involved in projects requiring in depth consultation with First Nations people can gain guidelines on interaction with communities via the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research (2020) and Australian Housing & Urban Research Institute (AHURI) have developed *Ethical Principles And Guidelines For Indigenous Research* as part of their National Housing Research program.

Depending on the project, it may be necessary to consider and assess reasonable and justified fears and concerns held by the community in relation to any of the above categories.

Possible Cultural Impact Evaluation (CIE) Guidelines

For a practice-based evaluation of possible cultural impacts there is an argument that a simplified process would encourage the application of the guidelines during project planning and design.

For example, rather than the IAIA's "Six Steps" I think that for a practical practitioner format, this could be further refined down to the following "Three Steps." These being: an initial gaining of an 'awareness' of potential cultural issues, followed by an 'analysis' process to identify aspects of the proposal that might impact on cultural aspects, and finally develop planning and design options for 'actions' that might avoid, limit, or minimise the perceived impacts.

It is also important to acknowledge that planning projects are often at a local government level and may be either a municipal, suburb or local area level, in each case planners and clients need to assess the scope of each of the proposed three steps in the following CIE model.

A possible model for this application is provided by Alba Colombo (2015) from the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Barcelona when she explores models to assess cultural impacts of events. Key to Colombo's model, which she calls *Cultural Impact Perceptions* (CIP), is that it proposes to assess the cultural impacts based on the 'perceptions' of residents; and validating the existence, or not, of cultural impacts on 'perceptions' through the eyes of the host society. Colombo makes the point that:

it must be highlighted that CIP proposes a methodology based on the perceptions of individuals from a host society, and therefore the results are based on subjective and personal perceptions. Thus individual perceptions is the most appropriate indicator by which to measure cultural impacts, since these impacts, due to their specific characteristics, are more subjective than other impacts such as the economic ones. (2015:15)

Building on the concepts of *Social Assessment Comment* (SAC) and Colombo's *Cultural Impact Perceptions* (CIP) proposal I believe that the concept of *Cultural Impact Evaluation* (CIE) is applicable to the built-environment and especially individual projects with identifiable host societies from which to gather impact evaluations.

Colombo's evaluation model is structured around community and practitioners' perceptions of impacts, as opposed to detailed research evidence, on the key questions of impacts on the '*Preservation or Loss of Cultural Tradition's*' and the '*Construction or Loss Cultural Identity*'.

The following Cultural Impact Evaluation (CIE) model is based on the recognition that a manageable impact assessment process could be based on three broad functions:

1. To identify local cultural issues and potential impacts relevant to aspects of the communities' cultural ways of life.
2. Assessing those impacts, in terms of their magnitude, duration, and the probability of their occurrence; and
3. Recommending measures that will reduce negative impacts and enhance positive impacts of planning/design proposal.

Therefore, the following model is structured around a 3 Step process.

1. Awareness: Consult with local community members to identify the existing state of the community's Cultural Domains in the local built environment context
2. Analysis: Consult with local community to identify Perceived impacts on the community's Cultural Practices, Expression, Heritage, and local built environment.
3. Actions: Identify appropriate Impact Management strategies to address the identified impacts

In relation to 'Actions' CIEs need to be practical and include a range of strategies and actions, such as variations to the proposed plans and or designs which can mitigate against any negative consequences and maximise the opportunities and benefits. Importantly, CIEs also need to provide clarity about the responsibility for cost of implementing these strategies and actions.

The following potential CIE model is an attempt at a set of guidelines suitable for urban planning and design which draws on both (CIP) and (SAC) approach.

Planning Culturally: A resource for Urban Planners & Designers

Ideally actions 2 and 3 should be undertaken at the early planning stages to influence the development of plans and designs and then again during community consultation and client review of draft proposals to provide the opportunity to demonstrate that the identified Management options have achieved the anticipated impact minimisation sought.

PROPOSED OPTION: A three step CIE process.

CULTURAL IMPACT EVALUATION (CIE) – 3 STEP MODEL	
STEPS	EVALUATION PROCESS
STEP 1: AWARENESS	Consult with local community members to identify the existing state of the community's Cultural Domains in the local built environment context.
STEP 2: ANALYSIS	Consult with local community to identify Perceived impacts on the community's Cultural Practices, Expression, Heritage, and local built environment.
STEP 3: ACTIONS	Identify appropriate Impact Management strategies to address the identified impacts

Conclusions:

In summary, there are three assessment options of relevance to Cultural Impact Assessment for urban planning processes, these are:

1. SIA with heightened cultural criteria.

This option can be based on established and successful models with enhanced focus on questions relating to community cultural ways of life, sense of place and belonging. Especially in relation to First Nations and multi-cultural perspectives.

2. CIA high level format for use by professional cultural impact assessors.

This option would be specifically focused on potential impacts on the community's cultural life from major urban development proposals. A CIA might be undertaken in parallel with a traditional SIA.

3. CIE as a tool for individual planners / designers and urban development project teams.

This option is intended to be a practical model suitable for urban practitioners to undertake and impact evaluation on smaller scale projects that cannot justify the time and cost of a full CIA.

References:

- AHURI (2023) *NHRP Funding Round 2023 Ethical Principles And Guidelines For Indigenous Research*.
- AIATSIS (2020) *Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research*.
- COLOMBO, A. (2015) *How to Evaluate Cultural Impacts of Events? A Model and Methodology Proposal*, Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism, Finland.
- DEPARTMENT OF STATE DEVELOPMENT (2018) *Social Impact Assessment Guidance*, Queensland Government, Brisbane, Aust.
- DESSEIN, J. et al. (2015) *Culture in , for and as Sustainable Development: conclusions from the COST action IS1007 investigating cultural sustainability*. University of Jyväskylä, Finland.
- JAMES, P. (2014b) *Assessing cultural sustainability*, United Cities and Local Governments.
- MACKENZIE VALLEY REVIEW BOARD (2009) *Cultural Impact Assessment Guidelines Development Process – 2008-2010*, Yellowknife, Canada.
- MUNDAY, J. (2020) *Guide to Social Impact Assessment*. True North Strategic Communication, Darwin, Aust.
- PIA (2010) *Social Impact Assessment Position Statement*.
- RINFRET, P. et al. (2022) *Practising impact assessment: a content analysis of 20 Cultural Impact Assessment reports in Aotearoa New Zealand*, AlterNative, Vol. 18(1)
- SAGNIA, B. (2004) *Framework for Cultural Impact Assessment*, International Network for Cultural Diversity.
- VANCLAY, F. (2015) *Guidance for assessing and managing the social impacts of projects*, IAIA Guidance Note.
- WENSING, E. (2011) *Improving Planners' Understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and Reforming Planning Education in Australia*. Paper Presented in Track 12 (Planning Education and Planning Practice) at the 3rd World Planning Schools Congress, Perth (WA), 4-8 July 2011.

Author's Note:

This Discussion Paper is not an academic paper and has not been peer reviewed. It expresses the considered professional opinions of the author, based on professional consulting experience and research including both industry and academic literature. Every effort has been made to correctly cite referenced literature and ensure that any direct quotes are used in an appropriate context.