

Architecture students create vital infrastructure in remote communities

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Masters of Architecture students from Melbourne School of Design *Photo: Supplied*

As this year's Bower Studio returns from the Northern Territory, Louisa Deasey reports on an initiative from the Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning that has seen a wide range of facilities designed and built in remote Indigenous communities.

With support from the MacDonnell Regional Council, 12 University of Melbourne students have travelled to the remote Indigenous communities of Areyonga and Amoonguna in the Northern Territory to build much-needed facilities, as part of the Bower Studio program, a subject offered through the Masters of Architecture, at the University of Melbourne,

The project is led by senior lecturer David O'Brien, and sees the students working alongside members of the local communities.

Every year since 2008, Bower Studio participants have built facilities in remote Australia, Papua New Guinea or Thailand that have contributed to community health and wellbeing. A wide range of facilities are constructed, but with one common thread: they are built in consultation and collaboration with local communities.

Students participating in the Bower Studio – named after 'bower shelter', a structure traditionally used by Indigenous Australians meeting together to shelter from sun, rain or wind – have constructed a bus stop and taxi shelter, a multi-purpose shade structure, and furniture including benches and seats in Areyonga and Amoonguna in the most recent project, Bower 15.

This year, the program also had local school kids building cubby houses from a prefabricated kit of panels with the University's team.

"We have done this a few times before in various locations and the kids love it!" Dr O'Brien says.

Since 2008, Bower Studio participants have designed and constructed buildings such as a neonatal centre, an early childhood learning centre, houses, computer labs, and community centres, in co-operation with twelve partner communities.

Dr O'Brien says the structures make an important contribution to community health and wellbeing.

"In places like the central desert of Australia, a shelter provides much relief from the heat for residents," he says. "Remote areas have extreme weather conditions so strong sheltering structures are important.

"Currently, in order to access public transport there is no protection from the elements, so we're creating sheltered pavilions that work with the climate to create cool and shaded protection from the sun and shelter from rain."

The Bower Studio creates environmentally sustainable and culturally relevant community and housing infrastructure, it's not just a quick fix. Dr O'Brien stresses the long-term goal of the program is to create something communities can replicate on their own.

"The aim of these studios is to develop systems and training for local communities that other building teams can replicate, providing a benefit to the community that continues long after we've left," Dr O'Brien says.

Last year's project (Bower 14) resulted in the construction of an essential neo-natal unit and composting toilet facility in the remote Papua New Guinea community of Suanum. The composting toilet was similar to those constructed by the Bower Studio at the Sipaia community in 2012.

Perinatal complications are the leading form of mortality in Papua New Guinea and are responsible for greater numbers of deaths than pneumonia and malaria, and like all coastal communities in PNG, Suanum is at risk from rising sea levels. The low lying community is under threat and the traditional pit toilets flood during high tides, spreading human waste throughout the community, causing disease.

The four-bed neonatal centre has a room for storing medication and a new ablutions facility, which provides a healthier place for infants and mothers at the most vulnerable time of their lives.

Bower 13 in the Northern Territory's Belyuen community involved the construction of a sheltered outdoor living area and kitchen for an Indigenous family from the HomesPLUS range of 'Add Ons'.

Masters of Architecture students at the University of Melbourne vie for a space in the Bower Studio. Dr O'Brien says the program offers students a rare opportunity to work in a hands-on manner with local community members and hone their consultative skills to facilitate lasting change.

www.bowerstudio.com.au

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/national/education/voice/architecture-students-create-vital-infrastructure-in-remote-communities-20150507-3vkpf.html>