



WILYA JANTA

RIGHT WAY HOUSING GUIDELINES

A new model for remote housing

This document has been prepared by Wilya Janta with assistance from OFFICE. July 2025

These guidelines have been developed by Warumungu Elders with input from other First Nations Elders in other remote communities. They are not supposed to be prescriptive, they are not supposed to be a rule that is to be applied to all communities. They are written to help show how one community would like to see future homes designed and built. All First Nations communities have different culture, climate and housing needs that might differ to these guidelines. We see this as a live document and welcome feedback from other remote Aboriginal communities.

Wilya Janta is an innovative Aboriginal not-for-profit cultural consultancy that promotes community agency in the design and construction of culturally and environmentally appropriate homes that allow First Nations communities to thrive. Wilya Janta recognises that Warumungu people retain deep knowledge of thriving in the Tanami Desert, and represents a truly bi-culturally innovative collaboration between Elders, architects and construction partners to demonstrate affordable, scalable sustainable housing models.

OFFICE is a not-for-profit multidisciplinary design and research practice based in Melbourne. Their projects span the intersections of built form, research, discourse and education. As a registered charity, the studio's operations, processes and outputs are bound by a constitution to make projects for the public good.

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AHNT) Aboriginal Corporation is the community-controlled peak body for Aboriginal housing in the Northern Territory.

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NATSIHA is the first and only national leadership body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community-Controlled Housing in Australia.

**"A [WELL-DESIGNED] HOUSE,
IT'S LIKE A MOTHER.
SHE FEED YOU,
SHE GIVE YOU A CLEAN HOME,
SHE GIVE YOU SOMEWHERE TO
STAY, SLEEP, LIFE. IT'S A MOTHER.
IT IS LIKE MOTHER EARTH,
THAT GOOD HOUSE.
YOU GOTTA LOOK AFTER IT.
YOU DON'T LOOK AFTER IT,
IT WON'T LOOK AFTER YOU.
IT'S THE SAME THING."**

- Waramungu Elder

For too long, Aboriginal people have not had enough of a say in how their houses are designed, built and work. There are big problems with remote housing. When houses aren't right they don't get respected. Aboriginal people deserve to have homes that are well considered for the families who will live in them. Homes that are built with real community input will be houses that people are proud of, that are safe, homes that families feel connected with and will want to look after.



PURPOSE OF THESE GUIDELINES

This document is here to make sure that Aboriginal families and communities have a strong voice in how houses are designed, built, and lived in. They are a practical tool to guide decision-making from the very beginning, so that new homes reflect the way people actually live, rest, gather, and care for each other.

These guidelines will help communities work with funding and industry partners so the community are; in the driving seat and can shape the design, understand and contribute to the process, make sure houses are built by the right people and in the right way, and speak up about what works and what doesn't. That way, every house can be better than the last, and we stop repeating the same mistakes. They are also about putting culture, joy, and identity at the centre of homes that allow families to thrive.

These guidelines recognise that houses aren't just buildings—they're places of safety, strength, and story. They must support family structures, cultural practices, and climate realities. A good house should keep you healthy, yes, but it should also keep you connected, comfortable, and proud. These guidelines help make that possible. And importantly, they help government, builders and communities work better together. With a clear, shared set of expectations, everyone, from funders to families, can move forward on common ground. That means more trust, more accountability, and better outcomes. When we get it right together, the homes are stronger and so are the relationships behind them.

Who are the guidelines for?

These guidelines are for everyone involved in funding, designing, building, maintaining, and living in remote Aboriginal housing. They are for community members - Elders, families, young people - who want to make sure new homes reflect the want to and what matters most to them. They are for Aboriginal Housing Organisations and Aboriginal Design Experts, who work to bring cultural knowledge into housing conversations. They are also for government, funders, architects, engineers, builders, and service providers. People who want to get things right, who want to work respectfully and walk alongside community. These guidelines help create common language, clear roles, and strong partnerships, so that better homes can be built, and better outcomes achieved, together.

Application of the guidelines

These guidelines are made to guide every step of the housing journey—from planning and design, to construction, handover and evaluation. They're not just a checklist, but a shared agreement between community and funders about how to work together and what matters most.

In practice, this means involving community early and often, being open about budgets and timelines, and ensuring local Aboriginal Designers are engaged, from the communities the houses are being built in, to help bridge cultural and technical needs. Designs must reflect local knowledge of Country, climate, family life and law.

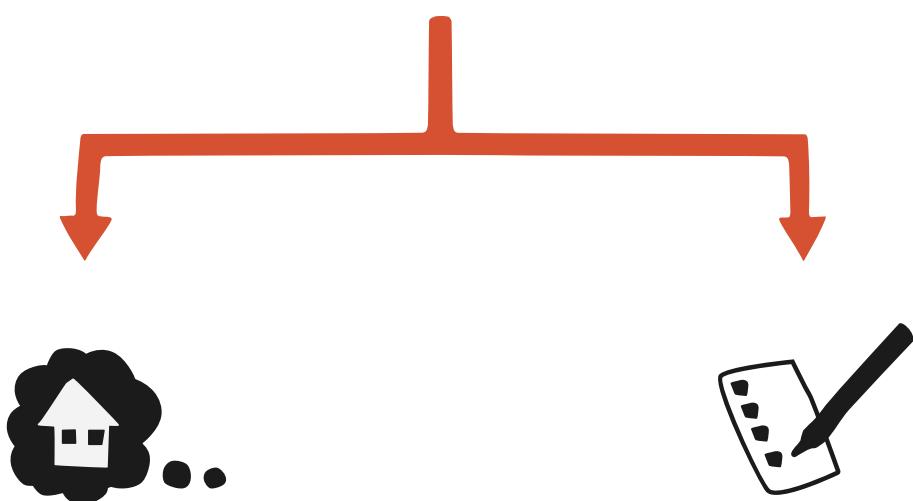
In spirit, it means sticking to what was agreed. No shortcuts. If things change, return to community to agree on a way forward. Homes should reflect the people who live in them—now and into the future. And everyone involved; community, builders, and funders, must hold each other accountable, with respect.

RIGHT WAY HOUSING GUIDELINES

DESIGN PRINCIPLES:

- 1. COMMUNITY LED**
- 2. CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE**
- 3. DESIGN FOR ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE**
- 4. DESIGN FOR HEALTH**
- 5. BUILD THE RIGHT WAY**
- 6. DESIGNED TO BE MAINTAINED**
- 7. ONGOING EVALUATION AND LEARNING**

DESIGN PRINCIPLES



THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

(Design Considerations)

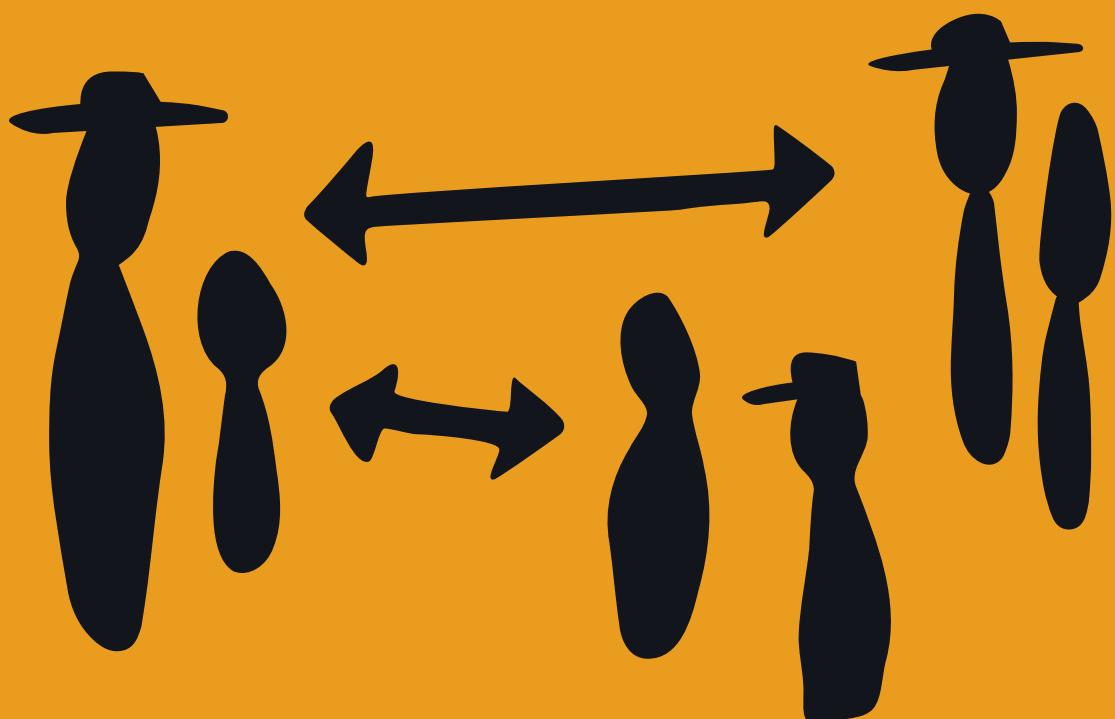
MUST HAVES

(Design Requirements)

1. COMMUNITY LED

“Listen, we’ve got to do it by the right guidelines, but the government are not thinking about our [Warumungu] guidelines. We need our own guidelines so we’ve got answers to the whitefella guidelines.”

- Waramungu Elder



Aboriginal housing must be community led. The community needs to be genuinely involved in every stage from the design and construction through to ongoing maintenance. This requires approaches that allow time and resources for community engagement, and where possible, the identification of local construction materials, skills and ongoing local maintenance of housing.

A community led process strengthens local capacity and provides meaningful work to support more rapid and cost-effective construction, maintenance, and repair practices. Community led approaches allow Aboriginal ways of doing good governance at the local level, where good outcomes in housing, health, education, economic development and environmental management are inter-related and dependent on doing good governance properly and respectfully with the right people.



THINGS TO THINK ABOUT AND DO

- It's the communities' homes, they are the boss. Ask yourself, *Am I talking with the right people who can speak for this country? Have I checked with Elders to make sure the right people are involved?*
- Each community decides the parameters of consultation. Pay close attention to and respect local governance and agreement-making practices. Allow time and space for negotiations to be discussed by landowners and caretaker individuals and groups. Ask if you're unsure.
- At the very beginning of planning for new homes in a community, sit down with the broader community, as well as the families who might live in these new homes
- Design to the communities' strengths
- How does the design and construction of the homes increase community capacity during and after construction is complete?



MUST HAVES AND DO'S

- Through the course of a project there must be consultation with the community multiple times on Country. Community sign-off must be sought at the end of each planning and design phase (community masterplan, concept, design development, tender)
- Negotiations can't be rushed and must go both ways, until everyone shaping the project is clear in what is being delivered. Don't be shy to use interpreters
- The 'money story' must be clear and upfront. Local Aboriginal Housing organisations will work with community members to assist in understanding 'money story' constraints and compromises
- Independent monitoring by an Aboriginal housing organisation to ensure a consultation plan and its delivery meets communities' requirements

2. CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE

“You can’t be sleeping in the same house with your mother-in-law or your son-in-law, or your daughter-in-law - walking around, bumping into each other. In the one kitchen, in one toilet. That’s just the way we live culturally, you know? And we can’t be walking on top of each other. You know, I wouldn’t walk into my mother-in-law’s house. No, cause there’s law for me.

You need to have a fireplace all the time to your house. Keep that spirit away you’ve got that fire burning. You’ve got no fire, you have Jungilyingi hanging around your house all the time. Spirit always be there. Anyway, when we get a lot of east wind from Tennant [Creek], so maybe have that house suited for catching that wind with that fireplace.”

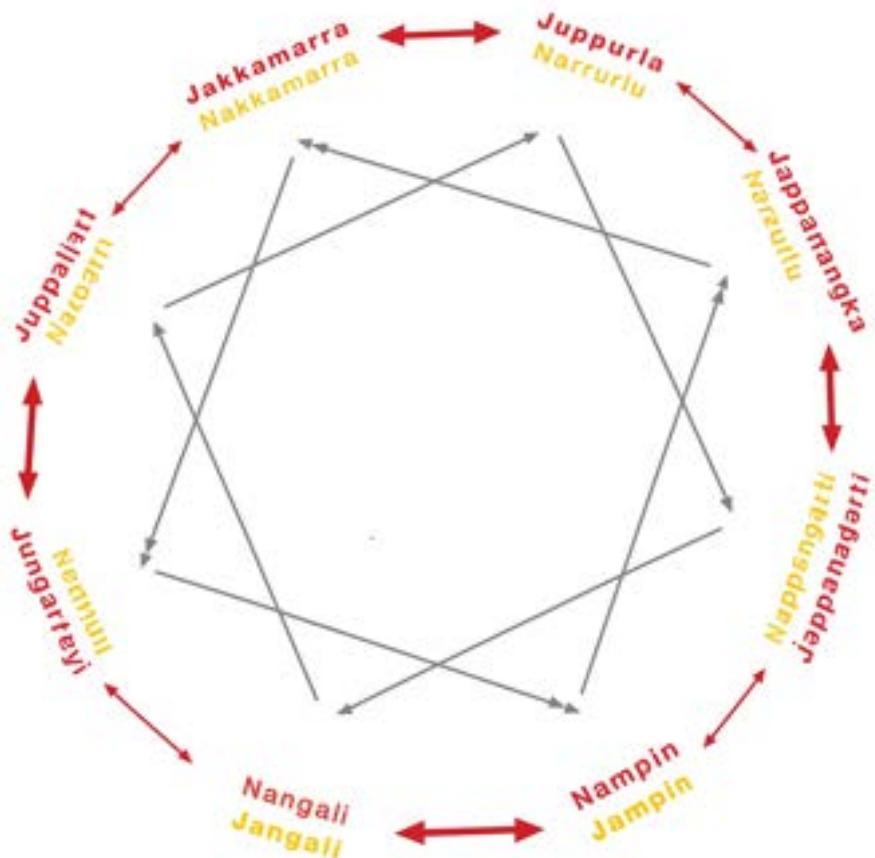
- Waramungu Elder



Culturally appropriate housing design accounts for the specific practices in each community. For instance, avoidance relationship practices which differ between communities and spiritual considerations including preferred sleeping orientations may impact the design, but are specific to clan and Country. For our communities, Kinship rule are very important.

Even within one community, there's lots of ways that people want a house, and each family might see the way culture fits a house in different ways. Houses need to be culturally safe, allowing families to stay connected but also sometimes maintaining a healthy distance from humbugging and troubles.

Remote area families, like families everywhere, are hugely different in their size and living preferences. Some families prefer to live in multigenerational configurations, others prefer living with immediate family only, so housing needs to allow for flexible adaptation.





THINGS TO THINK ABOUT AND DO

- Aboriginal people experienced in design will work between the community (particularly families that will be living in the new homes), funders, architects, builders to ensure that important cultural design considerations are included
- Building in the right place culturally, including and beyond sacred site clearance, as guided by the right Traditional Owners as defined by the community
- Living areas, indoors and out, facing the right way
- Allow for avoidance principles of specific communities and families. How do visitors access the bathroom, kitchen and water?
- How can visiting family stay, comfortably?
- Always be mindful of your own worldview, values and assumptions. Work hard to foreground Aboriginal ways of doing and knowing in all negotiations and discussions.



MUST HAVES AND DO'S

- Community must decide what cultural design elements are included
- Houses must have a minimum two entries/exits to allow for cultural avoidance principles
- Provide spaces for outdoor living including bough sheds and windbreak as well as outdoor cooking areas
- Allow for specific community sleeping orientation
- All rooms (except bathrooms) to have windows/ openings that allow people to see Country
- Where applicable the inclusion of two bathrooms, one accessible from outside for when visitors and families camp over
- Verandahs with decent shelter to be wide enough to allow for a mattress with clear access for movement

3. DESIGN FOR ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE

“Government, they make these, they shove us in these houses. They’re the one who build it, they’re the one that get the architect that made it and build it their way, how they wanted it. How they structured today, that isn’t my structure, that’s not how I wanted it. That’s why these houses today we get forced in to stay in, them houses not belong to my country, it’s not made for my climate.”

- Waramungu Elder



Consideration of design for the local climate is very important. Housing in central desert communities needs to allow for high thermal mass to keep homes cool in the hot of the day and retain heat for cold nights. Housing in the tropical north needs to optimise the breeze for ventilation, allow for escape of rising heat and to be low thermal mass so that heat is given up at night. Some community will be in climate zones that need to blend central desert and tropical responses.

By designing with Country, power bills can be minimised by efficient solar-passive design including house orientation, roof ventilation and generous eaves and window shading, as well as including solar power. Thoughtful design of verandas and landscaping is critical in minimising dust, providing outdoor living space, and accommodation for visitors.



THINGS TO THINK ABOUT AND DO

- Use of local materials and labour where possible
- Make the most of the site landscape, use existing trees for shade, vegetation to keep dust down
- Plant endemic vegetation to add to the site landscape, and to repair the site after construction
- Consider airconditioning at least 50% of bedrooms and the living areas
- In the beginning establish project funding to cover these 'finishing' things and make them core funding allowances.



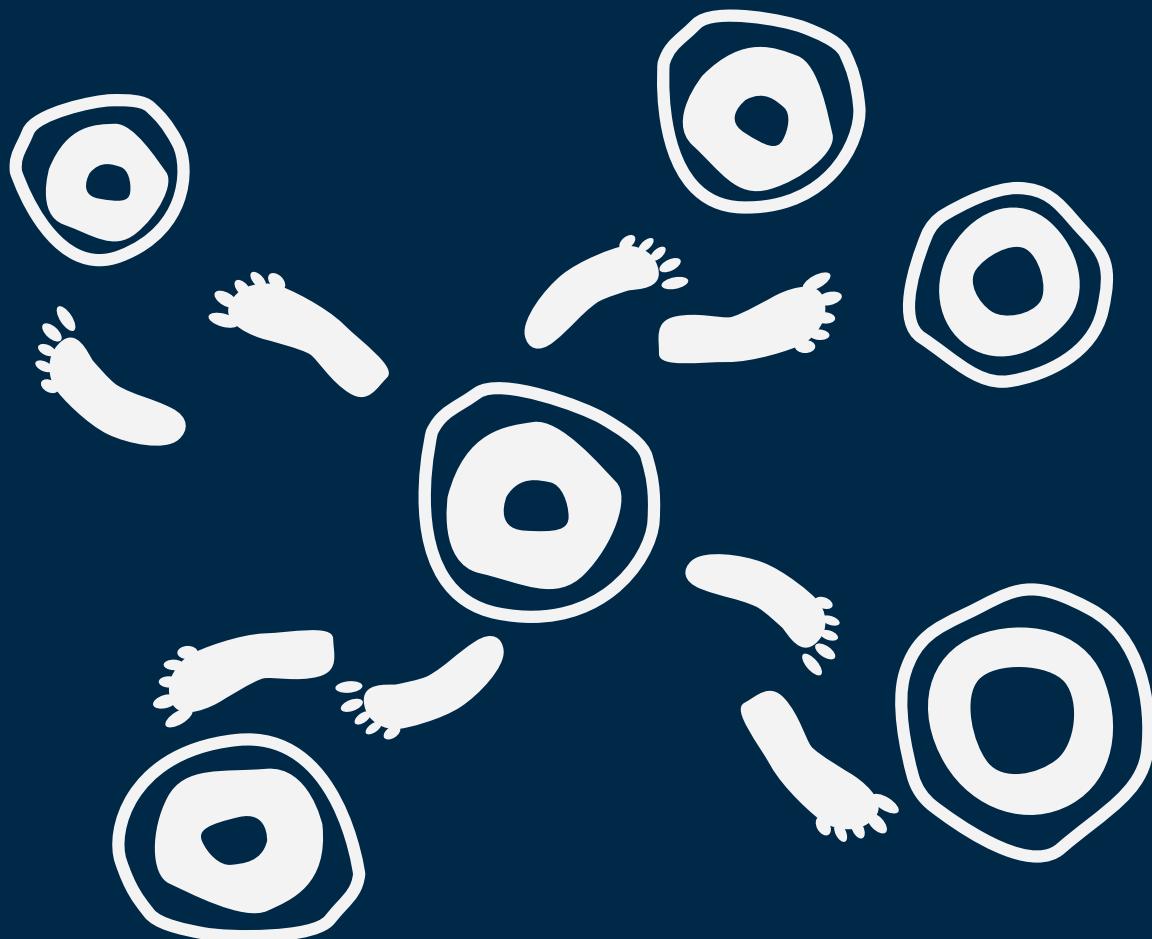
MUST HAVES AND DO'S

- Homes must be in the right place facing the right way; away from flood prone areas, catching the sun for winter and shade for summer, to catch the breeze
- All habitable rooms must have ceiling fans
- Windows and doors to have flyscreens
- Passive design thermal principles—stays cool enough even if the power is off
- Buildings to have big verandas and all windows to have shading
- Don't knock down trees and bushes that are good for shade and other things
- Design landscaping to make wind breaks, allowing for outdoor living and minimise dust coming into homes
- Shaded verandahs for outdoor living.
- Screening the summer sun while, allowing the winter sun in
- Storage for winter blankets, mattresses etc
- All homes to have solar power & battery
- All homes to have rainwater tanks for drinking water
- All homes to have tough, durable servicing for power outlets, lighting, cooking and hot water

4. DESIGN FOR HEALTH

“We got to be ready for that [the sickness associated with housing], you know, whether the stress caused by the house we are living in, will make our health problems more go higher for us mob. And housing needs to be suitable too for sick people, because it’s sad to say we’ve got a lot more renal [disease] yet coming. And age [old people], well, thinking about the stress, what sort of house they living in, could make them sick.”

- Waramungu Elder



Housing design can improve health. Most importantly, overcrowded houses make people sick—rheumatic heart disease, skin and chest infections, kidney problems. Making sure a home is designed so that even when families visit there's space. Homes can be designed for lots of visitors. For instance, making lots of outdoor space including big 3 or 4-side verandas, planting trees for shade, these can reduce indoor over-crowding. Optimising thermal performance (how the house keeps the heat out in summer) aside from reducing power bills will also reduce power disconnections which makes life hard.

Bathrooms and laundries can be designed to save and reuse precious water. Designed to allow in the breeze so they don't get too mouldy.

Lots of people in community suffer from sickness—renal, heart, diabetes. Houses need to be designed for sick people and for old people so they are comfortable and safe and can move around their home easily.



THINGS TO THINK ABOUT AND DO

- Is the house the right size, most of the time, for families, and for shorter times when visitors stay?
- How is rubbish temporarily held and collected?
- How is sewage and waste water treated?
- How do you keep dogs and snakes out?
- How do we keep cockroaches and bugs out?
- Do you need disable bathrooms (handrails and space to move around if in wheelchair)?
- Include a bathtub for children to be bathed in, including for using bush medicine



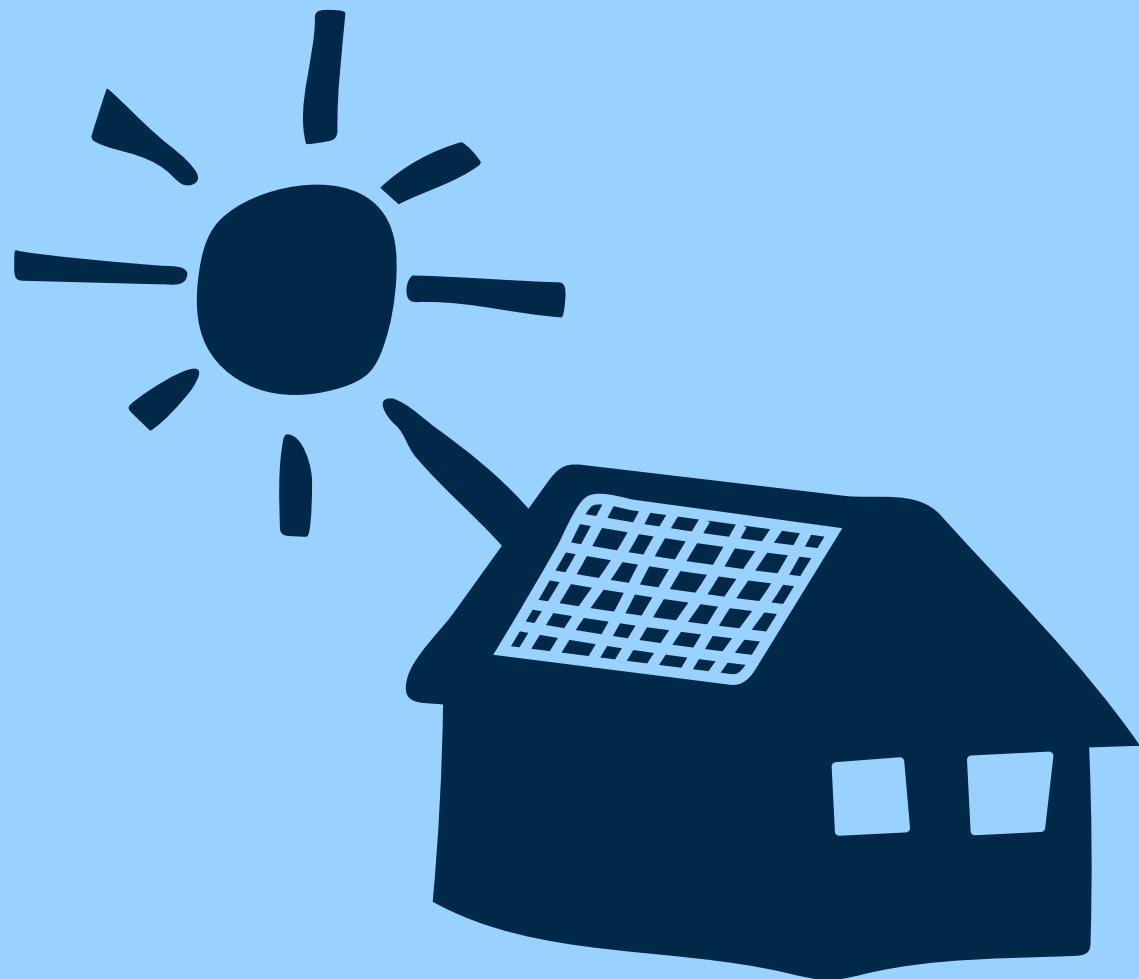
MUST HAVES AND DO'S

- Buildings designed for accessibility for Elders and people with disabilities to stay in homes
- Design with cross ventilation and breezeways to allow for airflow
- Design for spacious outdoor living and sleeping spaces to allow for visitors
- Houses must be easy to clean regularly
- Walls and cavity spaces need to be sealed to keep out cockroaches and other little animals
- The edges and underneath of houses to be fully enclosed to stop snakes and dogs

5. BUILD THE RIGHT WAY

“When they built his houses, but then they didn’t think they’re gonna put solar on them. And now they’ve got to put solar on. Now you’re going to be thinking what we’re going to do, or how can we make changes later on?”

- Waramungu Elder



All communities have complex cultural dynamics going on. This comes from the very old days, from the songlines and totems that belong to clan groups, from colonisation. Building the right way means really letting the community guide how and where a house is built, in the right way culturally for a start.

Housing for community needs to be cost effective not only in up-front costs but also for ongoing running costs. Appropriate thermal performance, solar power, water harvesting and conservation are all important to achieving sustainable and resilient communities.

Using local materials where possible can connect houses to Country, can make jobs for the community, and allow homes to be built in ways that don't contribute too much to climate change. Creating local capacity in both materials and construction allows communities to do things for themselves, makes whole communities more resilient which is very important and valuable.

The more that the community is involved, the prouder the house will stand. This longer term value needs to be acknowledged as important by funding and construction partners even if it hasn't been done before and might even cost a bit more in the short term.



THINGS TO THINK ABOUT AND DO

- Keep the ongoing power and water costs low for tenants
- Reuse grey water (water out of the washing machines and showers and sinks) to water gardens, to help keep dust down—without creating stagnant wet areas which attract mosquitoes
- How can local materials be incorporated into the building and landscape?
- If local materials are available, be sure to ask the Elders who can speak for country where can materials be sourced from? If you're unsure, wait
- Reflect on past events—Aboriginal people have long shaped housing across the Northern Territory. Speak with Elders and family about their experiences; their stories are valuable. Understanding local housing histories can guide how we approach housing today



MUST HAVES AND DO'S

- All outside tradespeople and labour must undergo cultural training prior to commencing work
- All worksites must maintain cultural safety and inclusiveness of local and outside workers
- All new homes must incorporate in some way local materials and/or artworks
- All building must employ local Aboriginal people from the community
- Materials to be high quality, tough, durable and easily maintained and replaced
- Limit the amount of trades required to construct the house to reduce costs and to make maintenance easier (requiring less people)

6. DESIGNED TO BE MAINTAINED

“If we got a blocked toilet, we get someone coming from say Tennant Creek, going out to Murray Downs or Ampilatwatja, that cost nearly two grand just for them to leave Tennant Creek before they even see that job. So what I’m saying is we can’t build houses in our community, but not knowing these little nitty gritty things that we can do ourself out there, you know? Maintenance. So let them people be a part of building that house and then have those skills when they leave, they’re leaving them up with something.”

- Waramungu Elder



Maintenance of homes is vital to ensure that they continue to function, and maintenance should happen before things break, not after (this is called cyclical maintenance).

Maintenance jobs can be given to locals, and when designing a new house, the more the community is involved, the more they'll be able to fix problems that always happen with houses. Maintenance shouldn't have to wait for a tradie coming in from a long way away and charging lots for remote travel. Building houses out of materials, fixtures and fittings that are easily available will make it easier to get things fixed quickly and for community to get trained up to know how to fix their own homes.



THINGS TO THINK ABOUT AND DO

- How is the building assessed in consultation with community, allowing for ongoing learning and improvement across the sector?
- What parts of the house help make families and culture thrive, and what parts didn't?
- How did the family care for the house?
- Have the community programs/work teams/stores enabled the house to continue to function well
- What could have been done better?



MUST HAVES AND DO'S

- All houses built to these guidelines will have a process of evaluation over a ten year period to determine what worked well and what didn't
- Evaluation will include household level feedback, and will also include indicators of health, wellbeing and social cohesion, so that communities can develop evidence based knowledge of how homes can make people, communities and culture thrive
- When a family moves into a house that complies with these guidelines, there needs to be a clear and agreed understanding of how the house needs to be looked after
 - an induction manual that recognises the importance of house-to family and community-to-house
- Aboriginal Housing NT will work with members to share learnings and publish findings

7. ONGOING EVALUATION AND LEARNING

“It’s about that country. I’ll tell you truth. That standard, how’s that gonna look 20 years time? We wanna start here and end up over here, you know, 20 years. So whatever we put down first, what our guidelines are, whatever mission statements are, you gotta stick to that one. Don’t go changing it. Cause when they say the standard of the houses they make today, whether they green grass or a concrete driveway, you know, if it’s in there, then stick with that. Don’t go changing it, you know? What we ask for and say, if I stick with that”

- Waramungu Elder



A home is like a mother—it looks after families, and families need to look after it. This is very important to measure the ways in which a house helps families and culture to thrive, and how the house is cared for in return. How it is measured is up to the community.

Ongoing evaluations must be part of the process so that knowledge is developed around how to make houses get better and better, and to move with the times. Whether that be health and well-being research, design, construction or technical performance, each project should be evaluated with learnings used to inform the next home.



THINGS TO THINK ABOUT AND DO

- What trades (if any) are accessible in the community?
- Can community members be trained up through the construction of the houses?
- Can community continue to run a construction and maintenance team?
- How did the family feel cared for by the house?
- Can community manage a 'spare parts' store or even a hardware store?
- What opportunities exist to support training? Is there a local provider who is an accredited Registered Training Organisation (RTO)?
- How can we support local people to gain additional skills through housing construction?
- Are there other opportunities beyond this project where local people will be able to continue to be involved with?



MUST HAVES AND DO'S

- Design with robust materials that don't break easily
- The evaluation will be designed with people in the community, reflecting their views on what 'good' looks like and what they value about the home.
- Design with easily sourced materials, fixtures and fittings that can easily be replaced
- Avoid using bespoke or artisan fixtures and fittings that are expensive and difficult to replace

STAYING TRUE

There's been something missing for a long time in the way houses are built. Families who are living in remote houses have had little say in the design, and they find this hard—these houses are not made for Culture, they don't allow people to live outside and to connect with the Country. And often, families do not care for these houses like the government wants them to, because these houses don't really belong to the community.

Communities have missed out on designing and building houses, and to have a sense of home ownership—this needs to change. The people in communities are the experts in how to make houses that are suitable for them—where the houses might sit, how they are constructed, and how they are lived in.

Remote Aboriginal people can and are developing expertise in housing design.

The people living in the houses are already the experts in how that house works and what could be done better. Investing in local Aboriginal people to engage with design, construction and maintenance will develop a local workforce that can guide all future investments in housing, to make sure that these investments are wise and deliver long-term health, social and economic benefits to remote communities and to governments who are making the investment.

Responsibility for housing goes two ways, and it must start with a commitment from both government and community to listen carefully to each other. This needs to allow real and meaningful collaboration where community voice is heard so that the way housing is done gets better over time, with community in the driving seat, building homes that they want to live in and happily care for.







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