# REAL MATERIAL ETHEREAL

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# The brown paper roll:
# A third space approach to participatory design research

**Abstract**

*The idea of third space has implications in the study of lived experience, built environments, and cross-cultural interactions. However, the concept has previously not been explicitly supported by research methods that combine these points of inquiry. This paper presents a new third space method that emerged through PhD research about experiences of 'belonging' for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young women living in Western Australian boarding schools. Fifty-three participants from eight schools were involved in the research over fifteen separate sessions which included eighteen alumni, twenty-seven current students and eight boarding staff members. The sessions were connected by a continuous roll of brown paper around which semi-structured drawing and storytelling took place, creating a third space.*

## Introduction

This paper presents reflections for connecting the concept of third space with visual design methods appropriate to analysis of cross- cultural spatial experiences in a boarding school setting. Third Space is a term used in many disciplines to describe non-binary concepts from a critical perspective. In this project, a multidisciplinary understanding of third space theory has been used to inform conceptual and physical binaries within the phenomenon of boarding school attendance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. While the focus of this paper is on the method developed, it is important to first explain the research problem that led to these findings, the way third space was constructed in the context of this research, and then how this was translated to a participatory method for data collection. Finally, a discussion on the limitations and merits of this methodology is presented with consideration of my own role in the research.

## Background

The established premise that kin and country are essential to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) wellbeing conflicts with the reality that in many remote Australian locations a secondary education is not available. This presents a serious dilemma for students that wish to pursue education opportunities without sacrificing identity and culture. Within the context of a long history of assimilationist education policy for ATSI young people in Western Australia,

the ‘successful’ education of this group is currently an area attracting ‘enormous scholarly attention’ and government consideration (Guenther et al., 2017, p. 256; Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2017, p. 44; Cuervo et al., 2015, p. 4). Emerging from this dialogue is an increase in both support and funding for boarding schools as an effective strategy for the education of ATSI students living in remote locations. This is underpinned by the assumption that the students will gain ‘human, cultural and social capital’ through the experience, aligning with concepts of code-switching, two way learning and orbiting that have been identified as effective methods for ATSI young people to operate succesfully ‘in two worlds, and have the best of both’ (Guenther et al., 2017, p. 262; Mander, 2012; Tamisari & Milmilany, 2003; Pearson, 2005; 2009, p. 1).

A growing body of research highlights the positive potential of boarding schools as an education strategy in this context, but makes clear that there are also significant challenges to student wellbeing that are not addressed by the provision of scholarships alone (Macdonald 2018; Bobengie 2017; Guenther 2017; O’Bryan 2016; Rogers, 2016; Mander 2012). Rogers (2016) reflects that for these students there is an unresolved tension between pursuing education opportunities and maintaining cultural identity. As such, the experience of homesickness is complicated, manifesting ‘as a yearning to belong, but home no longer satisfies that desire’ (O’Bryan 2016, 153).

The ability for the built environment to improve social outcomes is well established (Butterworth 2000). There are many models for the delivery of boarding schools in relation to place and architecture, however there is currently little to evaluate the impact of these designs from the perspective of the students themselves. This is particularly the case in Western Australia and for female students, for whom there has so far been no dedicated research. In response to this, the research question for this PhD was ‘*How can interior architecture increase a sense of belonging for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young women living in Western Australian boarding schools?*’ The focus was on the experience of students attending independent boarding schools in Perth, Western Australia in which ATSI students were typically a minority within the wider boarding school population, and one remote independent school specifically catering to ATSI students. The aim of the research was to facilitate a process through which students could propose their own design ideas. This paper will present the methodological findings from this process using Third Space theory to bridge several intersections within the topic.

**What is Third Space?**

> *'There is not a single third space—they are many and varied, they shift, they are spaces rather than places. They're often risky, unsettling spaces—where the security and familiarity of our own place of belonging has to be left behind.'*
> (Dudgeon and Fielder 2006, 407)

Third Space is an idea that helps explain phenomena that are in-between, outside of, or a product of concepts otherwise defined in sets of two. It is relevant to this research topic in three ways: First, in the construction of lived experience by people generally; secondly, through the navigation of identity between multiple cultures; and thirdly, in the social function of built environments.

Lefebvre constructs our understanding of the world as a product of *perceived (*first space) and *conceived* (second space), which is combined to create the *lived* (third space) (1991, 26). For example, a person's construction of their childhood home would be a product of what the house looks, smells and sounds like (*first space*), combined with their interpretation of the events and relationships connected with the place (*second space*) to create their lived experience (*third space*). A third space lens therefore reasons that all people navigate this ongoing process of construction. The same physical environment can therefore be perceived and constructed differently by occupants, resulting in a diversity of lived experience occurring simultaneously within a single setting.

Homi Bhabha characterizes the space between double identities (referred to as *images*) as the 'third dimension' (2004, 50). This is in line with the documented experience of feeling 'between two worlds' reported by many ATSI students who attend mainstream boarding schools (Macdonald 2018; Bobengie 2017; Rogers 2016; O'Bryan 2016; Mander 2012). It is important to note that many ATSI students navigate multiple language and cultural settings within their own communities before attending boarding school. Bhabha's characterization of third space as a tension within hybrid postcolonial settings is useful in understanding the particularly extreme polarities and 'in-between-ness' between home and boarding school for remote ATSI students (Dudgeon and Fielder 2006).

Third space in the built environment is commonly understood through the term Third *Place.* Ray Oldernburg (1989) proposes that a third place is a publicly accessible environment with a social function distinct from home (first place) and work (second place). This includes places such as libraries and neighbourhood streets (Lin 2015; Hickman 2013). Third places provide opportunities for positive social interaction, which is shown to lead to numerous mental and

physical health outcomes (Lin 2015). In boarding schools, the definitions of 'home' and 'work' are both blurred and unfulfilled. Boarding schools are not third places as their purpose is not social; their goal is to substitute home (boarding) in order to work (school). Combining the purpose of home and work into one setting does not inherently create a third typology, but rather an un-reconciled soup of first and second place. The provision of a distinctly third place is therefore lost, and with it the associated social benefits. These facets of lived experience cannot be understood purely through objective observation, which leads to a fourth dimension of third space to consider; the space opened up for dialogue by participatory research.

**Participatory research**

The considerations outlined above required methods to be highly participatory in order to develop 'practical knowing' grounded in the acknowledgement of alternative world views (Reason and Bradbury 2008, 2). Participatory approaches have recently regained momentum through concepts such as 'co-participation, co-design and co-enquiry', which are increasingly used as a means of 'blurring and collapsing the boundaries between more traditional stakeholder roles' (Cook et al. 2017, 47). Participant Action Research (PAR) was identified as an appropriate methodology for research with ATSI people as it allows for a cyclical and reflective practice of 'humility, inquisitiveness, and openness' while engaging with the community in focus (Wright, Lin and O'Connell 2016, 83). Importantly, this also allows non-indigenous researchers to engage in on-going learning and adjustment throughout the project, acknowledging this participation as an active and non-objective role. Qualitative methods were critically examined in relation to their merits and limitations for research with ATSI young people. A key consideration was the need for the non-indigenous researcher to establish trust and encourage design thinking within a short time frame.

**Yarning**

Yarning is an established participatory method that refers to storytelling and knowledge sharing in Aboriginal English and is recognised as a culturally appropriate way to gather information with ATSI people (Bessarab and Ng'andu 2010). Yarning circles can be used as an 'open-ended method to engender story' (Rennie 2018, 84), they do not always follow convention and can 'meander all over the place' (Bessarab and Ng'andu 2010, 39). This was complimentary to the participatory aims of the project as yarning will 'not always fit into neat little categories' and may follow a different convention to what the researcher is expecting (Geia et al. 2013, 41). Departing from the predisposition of western research to control the collection of data, Geia (2013) proposes that 'the rigor in the yarn is to listen' (41). This must be done without interrupting the flow of a story while simultaneously 'looking for threads that relate to the

research topic' (Geia et al. 2013, 41). The enforcement of rigidity serves only to create 'unnecessary difficulties' for both participants and researchers (Wright, Lin and O'Connell 2016, 86).

The value of storytelling also exists in the form of 'narrative inquiry' (Clandinin 2007). These methods have commonalities but are distinct in their fundamental principles. Yarning is an intentionally 'informal and relaxed discussion' in which both the researcher and participant build a respectful relationship while sharing knowledge with each other (Opie et al. 2019; Geia et al. 2013; Bessarab and Ng'andu 2010). While narrative inquiry can often be complimentary to this way of approaching research, it's aims are not explicitly to create space for two-way exchange. In other words, narrative inquiry *can be* participatory but does not *have* to be, as yarning does. Some narrative inquirers 'see themselves and their participants at more of a distance' and consider the 'relational aspects' between researcher and participants as 'less important' (Clandinin 2007, 5). This is a problematic approach for research with ATSI peoples for whom relatedness is an important foundation of knowledge and relationship building (Smith 1999).

Dudgeon & Fielder (2006) propose that third space storytelling is a 'critical method' for bringing services together with ATSI people, and Elston (2013) further suggests that this allows renegotiation of what is needed to ensure self-determination is embedded in the transformation of social circumstance. Yarning is therefore identified as being a means to simultaneously investigate and generate third space, however used alone would be difficult to draw focus to spatial experiences that may lead to design ideas.

**Visual methods**

Non-textual strategies are recognized as highly versatile ways of knowing and effective research tools with young people (Literat 2013, 85). There is a challenge in spatial research to capture the 'multi-dimensional nature' of spatial behaviour and relationships (Babb, Robertson and Curtis 2019, 63). Visual communication modes offer 'more nuanced depiction of lived realities, while simultaneously empowering the research participants and placing the agency literally in their own hands' (Literat 2013, 85). These can be mechanical (e.g., photography and video) or non-mechanical (e.g., drawing and play dough), also understood as digital vs non-digital (Literat 2013, 85). While there is a growing case for digital methods as engaging modes of communication for young people, 'there remains a significant role for pen-and-paper approaches like drawing' (Literat 2018, 2).

**Drawing**

Within the realm of visual communication, drawing is identified as an appropriate method for testing and expressing spatial subjects (Creigh and McGann 2019, 3). Drawing provides a common language by which to connect participants directly with architectural practice, in which ideas that are 'clearly drawn and narrated' become associated with 'trust' and 'neutrality' (Creigh and McGann 2019, 3). Drawing can describe the relationships between elements in physical space in a way 'that would be impossible to express via writing or speech' (Literat 2013, 87). This nuance is further allowed for by the 'co-constructed and playful' possibilities of drawing that are 'not dependent on linguistic proficiency' (Literat 2013, 84). It should be noted that 'proficiency' in this project refers more so to the researcher's knowledge of the participants' first languages, rather than their abilities in Standard Australian English.

In addition to its suitability for spatial research, participatory drawing is shown to be a 'highly efficient and ethically sound research strategy' for work with children and young people in a variety of cultural contexts (Literat 2013, 84). While it may be 'baffling' to complete a detailed drawing in response to a whole research topic at once, complex concepts can be built towards through a series of exercises (Awan and Gauntlett 2011). This meant focusing attention to individual layers of information in a logical order. Drawings also allow participants to physically take up space and contribute to research in a tangible way. In comparison to photography, drawing lets visual artefacts evolve organically in response to live conversation which can give participants a sense of control over the situation. This gives drawing an immediacy that is complimentary to 'live' storytelling within a short time frame.

This immediacy was also important as a way of addressing the possibility for misinterpretation after the interview. Literat (2013) posits that visual narratives are highly subjective and therefore vulnerable to over-interpretation, which is particularly problematic 'when the researcher belongs to a culture other than the one they are researching' (93). The decoding of visual imagery by students through simultaneous storytelling was critical in minimising this problem. If thoughts and experiences could be translated into spatial attributes in the first instance and explained as the drawing was happening, the researcher would not need to make these translations at a later date. This reduces the risk of confusion or taking information out of context.

**Pilot Study**

In response to the considerations above, a preliminary method was developed and tested through a pilot study. This was conducted firstly with a Cultural Advisor to the project, and secondly (on the advisor's recommendation) with her granddaughter who had attended a

boarding school in Perth. A semi structured interview format was used in combination with drawing on A4 pieces of white paper. The interview was categorized into five broad stages (see table 4), with specific questions in each stage to correlate with drawing activities. The participant was also asked to bring some photos of her time at boarding school to assist in discussion.

| | |
|---|---|
| **Introduction**<br>*(build familiarity)* | General discussion of who participants are, where they are from, age, school, etc. |
| **Belonging**<br>*(establish reference point for belonging)* | Discussion of what a sense of belonging is, if it is important, when do the participants feel it, examples of spaces they feel they belong. |
| **Boarding School**<br>*(encourage awareness of design)* | Participants describe the architecture and overall feeling of boarding school. |
| **Belonging in Boarding School**<br>*(connect belonging with design)* | Reflection on if definitions of belonging match with descriptions of boarding school. Discussion of which parts of boarding school help to feel sense of belonging or not. |
| **Design Themes**<br>*(data analysis and translation to design actions)* | Participants reflect on everything discussed and propose most important factors to consider in the design of boarding schools to have a better sense of belonging. |

**Figure 1**: Semi-structured stages of interview

The pilot study exposed a number of limitations and issues with the method. Most concerning was the linear and rigid conversation promoted by the use of overly scripted interview questions and prescribed drawing activities. While the participant and I were known to each other before the interview, the location of a small café meant we were sitting face to face across a small table, which created unintended awkwardness and formality. This was not helped by the structure of the interview which involved many activities in which I had nothing to do except watch the participant draw. Though reassured that the drawing did not need to be careful or of a high quality, the participant was often worried about being '*not the best drawer'* and expressed that it felt daunting to begin a new image on each piece of blank white paper. At the end of the interview the participant reflected that it would be preferable to continue future sessions as a group with friends in order to stimulate more memories and ideas. It was also noted that though some questions and activities were hard to understand at first, once an example was shown it was much easier. The use of 'birds eye view' drawing (drawing in plan) was observed as being the easiest style through which to discuss the design of spaces, however when shown some examples the participant was also comfortable drawing in elevation and perspective views.

It is worth noting that the same issues were not apparent in the initial pilot study completed with the Cultural Advisor. This is attributed to her senior community status and a higher degree of personal familiarity between us. Though conducted in an almost identical setting, this dynamic was more naturally conducive to a 'meandering' yarn in which I did not assume to be in control. A similar format was therefore maintained for semi-structured interviews with senior boarding school staff, with which it was assumed the relationship dynamic would be similar. The following discussion details the adjustments made to facilitate a similar dynamic with past and current student participants.

**The Brown Paper Roll**

Reflection on existing research methods combined with observations from the pilot study led to a revised third space method for data collection with current and past boarding school students. In total, 53 participants from more than 8 independent schools in Western Australia were involved in the research over 15 separate sessions. These included 18 past students, 27 current students (aged 16 and over), and 8 experienced boarding school staff members. Interviews were held in small groups of various sizes depending on availability and what was most comfortable and appropriate for each situation. In response to observations from the pilot study the sessions were held in places familiar to the participants but not the researcher. These included boarding school common rooms, student camps, or in the case of alumni; at the participants' home. This allowed the participants to be on 'home ground' and addressed the flawed assumption that a meeting space could, or should, be neutral.

**Figure 2:** The brown paper roll with student drawings


**Figure 3:** Drawings intersected and responded to one another

The same semi structured interview format was maintained, however the questions and activities of each stage were replaced with one broad theme. While the planned questions and activities were kept as a reference, the scripted nature of the interview format was heavily reduced. Further questions and prompts were only used if there was a distinct need for further direction. The photography element was removed completely in order to narrow the focus of the study and eliminate the need for students to prepare any material prior to meeting. I began to include myself in the drawing activities with participants in order to reduce the awkwardness of watching and waiting, and to give examples of drawing styles being referred to (eg. mapping, drawing in plan, perspective). This also gave me an identity in the research that changed my role of 'neutral observer' to 'human being' (Bessarab and Ng'andu 2010, 42).

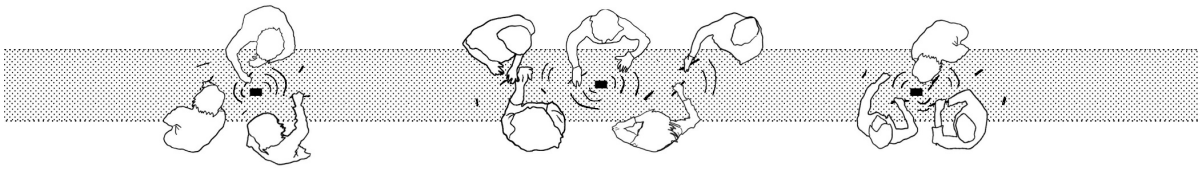

**Figure 4:** The continuous format connected geographically separate groups

The individual pieces of white A4 paper were replaced with a continuous roll of brown paper so that stories, examples, and ideas could be connected across multiple locations. The roll of brown paper was 90cm by 100m, with 20m of length being used in total. At the beginning of every session the paper would be rolled out on a table (or floor if there was no large table), and a mixed container of pens, pencils and other drawing tools would be provided, some of which would be spread across the paper. The ritual of rolling the paper out from the very beginning through to the free space at the end became an important component of the method, allowing participants to see the full scope of the project prior to their involvement. This would usually prompt discussion about the types of drawings and ideas being collected, the benefit of which aligned with student observations pertaining to mark making and leaving legacy for future students in the interior:

> *'…that also instils a bit of pride in being there as well, knowing that those other girls have been there, you know? 'Cause you can just be like... I'm not the first one. Or, even if you are the first one, made your mark.'*
>
> Past C 01

This also allowed an iterative development of ideas and acted as an ongoing participatory analysis of the data.


**Figure 5:** Drawings were encouraged to be rough and diagrammatic, not perfect.

Stories and ideas from participants suggested that channels should exist through which residents can temporarily or permanently imprint their identity upon the interior fabric. This was reflected in the method, particularly in cases where the paper was left out for students to contribute to over multiple days. Upon collection it would be filled with informal 'mess' such as graffiti tags, signatures, food stains, and nail polish drops- as well as additional input to the topic. These remnants communicated to future participants that the paper was not precious and could be interacted with without fear of mistakes or judgement. The unintended stains, marks, and wrinkles can also be seen as a physical trace of spatial occupation and demonstrates that students used this object in a social and interactive way without being prompted. When considered in relation to the frequency with which creativity and mark-making were reported by students as being able to increase their sense of belonging at boarding school, the roll can be seen as a piece of data in itself. For exmaple:

> *'Maybe a little art area…creative space. Space to draw, paint, write… like...creating your own space.'*
>
> Past C 01

> *'And it's kind of just a space to really just be you.'*
>
> Current E 01

This interactive relationship with the environment through creative activity could help students to express and clarify their personal identities, as well as give students the opportunity to project values and ideas that they feel are under-represented. Some participants commented that the opportunity to make a space with other Aboriginal students is how a sense of belonging can also be created while in boarding school. For example, explaining that this allowed them to speak 'normally':

> *'A: It was like ... We all drew together like that because then we could all speak ...*
> *B: This.*
> *A: Normally. Laugh about this and that…'*
> Past C 01

By being used in these ways, the occupation of the brown paper roll became a third space in itself and reinforced some of the experiences and ideas described within it.

**Limitations**

It remains an important consideration that in a discussion of belonging led by a non-indigenous researcher with limited to no familiarity with the participants home rhythms and language codes, this discussion is by default within a set of conventions and expectations to which the participants may not feel they belong. This is somewhat alleviated by the advanced trans-languaging (or code-switching) of many ATSI people (Farley et al., 2019). This became apparent in some interviews where members of the group would transition to Aboriginal English while telling a story and then transition back to explain some parts to me, relating elements of a story to the research topic that I may not have otherwise understood. In this way, the success of this method relied heavily on the intelligence and empathy of the students. If this had not been the case, a much higher degree of community familiarity and language knowledge would likely be needed by the researcher.

As a non-indigenous person specifically exploring issues of belonging and relatedness with Aboriginal young people, I was inherently un-connected with the participants in many ways. While this remains a limitation of the research, it is important to note that other demographic qualities were shared. Participants throughout this study were required to be at least 16 years old in order to give informed consent on their own behalf. I was 23 years old when I commenced the research project and 25 when data collection was completed. I was therefore a maximum of 7- 9 years older than the students, and in most cases the past students who participated were of a similar age to me or older. Though having never attended boarding school I had similarly moved from a small country town to a regional centre for high school, and again to a city for university and so could relate to some aspects of the transitions and rhythms discussed.

My connection with other young people as a peer with similar points of reference became an important aspect in reducing power imbalances within the research process. As the project may have been inherently culturally richer if led by an Aboriginal person, it is also possible that outcomes would be different if conducted by someone of a different generation, gender, or geographic background.

**Discussion**

The roll of paper connected geographically separate participant interactions, and in doing so created an extended 'third space' within the project. The iterative development of ideas and (anonymous) transparency of content between separate groups enabled a greater sense of relatedness and connection between otherwise isolated locations. Students could see the drawings of other students, build on their ideas, and feel an understanding for how their own experience fit within a larger context. This continuity was also effective in increasing the confidence of participants who were reluctant to draw, as they could see that the previous drawings were of a similar ability to what they were able to produce. While some groups weighed more heavily towards drawing or storytelling than others, it was observed that the combination of both was effective and necessary in facilitating free flowing conversation. While engaged in drawing, participants had time to reflect on the topic at hand and consider their response, the visual material then served as 'useful prompts during discussion' (Awan and Gauntlett 2011, 370). The ability to do something physical that does not require direct eye contact between participants helped to reduce awkwardness and anxiety in the sharing of personal experiences. Similar functions to achieve this in future research could include model making, sculpting clay, drawing with chalk on pavement, sitting around a fire, cooking, walking side by side together, or any other activity where visual focus is taken away from the person speaking through constructive movement.

A key part of making this method function as intended was for me to relinquish the expectation that dialogue could be controlled. Continuous learning and adjustment over time was necessary to become effective in facilitating the drawing without interrupting the yarning. Bessarab and Ng'andu (2010) similarly reflect that the researcher can sometimes be 'so focused on their research question and looking and listening for language steeped in academic concepts that they failed to hear that what the person was talking about was in fact to do with the research topic' (41). They also found that by interrupting or cutting across the participant's storytelling, the 'potential of the information being imparted' was limited (Bessarab and Ng'andu 2010, 41). Planned points of analysis and reflection allowed me to realise that this was happening and consciously adjust the weight of my voice in the sessions.

**Conclusion**

A process that started as an investigation of third space experiences also became a task in how to create one. The use of a brown paper roll provided a tool to engage in participatory spatial research while transparently responding to mistakes, ideas, and stories along the way. While this could also be achieved through other creative formats, the specific function of the continuous paper roll was that multiple third spaces could be connected in order to build something bigger and more complete. This transformed small pockets of isolated dialogue into a larger collection of voices, now represented through an object that literally takes up a lot of space. This tool also meant that trust and familiarity could build iteratively with each session and ideas be continuously extended and refined as a result. This method has potential for application in design contexts in which a process of participation is required between stakeholders of varying abilities and perspectives, who are physically separated, and where mistakes are expected to be made by both participants and researcher.

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**Figure List**