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Subject: Feedback on Wollongong City Council Community Strategic Plan 2035

Dear Council,

Drawing on our professional knowledge, global best practice, experience working with Country-centred design frameworks - especially the Government Architects' [Connecting with Country](#) Framework and [Biodiversity in Place](#) Frameworks - Understorey Landscape Architects¹ makes the following recommendations for the CSP 2035.

Commit to Environmental and Cultural Care

The draft CSP exhibits weakened references to environmental protection and ecological sustainability in its Vision and Goals. We recommend reinstating and strengthening commitments to protecting and regenerating the environment across all areas of planning, with explicit reference to Country, biodiversity, and ecological resilience. Council should formally adopt [Connecting with Country](#) as an integrated approach across all goals, embedding collaboration with Dharawal Traditional Owners, cultural care, and First Nations knowledge systems into all city planning and design processes.

Move Beyond Sustainability Towards Regeneration

Global cities leading climate and urban transformation (e.g., Copenhagen, Melbourne's Green Infrastructure Plan, Paris's Urban Forest initiatives) are moving beyond sustainability into net-positive, regenerative practices. Wollongong should set ambitious targets for:

- Net gain in biodiversity.
- Climate-positive construction and landscapes.
- Hyperlocal planting to repair soil, increase canopy, and support native wildlife and multispecies thriving.
- Circular economies that reuse, regenerate, and minimise emissions.

Foster Hyperlocal, Place-Responsive Design

¹ Understorey Landscape Architects are community members Kathryn Morgan (Figtree) and Katrin Plogstert (Shellharbour). Katrin is a senior landscape architect registered with the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects, and Kathryn is a Master's of Landscape Architecture student and teaches in the UTS School of Architecture.



Each neighbourhood from escarpment to coast should celebrate its distinct natural systems (including their specific pre-Invasion ecological communities), histories, and communities. Council should embed hyperlocal placemaking principles to resist generic urbanisation and protect Wollongong's rich and diverse local identities. Urban renewal should prioritise Country-centred, co-designed, community-led public realm improvements that celebrate local culture, ecology, and diversity. Our local Aboriginal Elders and Traditional Owners must be engaged in these processes.

Embrace Culture, Creativity, and Ecological Storytelling

Landscape, art, and public spaces must be recognised as living cultural infrastructure, not just amenities, and consider More-than-human experience (flora, fauna, seasonality). Cultural vibrancy must include Country-centred and multispecies creativity, embedding Dharawal and First Nations, ecological, and community narratives into city life.

Center Equity, Inclusion, and Justice in Urban Transformation

Social equity must be designed into climate resilience strategies: Affordable housing close to green infrastructure; Equitable access to public spaces, active transport, and healthy landscapes. Council should embed decolonising principles — amplifying Dharawal and First Nations voices, creating leadership pathways for Traditional Owners, and embedding Indigenous governance into major projects.

Wollongong has the opportunity to become a **global leader** in regenerative, culturally connected, and resilient city-making. We already have Australia's first fossil-fuel free suburb²! And we can build on the prestigious UCI Bike City title that already places us as a leader - this CSP should commit Wollongong to a future of care for Country, creativity, connection, and climate leadership.

We look forward to reading the next iteration of the CSP, and thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Warmly,



Kathryn Morgan



Katrin Plogstert

For Understorey Landscape Architects
www.understorey.com.au

² Saul Griffith argues we need to "invest in creating more renewable energy, and to replace all of the 'machines' (including appliances and vehicles) driven by fossil fuels with electric alternatives that can be powered by renewables. To make this happen, it would mean getting an electric hot water heat pump, electric induction stoves, electric heating/cooling, buying an electric vehicle, a home battery, and installing rooftop solar."

[The Design Files](#)



Detailed Feedback

Goal 1: "We are a sustainable and climate resilient city"

Our Feedback

In sum:

- *Language shift to "ecological sustainability" and "regeneration."*
- *Vision must retain the environment as a core community value.*
- *Resilience must be supplemented with active regeneration.*
- *Metrics must track meaningful ecological outcomes, distinguishing between public and private land impacts.*

Broaden "sustainability" to explicitly mean **ecological sustainability**

The current wording is too vague. Council should revise Goal 1 to:

"We are an ecologically sustainable and climate resilient city."

This revision aligns with the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act (1979) and the Protection of the Environment Administration Act (1991). It reflects strong, ongoing community expectations prioritising environmental care.

Strengthen the Vision statement by **restoring environmental care**

We support the new reference to Dharawal Country, but urge Council to reinstate a commitment to the environment in the Vision:

"On Dharawal Country, from the mountains to the sea, we value and protect our environment, and we value and respect each other, our places, past and future."

This reinforces the inseparability of Country from community wellbeing. It acknowledges consistent community values expressed through Council's own consultation processes.

Embed **regenerative practice**, not just resilience

Council should expand its climate and sustainability goals from passive "resilience" to active "regeneration," in line with global best practice. As a UCI Bike City, Wollongong has a unique opportunity to lead by embedding regenerative infrastructure into its urban landscape. Fellow UCI Cities like Glasgow, Copenhagen, and Utrecht³ show how bike-friendly design can go hand-in-hand with environmental restoration—transforming disused spaces into biodiverse corridors, expanding green cycling routes that

³. **Glasgow** has integrated cycling infrastructure with urban greening projects, transforming former industrial sites into biodiverse green spaces. These initiatives not only promote active transportation but also enhance urban ecosystems, contributing to the city's climate resilience efforts. **Copenhagen** has implemented green cycle routes that double as stormwater management systems. These green corridors support biodiversity, improve air quality, and provide residents with access to nature, exemplifying regenerative urban design. **Utrecht's** extensive cycling infrastructure is complemented by green roofs and walls on bike parking facilities and public buildings. These features reduce urban heat island effects, manage rainwater, and create habitats for pollinators, showcasing a holistic approach to regenerative urban planning.



manage stormwater and reduce heat, and enhancing infrastructure with green roofs that support pollinators. Inspired by these global leaders, Wollongong can move beyond resilience toward regeneration—using cycling infrastructure as a catalyst for ecological health, climate action, and community wellbeing.

Recommended approaches:

- Develop regenerative water systems (e.g., rain gardens, constructed wetlands, riparian revegetation).
- Commit to local native plantings (“rewilding” /rematriation) in degraded urban spaces, not just providing “green space” that may in effect be monocultural “green deserts”.
- Deliver carbon-positive projects like carbon sequestering landscapes. Council operations could be fossil-fuel free, like Austinmer!
- Improve Metrics for Ecological Success Indicators must go beyond general canopy cover. We recommend: Separate reporting of trees planted vs. trees removed for public and private land. Metrics tracking to include: Native species richness; Habitat connectivity; Soil health restoration; Water quality improvements; Urban microclimate cooling impacts.
- Clarify metrics applied for measuring urban canopy cover. Indicator 1.6 references two different metrics, and it is very hard to believe that canopy cover has increased by over 10 percentage points (nearly doubling) between 2021 and 2025. Use the Aerotrex methodology for both 2021 and 2024 data.



Saul Griffith's electric go-kart image: [Design Files](#)



Goal 2: “We have well-planned, connected, and liveable places”

Our feedback:

Understorey welcomes the intent behind Goal 2 but advocates for a stronger vision that centres ecological urbanism, **hyperlocal place-making**, and climate-resilient infrastructure with a focus on accessible, shaded, shared paths for walking and cycling.

Planning and liveability cannot be separated from the health of Country, ecological connectivity, and community co-creation. We recommend that the strategic plan make explicit commitments to **regenerative development** and **hyperlocal identity**.

We recommend:

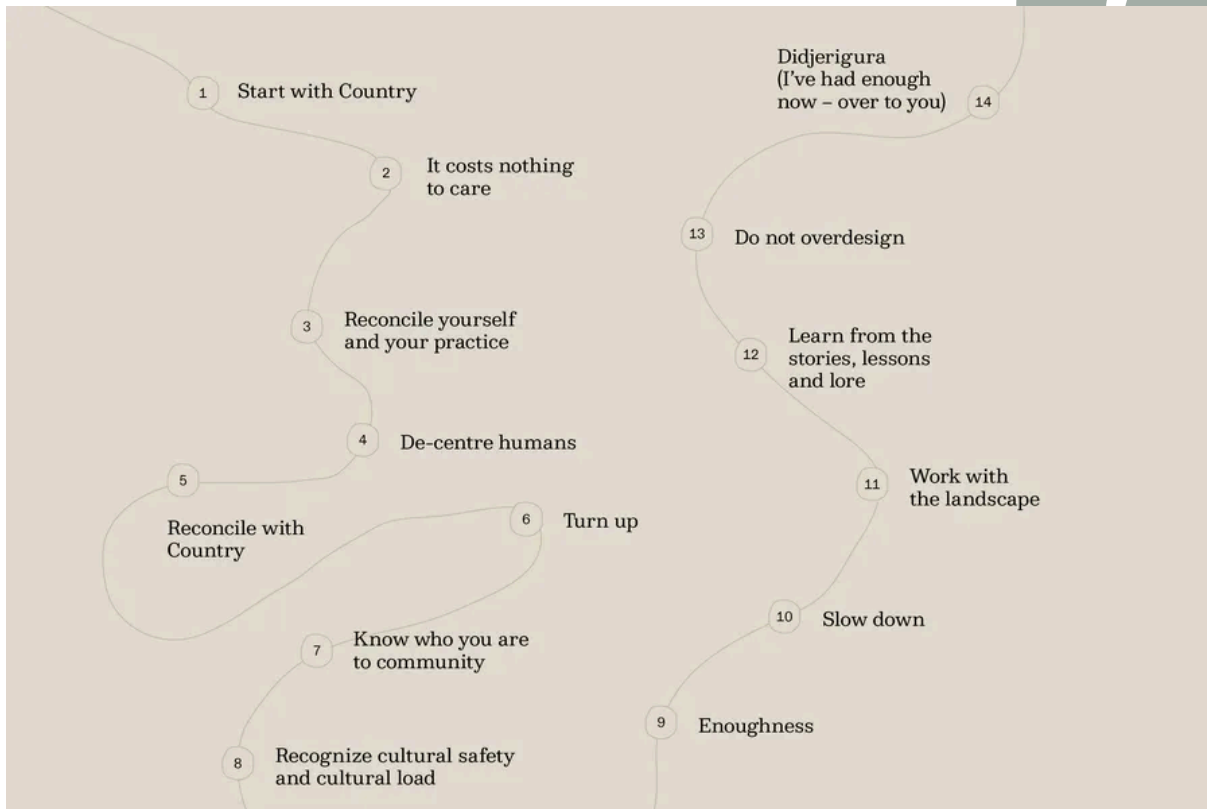
- Strengthening the language around ecological connectivity (green corridors, fauna movement) as part of urban planning. We suggest wildlife crossings and slowed traffic, and minimal/movement responsive lighting, at night.
- Embedding regenerative, nature-positive design and maintenance across all developments. Require climate-positive architecture and landscape outcomes, with developers meeting targets for carbon-neutral construction, native planting beyond minimum thresholds, permeable site coverage (eg, permeable paving rather than asphalt), and net-positive ecological impacts (e.g., enhanced biodiversity, soil health, and urban cooling). Shift beyond “sustainability” toward regenerative practices that actively heal and strengthen local ecosystems. This means gardening and care, not mow-and-blow. This means planting for multispecies thriving, not just decoration. Open space should not be laid with turf but planted with mixed native grasses like *Microleana stipoides* and *Dichondra repens*, and adjacent to beaches, *Zoysia macrantha*. Maintenance should be skilled and sensitive to the needs of Country. Every project must contribute meaningfully to Wollongong’s biodiversity, cooling, and climate resilience networks.
- Prioritising hyperlocal placemaking: each neighbourhood reflecting unique stories, natural systems, and community needs. Celebrate Wollongong’s diversity of places (coastline, foothills, escarpment, villages) through design and maintenance that reflects hyperlocal cultural, ecological, and social



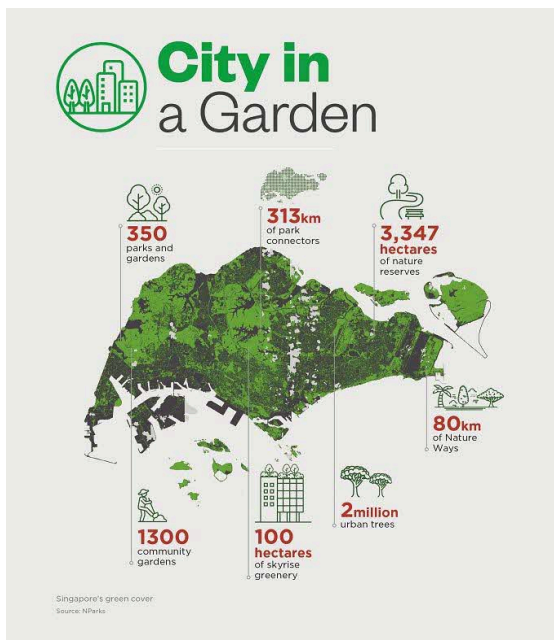
characteristics. Protect and amplify vernacular identities rather than applying generic urban design templates.

- Ensuring "connectedness" includes non-human networks: waterways, soil health, and pollinator corridors. Animals and humans must be able to make their way through the environment. Desirelines and shortcuts must be respected. This means no gating or blocking of de facto paths, including by churches, the Department of Education and other property owners. It means increasing resources for 'Safer Routes to School'.⁴
- Mandating green-blue infrastructure at all scales — streets, laneways, stormwater systems. Embed a Biodiversity-Led Design Mandate, starting with the [Biodiversity in Place framework](#). Move towards city planning where urban nature leads, rather than follows, infrastructure placement. Create a Biodiversity Action Plan aligned with urban planning approvals. Integrate living green and water systems (bioswales, green roofs, stormwater wetlands) as standard infrastructure, not aesthetic extras.
- Commitment to decolonial planning: Country-led design processes, Aboriginal custodianship, and cultural landscapes. Centre walking, cycling, and accessible public transport not just for emissions reduction but for equity, social cohesion, and connection to Country. Embed Aboriginal pathways and stories in wayfinding and movement corridors.
- Protecting affordable access to green public space, avoiding green gentrification. Ensure affordable, accessible, and culturally appropriate housing is co-designed with Country-centred and climate-responsive principles. Protect green space access for all residents, particularly renters, multi-dwelling residents, and low-income communities.

⁴ "Safe Streets to School Wollongong imagines a safe connected network of streets centred around schools that allow children and families to walk safely between home and school and people to easily walk and ride within their community for other short everyday trips" [The Illawarra Flame](#)



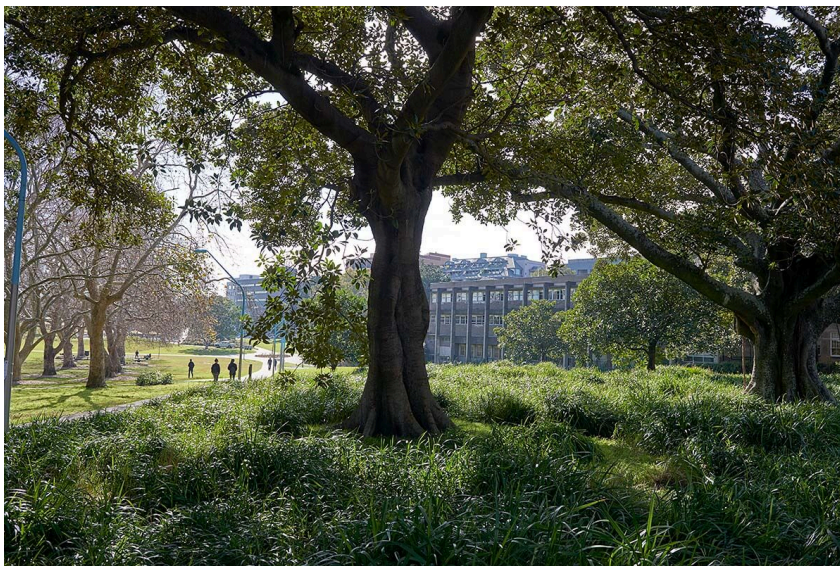
Danièle Hromek's 14 principles for what non-Indigenous architects can do to Indigenize practice. Image: Design by AKLR Studio Image: [Architecture AU](#)



Singapore's Biophilic City Vision: Mandatory integration of green space into every building project. Urban nature is treated as essential infrastructure. Image: National Parks Board Singapore



Freiburg Vauban District, GermanyL Car-free, eco-focused urban district with strong green infrastructure. Community-driven development preserving affordability and biodiversity. A regenerative neighbourhood designed for walking, cycling, community gardens, stormwater management, and net-positive energy homes. Article in [the Guardian](#) Bottom image: [Green City Times](#)



[Sydney Green Grid](#) (Greater Sydney Commission) Strategic plan for an interconnected network of open spaces, waterways, and tree canopy corridors. Image: [Planning NSW](#)



Goal 3: “We foster a diverse economy, and we value innovation, culture, and creativity”

Our Feedback

Creativity is treated in the Plan as a human-centred asset, rather than integrated into the fabric of Country, ecology, and multispecies life. Innovation is framed around economic growth rather than ecological or social innovation that fosters regenerative futures. Cultural diversity is acknowledged, but stronger place-based and multispecies creativity should be celebrated. Learning, education, and ecological literacy are underemphasized, despite being essential for long-term innovation, adaptation, and resilience. There is rich knowledge in this community that can only be passed onto younger generations through the funding of ecological programs.

Recommendations

1. Embed Place-Based Creativity Across Council Activities

Creativity should be considered beyond events and artworks—it should be embedded into landscape, urban design, water management, transport, and governance processes. Designing with Country principles should inform innovation strategies. Consider the award-winning [Yirran muru playspace](#)⁵, Shellharbour, as a model.

2. Expand the Concept of Innovation Beyond Economic Growth

Celebrate innovation in regenerative agriculture, circular economy, climate adaptation, biodiversity restoration, and social inclusion. Innovation should align with climate justice, decolonisation, and ecological repair.

3. Prioritise Ongoing Learning, Ecological Literacy, and Public Education

Establish and increase funding to programs that support community ecological knowledge, multispecies storytelling, and connecting with Country. These programs include, to our knowledge, and are not limited to bushcare and dunecare programs, which are doing this well, but have not seen increase in resources. Effort needs to be made to get young people involved in environmental programs. The participation rates in environmental programs are not meeting targets. Bushcare volunteer groups are aging and limited effort is made in teaching the next generation skills needed to restore nature and learn how Aboriginal people connect with Dharawal Country.

4. Foster Multisensory and Multispecies Creative Expression

Support and boost creative projects that involve not just humans but also flora, fauna, and ecosystems in shaping public experience. These might include pollinator pathways, sensory gardens, ephemeral land art projects, community gardens and native planting along cycleways.

⁵ Yirran muru (Dharawal for 'many pathways') is an Aboriginal interpretive playspace in Shellharbour City, which was co-designed by Shellharbour City Council and the local Aboriginal community. This unique space is nestled in the native gardens behind the Shellharbour Civic Centre, and shares local Dharawal culture with the wider community through Aboriginal methods of learning. It is an accessible, inclusive space that invites people of all ages to take a cultural journey, following in the footsteps of local Aboriginal people across Dharawal country.
<https://www.shellharbourciviccentre.com.au/facilities/interpretive/>



5. Embed Artist, Scientist, and Community Collaborations in Strategic Projects

Major Council initiatives (transport upgrades, green infrastructure, water-sensitive projects) should include embedded artists, Indigenous knowledge holders, and community co-design.

6. Recognise Creativity as Critical Urban Infrastructure

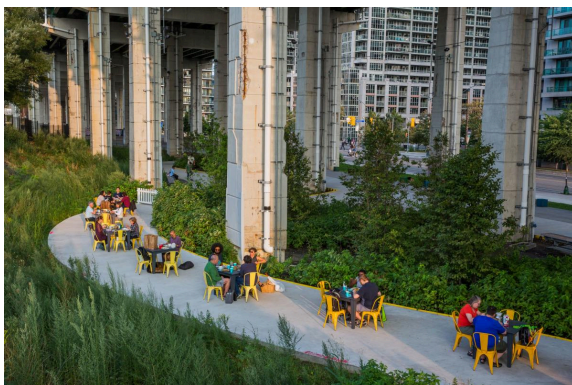
Art, culture, and creativity are not decorations—they are essential to building vibrant, resilient cities that can adapt to the climate and social challenges of the 21st century.



The Living Pavilion — Melbourne, Australia - Temporary landscape installation co-designed with Wurundjeri Elders, it featured 40,000 native plants, soundscapes, artworks, and educational workshops and connected ecological health with cultural celebration and creativity.

CAUL Hub Talk 2: Nature in the City. Sitting beneath the Gathering Tree.

Image <https://nespurban.edu.au/platforms/living-pavilion/>



The Bentway, Toronto, Canada. Underutilised freeway transformed into a cultural commons.

Seasonal arts programming, public gardens, skating, performances — integrated into public infrastructure.

Image: [Destination Toronto](#)



Goal 4: “We have a healthy, respectful, and inclusive community”

Our feedback

Health is focused predominantly on individual wellbeing and services, rather than including the health of Country, ecosystems, and community landscapes as integral to collective wellness.

Inclusion and respect are mentioned, but greater emphasis is needed on active decolonisation, accessibility to Country, and centring First Nations voices.

Community connection to **place, food, and ecological care** is largely absent from health and inclusion strategies. Meanwhile, over a third (38%) of Illawarra and Shoalhaven households experienced food insecurity over the past year, with 12% severely. In households with children, 30% of parents/caregivers said they were worried or unable to afford balanced meals for their families.⁶

Nature-based healing, green infrastructure for wellbeing, and cultural safety in public spaces are underdeveloped in the draft.

Recommendations

1. Expand the Definition of Health to Include Ecological and Place Health

A healthy community depends on healthy waterways, soils, air, ecosystems, and reciprocal care for Country. Promote biodiversity corridors, edible gardens, and water-sensitive landscapes as health infrastructure.

2. Embed Connection to Country as Core to Community Wellbeing

Actively promote opportunities for Aboriginal-led storytelling, cultural practices, and land care to be part of the everyday life of the city. Acknowledge that cultural healing and environmental healing are intertwined.

3. Build Culturally Safe and Inclusive Public Landscapes

Design public spaces that feel welcoming to people of all cultures, genders, ages, and abilities. Prioritise projects that demonstrate decolonial practice, respect for local Custodians, and accessibility to nature for all. Increase funding to WBG Plant Nursery, allow and encourage all residents - not just property owners - to purchase native plants.

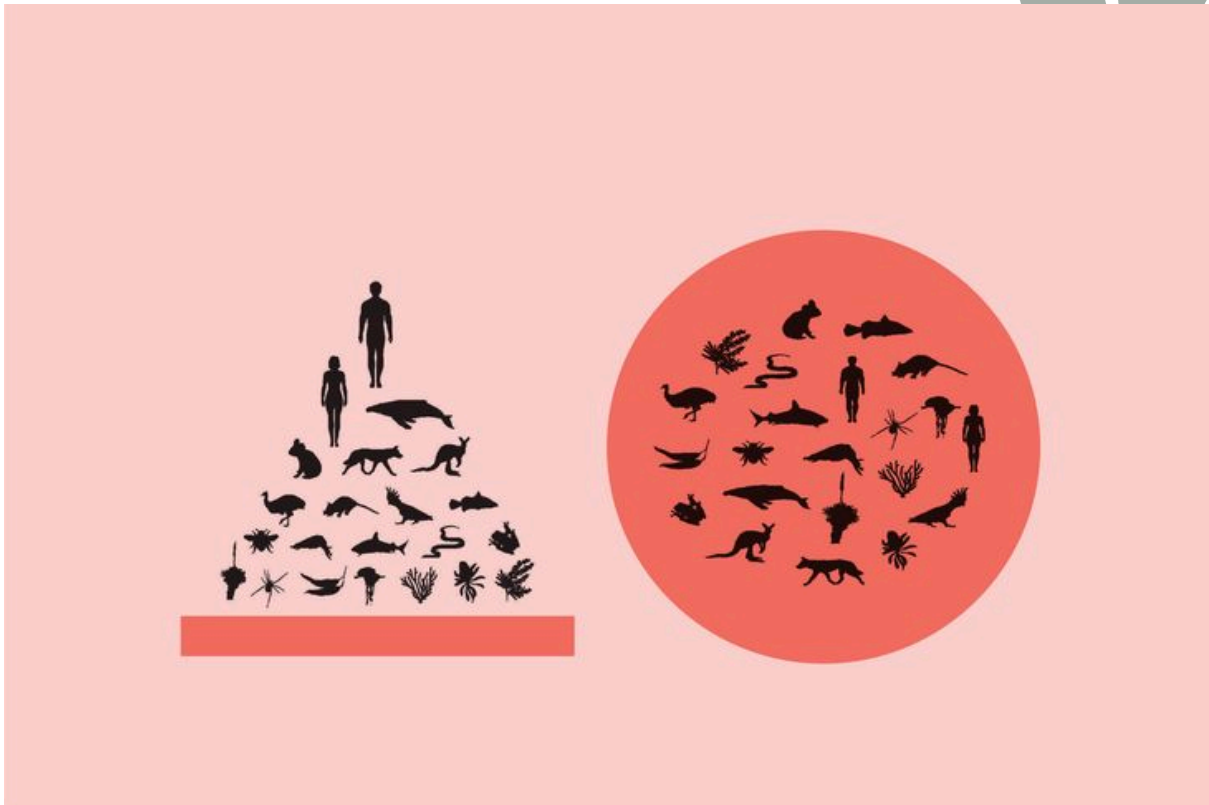
4. Recognise Nature as a Public Health Necessity

Green public spaces should be framed as critical public health infrastructure, especially for mental health, climate resilience, and social connection. Examples include urban cooling gardens and tree planting as preventive health actions.

5. Support Multispecies Justice and Wellbeing

Recognise the rights and needs of non-human kin — plants, animals, waterways — as part of building a truly healthy, respectful community. Promote local native gardens, pollinator habitats, and animal-friendly urban design (eg wildlife crossings and traffic adjustments)

⁶ “Our goal is to create an enduring food system which equitably supports the health, well-being and social cohesion of our community”- [Illawarra Shoalhaven Food Futures Taskforce](#), [Professor Karen Charlton](#) and [Dr Katherine Kent](#) of the University of Wollongong



The Connecting with Country Draft Framework adapts a diagram by German architect Steffen Lehmann (Eco v Ego, 2010) to describe the shift from a human-centred to a Country-centred view. Image: Steffen Lehmann



“‘Rewild Bondi is seeking to bring our verges to life. Integral to this initiative is understorey. While many of our streets contain trees and lawn, there is a striking gap when it comes to the space in between’ — Vicky Bachelard, Sustainable Engagement, Waverley Council



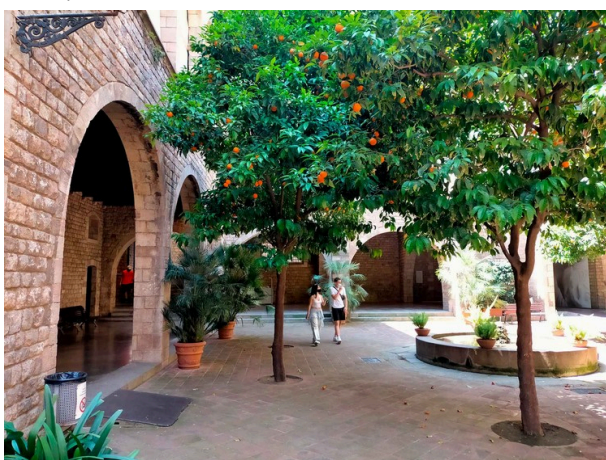
"Educating and informing: Starting with the youngest members of our community is a way to change perception from lawn-centric landscapes to beautiful verdant native gardens. Image: Annabel Osborne Photography." Source [Biodiversity in Place Framework](#)



Healing Forests, South Korea: Government-supported network of healing forests designed to address mental health, community trauma, and climate resilience. Blends science, ecology, and traditional knowledge to create healing spaces. Image: [Visit Korea](#)



Our very own Clarence Slockee! Yerrabingin Indigenous Rooftop Farm — Sydney, Australia. Australia's first Indigenous urban rooftop farm. A place for cultural education, food security, biodiversity, and connection to Country in the heart of the city.



Barcelona's Climate Shelters, Spain: Schoolyards and small public spaces transformed into cool, green refuges to protect communities during extreme heat events. Integrates urban greening, education, public health, and social inclusion. Image: [Arch Daily](#)



Conclusion

Understorey Landscape Architects know that meaningful change is only possible through collective advocacy and collaboration. Although we are a small and newly established practice, we want to use our voice and modest platform to champion regenerative, inclusive, and Country-centred approaches to city-making. Our feedback is offered in the spirit of care for Wollongong, a place we love and share, and where we see immense potential for leadership in environmental, cultural, and social innovation.

We sincerely hope to continue building a positive relationship with Wollongong City Council, working together in the future to create landscapes and communities that are more resilient, inclusive, and deeply connected to Country. We are excited to see a flourishing future for Wollongong and all who live here.



Residential gardens by Understorey Landscape Architects

Understorey Landscape Architects are community members Kathryn Morgan (Figtree resident) and Katrin Plogstert (Shellharbour resident). Katrin is a senior landscape architect registered with the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects, and Kathryn is a Master's of Landscape Architecture student and teaches in the UTS School of Architecture.

Understorey supports the overall direction of Wollongong Council's 2035 Community Strategic Plan (CSP) but believes stronger ambition is required to ensure that Wollongong becomes not only a "sustainable" city, but a regenerative, culturally inclusive, and future-leading city worthy of its remarkable environmental gifts.