

Progress Report

LIVING
LAB
NORTHERN
RIVERS

2022–2025





Cultivating a new model for community-centred resilience

Residents of North Lismore sharing
stories at the Living Memory pop-up
photobooths. Photo by Kate Holmes.

Living Lab Northern Rivers acknowledges the Bundjalung, Yaegl and Gumbaynggirr Nations as the Traditional Owners of the land within our boundaries, and recognises their continuous connection to culture, community and Country.

Contents

04	EXECUTIVE SUMMARY A new model takes shape	28	WORKING WITH COMMUNITIES (02) Community-centred methods
06	WHO WE ARE Global expertise, local innovation		SPOTLIGHT PROJECTS 30 Living Memory 32 Mapping community values 34 Bring It On Home
08	MEASURING PROGRESS AND IMPACT Alignment with key frameworks		
10	OUR MODEL Building a new critical infrastructure	36	BRINGING GROUPS TOGETHER (03) Convening Power
	12 OUR KEY PRINCIPLES Core elements of the model		SPOTLIGHT PROJECTS 38 Think Tank: Housing Now Forum 40 Richmond River Catchment Mapping
	14 OUR UNIQUE VALUE What makes our model different		
	16 OUR RESEARCH AND CREATIVE PRACTICE COMMUNITY Our network reach	42	READY TO SCALE Expanding our impact
18	WHAT WE'VE ACHIEVED Proof of concept		44 OUR UNIVERSAL IMPACT Global implications
20	BRINGING EXPERTISE TO THE REGION (01) Technical expertise and a national network		46 Foundation for scale
	SPOTLIGHT PROJECTS 22 Look Ahead 24 Circular Timber 26 Research-driven evidence	48	Next steps

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A new model takes shape

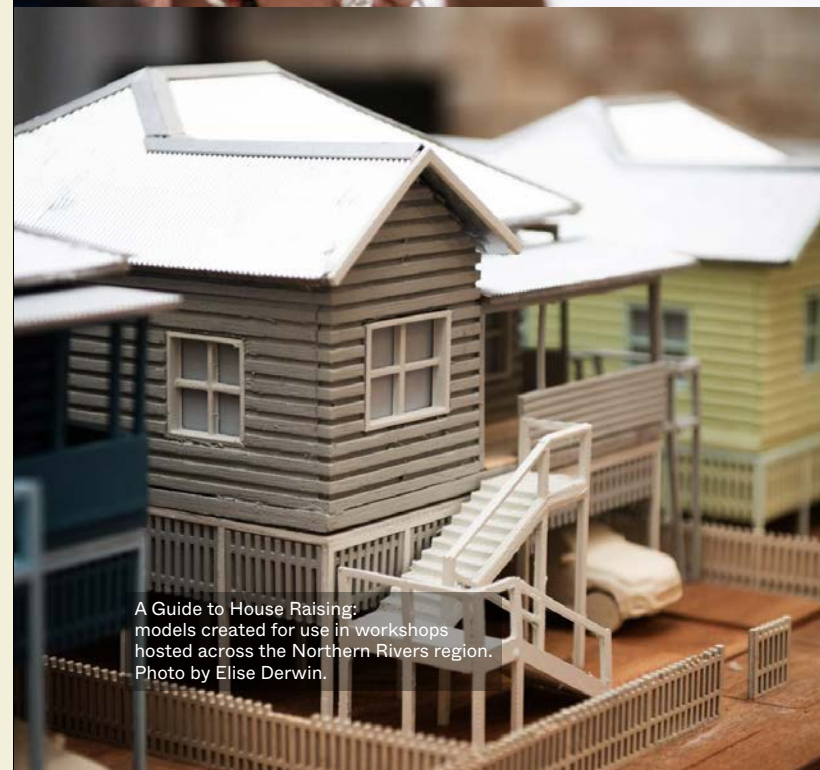
When devastating floods hit the Northern Rivers in 2022, they exposed the cracks in traditional disaster response models. The rising waters weren't just a reminder of our vulnerability to climate change; they made it clear that communities need new ways to adapt to unprecedented challenges.

Recovery would mean more than just physical reconstruction: it would require a wholesale rethink of how we build resilience in our communities.

Living Lab Northern Rivers was born from this moment, combining deep post-disaster recovery experience with innovative, community-centred resilience strategies. By operating in the crucial space between government, industry, academia, and community, we're proving that a different model is possible – one that brings world-class expertise and local knowledge together to drive real change.

This report documents our first two and a half years of operation in what has been a very complex and difficult operating context, typical of post-disaster environments. It's more than a record of activities; it's evidence that a new approach to disaster recovery and adaptation can work. We're demonstrating how regions can build resilience differently, creating a model with implications far beyond the Northern Rivers.

North Lismore residents participating in Living Memory community co-design meeting. Photo by Elise Derwin.



A Guide to House Raising: models created for use in workshops hosted across the Northern Rivers region. Photo by Elise Derwin.

EARLY PROGRESS

- Established a dedicated 'third space' through our Lismore shopfront, creating a physical base for community interaction in the Northern Rivers.
- Piloted a new model for disaster recovery and adaptation.
- Developed innovative tools for adaptation planning.
- Built partnerships across government, academic, industry and community sectors.

Global expertise, local innovation

Living Lab Northern Rivers brings deep, hands-on experience in disaster recovery and community resilience. Our leadership team has worked on some of the most important post-disaster recovery efforts around the world, including:

- Post Hurricane Katrina recovery in New Orleans and the US Gulf Coast, where our team members pioneered new approaches to community-centred rebuilding;
- Christchurch earthquake recovery, contributing to university-community engagement strategies;
- innovative community development strategies in Detroit, a city recovering from the disaster of major urban unrest and prolonged urban disinvestment; and
- other post-disaster and resilience-building projects across the US sponsored by the Federal Environmental Protection Agency.

Block Party, a co-housing case study by Spacecraft Architects New Zealand, featured in our Bring It On Home exhibition and public program. Photo by David Straight.



KEY TEAM EXPERIENCE



Elizabeth Mossop

Played a key role in post-Hurricane Katrina recovery in New Orleans; co-founded Louisiana State University's Coastal Sustainability Studio and was involved in numerous rebuilding, and adaptation projects including addressing extensive urban vacancy work in Detroit and multiple place-based projects for the US Environmental Protection Agency.



Dan Etheridge

Co-founded the Tulane City Center in New Orleans to support resident-driven recovery and rebuilding programs after Hurricane Katrina; co-founded and directed the Public Interest Design Student Leadership Forum at the University of Texas in Austin.



Ben Roche

Worked with the University of Canterbury on their strategic approach to engaging with disaster-impacted communities following the Christchurch earthquakes. At Southern Cross University, led the transformation of the campus into a comprehensive recovery hub during the 2022 floods, drawing on 25 years of experience in university-community partnerships.

Alignment with key frameworks

Living Lab Northern Rivers has spent the past two and a half years building partnerships and developing methods of effective collaboration and community-centred practice.

We are now ready to engage more rigorously with emerging monitoring and evaluation frameworks suitable for this work. While such frameworks exist, we need to prioritise developing a specific approach for our model and systematically capture learnings as we continue our work. We also look to established strategic plans and frameworks in which to ground our progress.



Footbridge over the Wilson's River, North Lismore. Photo by Elise Derwin.

THREE CRITICAL FRAMEWORKS

Our work directly responds to and advances three critical frameworks:

1. 2022 NSW Flood Inquiry Report

The Inquiry exposed systemic failures in traditional approaches and opened a window for new methods. Living Lab Northern Rivers' model directly addresses these gaps, particularly in:

- community participation in recovery planning;
- integration of local knowledge with technical expertise;
- development of more effective adaptation strategies; and
- utilising floodplains as assets.

2. Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction

As a UN-backed strategy signed by Australia, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction framework emphasises:

- proactive planning;
- risk-informed decision-making; and
- community-led resilience.

Our approach embodies these principles, demonstrating how they can work in practice at a regional level. The domestic implementation of the Sendai Framework is the National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework released by the Federal Government in 2019.

3. NSW State Disaster Mitigation Plan

The NSW Reconstruction Authority developed Australia's first State Disaster Mitigation Plan (SDMP). This government strategy identifies 37 short to medium-term actions to address policy and program gaps, aiming to reduce both the costs and impacts of natural hazards.

Our approach directly connects to the SDMP's Disaster Adaptation Plans, which are designed to:

- help communities become more aware of disasters and prepared to respond;
- inform future planning processes; and
- rebuilding and reconstruction efforts after a disaster occurs.

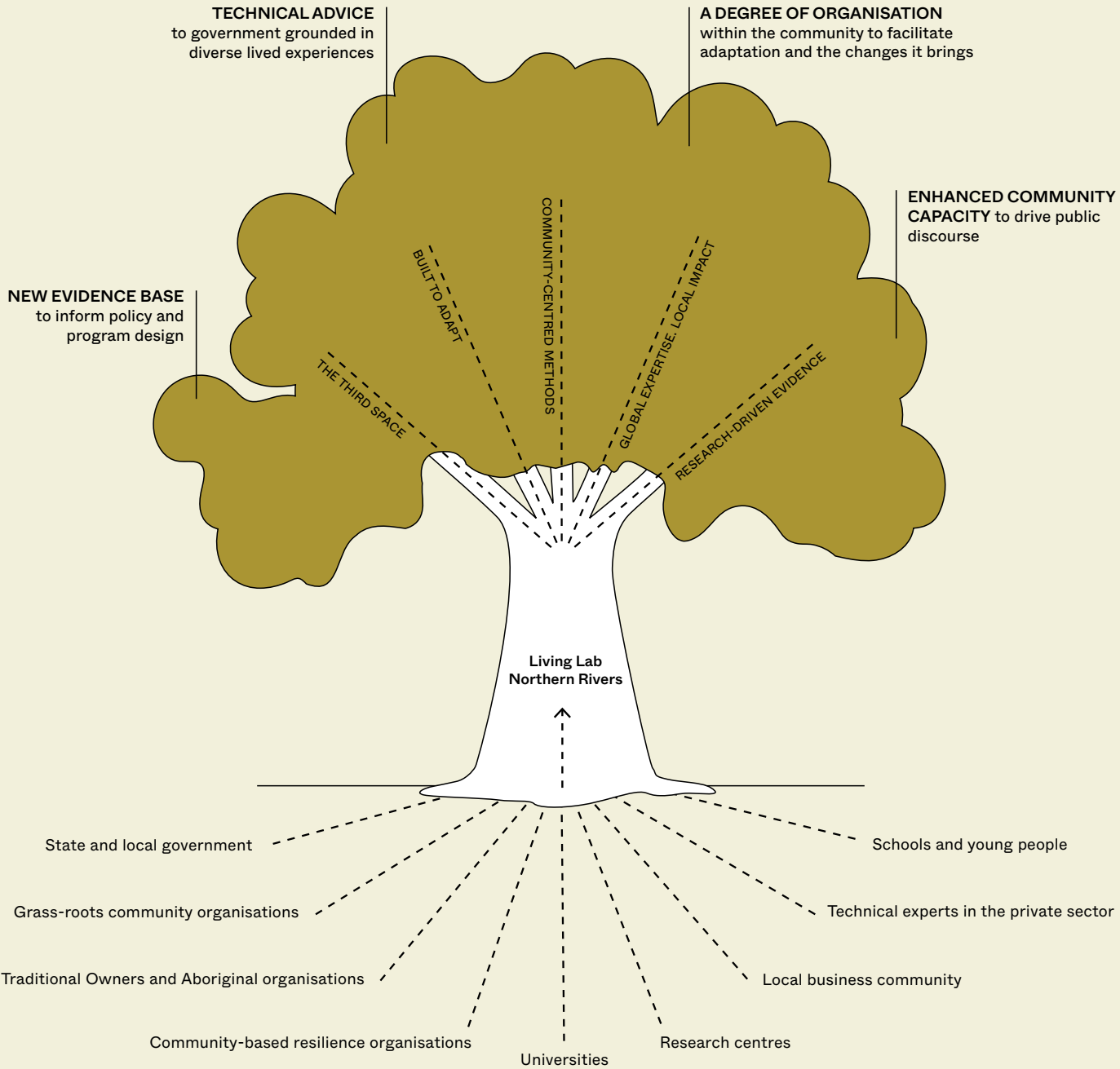
Building a new critical infrastructure

Living Lab Northern Rivers operates in the crucial space between government and community – independent enough to move fast, connected enough to catalyse real change.

Our model responds to a pressing need: while governments tackle escalating climate challenges through policy and programs, communities require immediate action. At the same time, policymakers depend on local insights to craft effective solutions but often struggle to access and apply this knowledge in meaningful ways.

This disconnect isn't just inconvenient – it's costly. Without strong links between lived experience and technical expertise, resources are wasted on solutions that miss the mark. Living Lab Northern Rivers creates a trusted space where policymakers, researchers, and local knowledge holders can collaborate effectively, ensuring that expertise and community needs align.

A collaborative approach in service of community-centred adaptation



Core elements of the model



1.

The third space

Living Lab Northern Rivers operates as a ‘third space’, borrowing from the sociological concept of a space that sits outside traditional institutions. Working beyond both government and academia allows us to test new approaches that wouldn’t be possible within traditional structures. We take the risks that government can’t – trialling ideas, ground-truthing options and ideas, creating community agency, and clearing the path for lasting change.
2.

Built to adapt

Living Lab Northern Rivers isn’t structured like a traditional organisation – and that’s intentional. We’re designed for flexibility, responding quickly as challenges evolve. A small core team anchors our work, but our strength comes from an expansive network of collaborators — academics, community experts, leading practitioners and industry leaders. We scale up or down as needed, bringing in the right people for the right problems.
3.

Community-centred methods

We’ve moved beyond traditional ‘engagement’ to develop new ways of working with communities. This isn’t just about consultation – it’s about creating the conditions for genuine co-creation, where local knowledge and technical expertise come together to shape solutions. Our methods ensure that communities aren’t just consulted about decisions but are actively involved in shaping solutions that have the potential to influence decision-makers.
4.

Global expertise, local impact

Our partnerships with Southern Cross University and the University of Technology Sydney provide world-class research capabilities and leverage global research networks, while our independence keeps us agile and community-focused. Few organisations in the adaptation and resilience space can move this quickly while staying this deeply embedded in local communities.
5.

Research-driven evidence

Through the establishment of the Adaptation Research Network, we have built a community of researchers who are leaders in their respective fields. This growing group can be mobilised to work with us to investigate specific challenging questions that must be answered as we build a new evidence base to drive policy and program design.

What makes our model different

KEY DIFFERENTIATORS

- **SUSTAINED COMMUNITY CAPACITY**

Unlike traditional project-based engagement, we’ve built lasting relationships and ongoing capacity across the whole region.
- **LOCALLY ADAPTED METHODS**

Our approaches are shaped by and responsive to Northern Rivers’ unique conditions and needs.
- **INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE**

All of our work is informed by a foundational partnership with local Aboriginal organisation Jagun Alliance. Through this partnership we can connect with Traditional Owners on specific projects, but more importantly we work consistently with Jagun Alliance to ensure Indigenous Knowledge informs our approach across our entire program.
- **BEST-IN-CLASS EXPERTISE**

We assemble purpose-built teams of leading experts specifically matched to each challenge.
- **EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION**

We translate complex information into accessible, actionable knowledge through innovative design and storytelling.
- **WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP WITH GOVERNMENT**

Our close collaboration with the NSW Reconstruction Authority shows how government agencies and independent organisations can work together to deliver community-centred resilience, support research, and influence policy design.

Unlike existing organisations, our model is specifically designed to:

- Address the complexity of adaptation problems across disciplines;
- Build trust through independence and lack of commercial interest;
- Maintain local credibility through a place-based approach;
- Respond flexibly as conditions change.

This ability to connect, adapt, and test new approaches is built into our DNA. Our structure and way of working are what make us different, allowing us to connect expertise and lived experience, ideas and action.



(Top and bottom) Tracing the Past, Shaping the Future exhibition opening. Photos by Elise Derwin.

“Jagun Alliance and Living Lab Northern Rivers have flowed together on journeys and gatherings for restorative growth. We have been wading in the mud left by not only the floods, but from layers of misunderstanding that can make it hard to move forward, without a common goal. Luckily we share a common goal realised through collaborative practice — reconstruction and resilience through design, planning and adaptive practices based on connecting to Country and respecting Indigenous Knowledge.

We have been imagining old and new ways of shaping and being shaped by communities and Country. It often feels like we are wiping away the mud to discover the beauty that lies beneath and all around us. We see its beauty and abundance! And we share a vision for healthy abundant communities and Country.

Yumbeleh garima jagun yoway.
(Safe travels respect country yeah.)”

Oli Costello
Executive Director
Jagun Alliance Aboriginal Corporation

Our network reach

The Adaptation Research Network

Living Lab Northern Rivers’ establishment of the Adaptation Research Network (ARN) brings research power directly into our region, mobilising the world’s best academic and specialist knowledge to tackle the Northern Rivers challenges.

A growing community of leading researchers who work together across traditional boundaries, the ARN connects otherwise siloed disciplines like engineering, architecture, environmental sciences, social sciences, arts, and mental health.

What makes the ARN special is how it bridges academic expertise with on-the-ground needs. When communities or government partners bring us challenging questions, we can quickly bring together the right mix of researchers to investigate these issues and develop innovative solutions.

This collaborative approach helps us build a strong evidence base for new courses of action. Through the ARN, we can assemble research teams to investigate specific challenges and create the knowledge needed to drive better policy and program design – all in response to the real needs of our region.

Our flexible structure connects:

- state and local government;
- grass-roots community organisations;
- community-based resilience organisations;
- Traditional Owners and Aboriginal organisations;
- technical experts in the private sector;
- local business community;
- universities;
- research centres; and
- schools and young people.

To deliver best-practice solutions to the region, the Adaptation Research Network has brought together experts from more than 20 specialised fields. To date, the specialist knowledge we’ve integrated into the Northern Rivers includes:

Environmental & natural systems

- catchment science
- environmental history
- hydrology
- indigenous land management
- landscape architecture

Built environment

- architecture
- civil engineering
- construction
- housing studies
- property development
- property economics
- urban design

Planning & management

- local history
- planning
- project management
- public health
- strategy

Design & communication

- visual communication
- information design
- photography
- design research
- interaction design
- data visualisation

We’ll continue to identify the knowledge and skills needed to address the region’s evolving challenges as we move beyond our initial establishment phase, building a network of specialists that adapts alongside our community’s changing needs.



Some members of the Adaptation Research Network from left to right: (top) Adele Wessell, Richard Benedict, Adam Russell, Amanda Reichelt-Brushett; (second row) Andrew Rose, Barbara Brown Wilson, Cherine Fahd, Chris Gaul; (third row) Olivia Ntim, Joshua Lewis, Johnathan Tate, Jane Wolff; (fourth row) Martin Bryant, Mary Spongberg, Nicole Gurran, Oliver Costello; (fifth row) Kate Sweetapple, Penny Allan, Andrew Toland and Brooke Jackson.

Proof of concept

The first two years of Living Lab Northern Rivers have been about proving a new approach is possible. While much of this work has been foundational – building relationships, testing methodologies, establishing trust – we're already seeing evidence that this model can drive real change.

Our achievements fall into three key areas, each demonstrating a crucial aspect of our approach:

01. Technical expertise and a national network
02. Community-centred methodologies
03. Convening power

Visitors at the Tracing the Past,
Shaping the Future exhibition.
Photo by Elise Derwin.



01. Technical expertise and a national network

What sets Living Lab Northern Rivers apart isn't just our access to expertise – it's how we apply it. Our network includes some of the only practitioners in Australia with deep experience in post-disaster environments, including team members who led successful recovery efforts after Hurricane Katrina. In other words: we bring tested approaches to Australia that work in the real world.

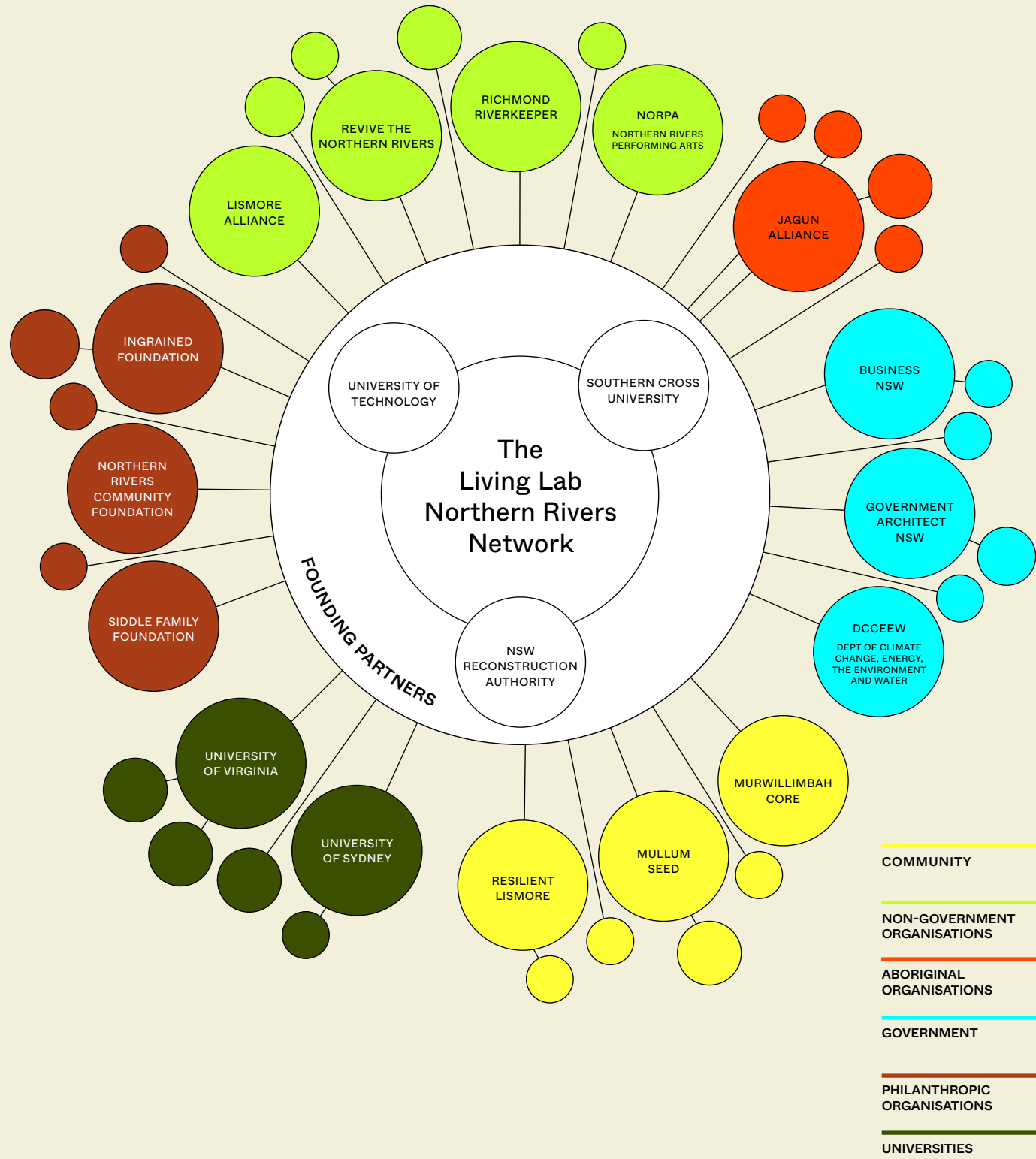
APPROACH

Living Lab Northern Rivers innovative approach to visualising community resilience has drawn international attention:

- Selected by University of Pennsylvania for case study development
- Contributing to international understanding of community-centred methods
- Setting graphic standards for global resilience case studies

- Our expert network includes:
- Leaders from successful post-disaster recovery efforts
 - Internationally recognised resilience researchers
 - Award-winning sustainable design experts
 - Indigenous knowledge holders
 - Community adaptation specialists

Building a network



SPOTLIGHT PROJECT

Look Ahead

→ Reimagining Lismore

Look Ahead exemplifies how we bring expertise and community knowledge together. This project wasn't just another planning exercise – it was a collaborative rethink of how a flood-affected city could rebuild smarter.

We assembled a team that paired nationally recognised researchers, engineers, architects, and urban planners with community members holding deep local knowledge.



PROGRESS

800+

Community members actively participating

14

Members in the technical expert panel

5

Planning scenarios developed for Lismore

5

Recommendations presented to decision-makers



Sharing ideas at one of the community meetings. Photo by Elise Derwin.

“Thanks for inviting myself and other business leaders to participate – we hope this work forms the foundation of many more discussions. I strongly support emergency housing, flood mitigation, vision and development for the CBD (and surrounds) and an economic recovery plan. A long way to go but this is a great start.”

Simon Stahl
CEO
Casino Food Co-op



SPOTLIGHT PROJECT

Circular Timber

→ Salvaging value from disaster

We’re piloting innovative approaches to post-disaster material recovery through our Circular Timber project. This initiative addresses a critical gap exposed during the floods: the lack of systems to salvage and repurpose valuable building materials that would otherwise end up in landfill.

Led by senior researcher Berto Pandolfo from University of Technology Sydney, a nationally recognised expert in creative approaches to circularity and material reuse, the team includes timber specialists, builders, architects, and researchers developing best-practice approaches for salvaging premium-quality local timbers from houses acquired under the NSW Reconstruction Authority’s Resilient Homes Program.

This project demonstrates our ability to pair technical research with practical community outcomes. Using two houses on Tweed Street in Lismore as pilot sites, the team is documenting deconstruction methods and developing detailed material assessment protocols. This research will inform a guide to timber recovery and reuse that can be applied across future disaster recovery efforts.

The findings will be showcased in a public exhibition in April—May 2025, demonstrating the technical and creative possibilities of material reuse. More importantly, the project is creating an evidence-based framework for incorporating circular economy principles into disaster recovery – an approach with potential applications well beyond the Northern Rivers region.

“Circularity demands products are kept in use for as long as possible. But when products can no longer be used we need to deal with them in a responsible manner. A product at its end of life is not just waste, products are made material and this material should be viewed as a resource.”

Berto Pandolfo
Associate Professor, School of Design
University of Technology Sydney (UTS)



(Top) Co-design workshop participants included local timber suppliers, carpenters, builders, architects, artists and business owners. Photo by Meg Louis.

Berto Pandolfo and Kris Gardener, Big Scrub Salvage, inspecting timbers during deconstruction of a buyback house in North Lismore. Photo by Kurt Petersen.

PROGRESS

2

Buyback houses deconstructed as part of the pilot project

9

Tonnes of reclaimed timber from two deconstructed houses

59

Objects crafted by makers as part of the Circular Timber: From Salvage to Showcase exhibition

3

Recommendations for developing a robust timber recovery and reuse system

SPOTLIGHT PROJECT

Research-driven evidence

→ Improving policy and program design

Living Lab Northern Rivers is building a strong evidence base to support policy and program development through rigorous applied research. Our partnerships with academic institutions enable us to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical implementation, creating actionable insights for complex regional challenges.

Through two major research initiatives in 2024, we have developed frameworks and recommendations to address housing challenges in disaster-affected regions.



“Communities that embed housing in their disaster planning recover more effectively. The research clearly shows that housing recovery is a long-term process, typically taking 5–10 years. This framework helps align our emergency responses with that reality, making sure communities have the support they need for the long term, not just the first couple of years.”

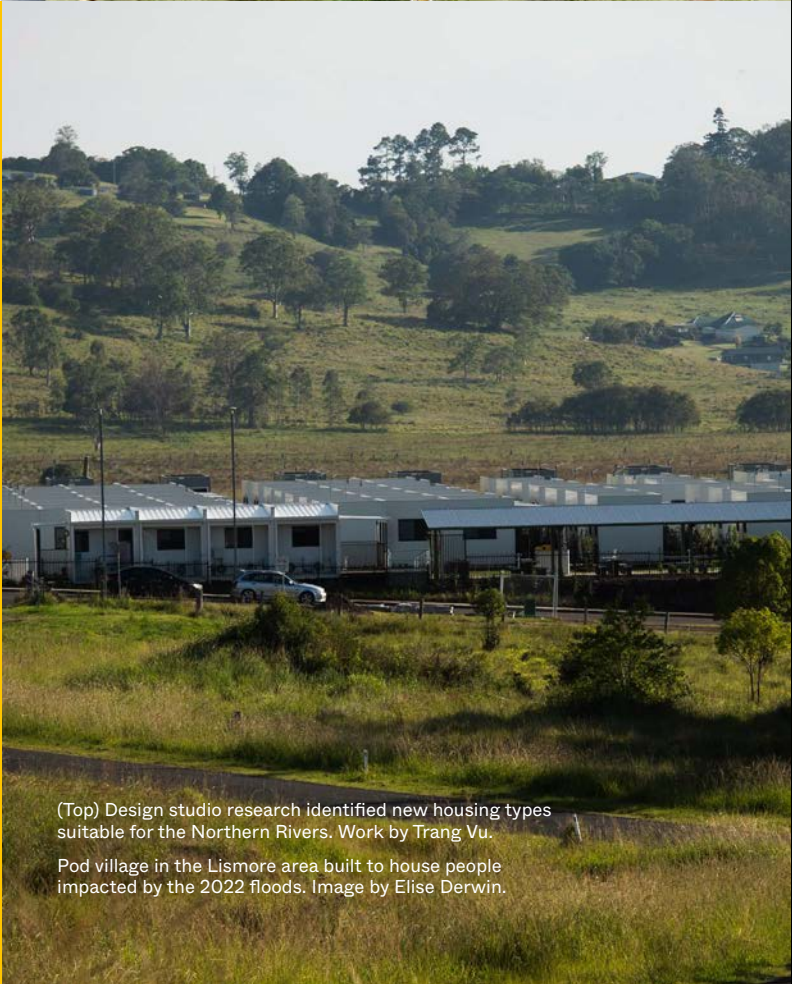
Richard Benedict
Research Associate
University of Sydney

01

Housing in Disaster-Affected Areas: From Crisis to Long-Term Resilience

Commissioned by the NSW Reconstruction Authority, this research created a best-practice framework for integrating housing considerations into disaster planning and management. The study combined international research evidence, in-depth case studies of comparable disaster events, and stakeholder consultation in the Northern Rivers to produce practical guidance for emergency response through to long-term resilience planning. The resulting framework and implementation roadmap provide clear steps for integrating housing considerations in future disaster responses.

READ THE REPORT



(Top) Design studio research identified new housing types suitable for the Northern Rivers. Work by Trang Vu.
Pod village in the Lismore area built to house people impacted by the 2022 floods. Image by Elise Derwin.

02

Resilient Housing for the Northern Rivers

Undertaken by University of Technology Sydney (UTS) and Living Lab Northern Rivers with support from the NSW Reconstruction Authority, this research explored alternative approaches to housing in flood-prone areas. Through intensive design studios, the work identified practical alternatives for more resilient, affordable and demographically diverse housing suited to our region. The research produced emerging principles for house raising, new housing types, and transitional housing solutions that could inform future development in the Northern Rivers.

READ THE REPORT

COLLABORATORS

- Research and creative practice
- Martin Bryant
Professor of Landscape Architecture, UTS
- Adam Russell
Architect and Partner, Saltbush Projects
- Brooke Jackson
Architect and Studio Lead, UTS
- Nicole Gurran
Professor of Urban and Regional Planning, University of Sydney
- Richard Benedict
Research Associate, University of Sydney
- Olivia Ntim
PhD candidate, UTS.

02. Community-centred methods

Our approach goes beyond traditional community engagement, creating new ways to integrate local knowledge with technical expertise. Through our collaborative processes and knowledge-sharing initiatives, we give communities the tools to meaningfully participate in rebuilding efforts – not just as stakeholders, but as co-creators of solutions.

MAKING COMPLEXITY ACCESSIBLE

Rebuilding after disaster presents us with the opportunity to rethink fundamental systems – from housing design to flood mitigation strategies. But communities can only play an active role if they have the knowledge and tools to engage meaningfully. That’s why we’ve built an ongoing program that bridges the distance between research and real-world action:

- Public exhibits that translate technical concepts into accessible formats
- Interactive workshops that bring experts and community members together
- Panel discussions that explore new possibilities
- Regular open houses at our CBD location
- ‘Knowledge on the Road’ program brings exhibits and discussions to coffee shops, community centres, recovery hubs, galleries, and classrooms across the Northern Rivers.

THE POWER OF PLACE

Our shopfront in Lismore’s CBD isn’t just an office – it’s a physical manifestation of our approach. Open to anyone, it serves as a space where community members and decision-makers can explore ideas, connect with experts, and actively participate in shaping solutions. This dedicated ‘third space’ has become a crucial piece of civic infrastructure, supporting the knowledge exchange needed for effective adaptation.



Living Memory community co-design workshop. Photo by Elise Derwin.

KNOWLEDGE TRANSLATION

7

Public exhibitions created and hosted

10

Primary and high school visits to our exhibitions

570

Hours shopfront open to the public

10

In-the-field trips and on-Country visits

8

Co-design workshops hosted

41

Living Lab Talks, workshops and community conversations

SPOTLIGHT PROJECT

Living Memory

→ Preserving community stories

When many residential properties in North Lismore became part of the Resilient Homes Program buyback - the largest residential buyback program in Australian history - a vibrant community faced unprecedented transition. As residents moved away, there was a risk that local stories, history, and deep understanding of place would disappear with them.

Living Memory emerged as a creative response to this challenge, designed to capture and preserve the rich cultural heritage of North Lismore during this massive transformation. At its heart is a commitment to support community members in telling their stories in their own words.

Working directly with current and former residents, Living Lab Northern Rivers assembled a multidisciplinary team including historians, photographers, and audio documentarians.

Through co-design workshops, pop-up photobooths, and in-depth oral history interviews, the project has created a growing archive of community memories, portraits, and historical artefacts.

This collaborative approach exemplifies our community-centred methods by prioritising resident voices and creating space for shared remembrance. Rather than simply documenting a neighbourhood in transition, Living Memory celebrates the people, culture, and resilience that define “Northie” identity – ensuring these connections endure even as the physical landscape changes.

The project’s digital archive will preserve these stories for future generations, creating a lasting record of North Lismore at this pivotal moment in its history.



Living Memory pop-up photobooths (and left). Photos by Elise Derwin.

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

45

Community co-design workshop participants

72

Portraits captured at the pop-up photobooths in Bridge Street

15

Oral history interviews collected and preserved



“Stories make us human and they shape our identities. Banyam/Baigham or North Lismore deserves the best, richest, fullest stories we can tell in this moment of profound change, and that’s best done by community in their own words and images.”

Adele Wessell
Associate Professor, Faculty of Education
Southern Cross University

PROJECT COLLABORATORS

- **Adele Wessell**
Historian with 30 years in the Northern Rivers
- **Cherine Fahd**
Leading photographic artist, Associate Professor at UTS
- **Elise Derwin**
Award-winning photographer based on Bundjalung Country
- **Jeanti St Clair**
Audio documentarian and lecturer at Southern Cross University

SPOTLIGHT PROJECT

Mapping community values

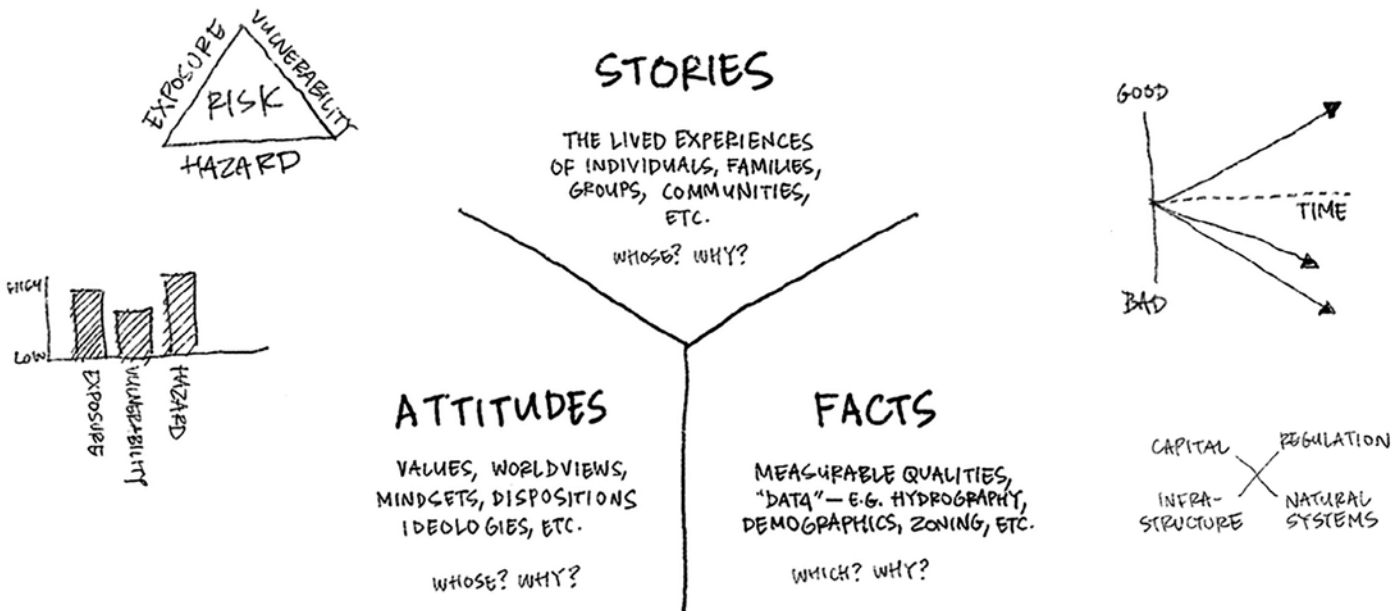
→ Valuing local knowledge

When the NSW Flood Inquiry recommended creating Disaster Adaptation Plans (DAPs) for vulnerable regions across the state, they opened a door to rethink how we plan for future challenges. The Northern Rivers was chosen as the first region to develop a multi-hazard DAP, presenting both an opportunity and a challenge: how do we ensure community values shape these crucial plans?

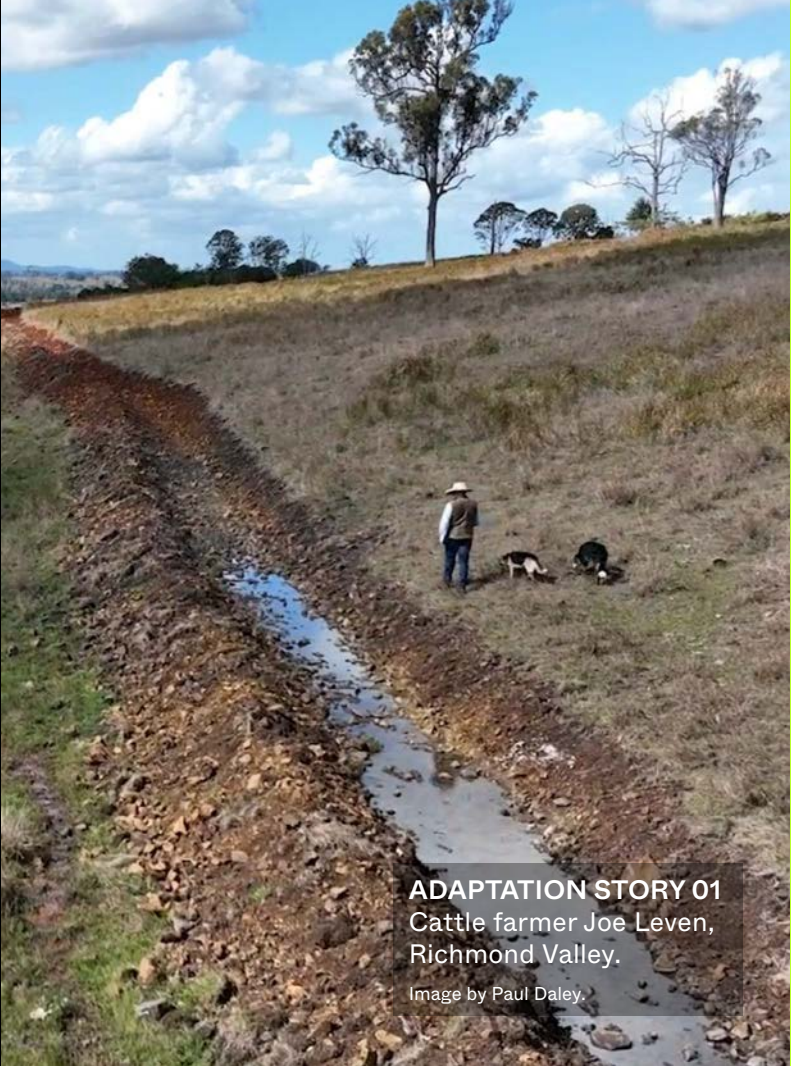
Living Lab Northern Rivers is originating new methods to bridge this gap. Working with design experts Kate Sweetapple (UTS School of Design) and Chris Gaul (Parallel Lines), we're developing innovative ways to gather, measure, and communicate what matters most to communities.

This isn't just about collecting data – it's about ensuring local values and identity directly influence decision-making.

Our approach recognises that effective adaptation strategies need more than risk assessments and technical analysis. They must also preserve what people love about where they live. By creating new tools to capture and communicate community values, we're helping ensure the Northern Rivers' first-of-its-kind DAP reflects both expert knowledge and local wisdom.



Illustrations by Chris Gaul.



ADAPTATION STORY 01
Cattle farmer Joe Leven,
Richmond Valley.
Image by Paul Daley.

PROJECT IMPACT

- Developing new methods for capturing, analysing and communicating community values.
- Creating tools to help decision-makers understand local priorities.
- Building a model that can be used across NSW and beyond.
- Ensuring technical solutions align with community needs.

“ The aim is to build a picture of natural disaster and adaptation in the Northern Rivers that puts conventional data in relation with human experience. We’re doing this to help communities and government form richer and more nuanced understandings of the landscape of adaptation.”

Chris Gaul
Founder and Design Director
Parallel Lines



ADAPTATION STORY 02
Cara MacLeod, Fire to
Flourish, Clarence Valley.

Image by Paul Daley.

SPOTLIGHT PROJECT

Bring It On Home

→ Housing solutions together

When the 2022 floods hit, they collided with an existing housing crisis, creating unprecedented challenges. As the NSW Reconstruction Authority began buying back high-risk properties, they also committed to building new housing – presenting an opportunity to reimagine housing solutions for the Northern Rivers.

Living Lab Northern Rivers responded by creating a dynamic platform for innovation. Through co-design workshops, we brought together residents, housing experts, and decision-makers to explore new possibilities for regional housing.

These conversations evolved into a major public exhibition that made complex housing challenges accessible to the broader community.

The exhibition helped lay the groundwork for a series of housing projects and collaborative initiatives, bringing together technical experts, community members, and government agencies as they work to deliver more resilient housing options for the region.



Streetscapes of the Northern Rivers. Illustrations by Rick Shearman. (Below) Exploring house raising and retrofitting designs to get living spaces above future flood levels. Model by Benjamin Brennan.



Visitors to the exhibition in our Lismore shopfront. Photo by Elise Derwin.

PROJECT IMPACT

1,180

Exhibition visitors and participants at public program events

16

Innovative infill housing case studies and speculative designs created

18

Talks, workshops and incursions as part of the exhibition's public program

32

Expert housing researchers and practitioners consulted



03. Convening power

Living Lab Northern Rivers has established itself as a trusted convener, bringing together groups that traditionally work in parallel but rarely intersect. Our independence and focus on practical outcomes has made us a natural gathering point for diverse stakeholders who are committed to regional resilience but may not have natural pathways to collaborate.

This convening role is essential because effective adaptation requires coordinated action across multiple sectors. Government agencies, community organisations, Indigenous Knowledge holders and industry representatives all contribute valuable perspectives, but often lack the dedicated spaces and processes to align their efforts. By creating neutral, purpose-built environments for collaboration, we help transform isolated initiatives into collective impact.

CREATING NEW PARTNERSHIPS

Through the Commonwealth Regional Partnership and Precincts Program, Living Lab Northern Rivers facilitated groundbreaking discussions about North Lismore’s future. We brought together Lismore City Council, the NSW Reconstruction Authority, Jagun Alliance, and the Bundjalung Tribal Society — groups with diverse priorities and perspectives — to develop a shared vision for the area’s renewal.

This process established new relationships and created space for Indigenous-led planning approaches, resulting in a joint proposal for a community-led masterplan. This significant step would not have been possible without a trusted intermediary to bridge institutional boundaries and facilitate meaningful dialogue.

COLLECTIVE INTELLIGENCE

Our structured Think Tank approach demonstrates how bringing diverse expertise to shared challenges leads to breakthrough solutions. By carefully designing collaborative processes, we help participants move beyond institutional constraints to identify innovative approaches.

Through these facilitated collaborations, we’ve established cross-sector partnerships, launched new initiatives, developed policy recommendations, and identified funding opportunities that would be impossible through conventional siloed approaches.

The power of convening is ultimately about transforming how decisions are made. By creating the right conditions for diverse stakeholders to work together effectively, we help ensure that recovery and adaptation efforts benefit from the full spectrum of available knowledge, resources, and perspectives.



Facilitated community meetings as part of the Look Ahead: Community design for Lismore process. Photo by Elise Derwin.

SPOTLIGHT PROJECT

Think Tank: Housing Now Forum

→ Ideas into action

Our Think Tank series demonstrates our convening power in action. We've hosted multiple sessions on topics ranging from circular economy solutions to housing challenges, each leading to concrete outcomes. One session resulted in nine proposed pilot projects—including Circular Timber, which is now underway.



“Living Lab Northern Rivers’ professionalism, creative approaches to complex issues and genuine willingness to work together is a joy — and has enabled us to align diverse perspectives toward common goals. This collaborative approach has created new partnerships and projects for sustainable regional resilience.”

Jane Laverty
Regional Director
Business NSW

OUTCOMES

The Housing Now Forum brought together:

- Business NSW
- architects
- planners
- local government
- Lismore Base Hospital
- community housing providers
- Homes NSW
- housing activists
- youth representatives
- Government Architect NSW
- housing builders
- housing developers
- housing financiers
- state government.

RESULT

The broad reach of the forum has led to the development of a series of six pilot projects that have been presented to NSW Minister for Housing Rose Jackson and are helping to move initiatives forward for the region.

These include:

- A secondary dwellings initiative to streamline development across local government areas (LGAs);
- A demonstration village to showcase diverse housing alternatives;
- The Northern Rivers Dream Home Fund to support new housing development;
- A program for fast, affordable reuse of buyback houses;
- Essential worker housing near Lismore Base Hospital; and
- A regional education and marketing campaign.

SPOTLIGHT PROJECT

Richmond River Catchment Mapping

→ A hybrid approach

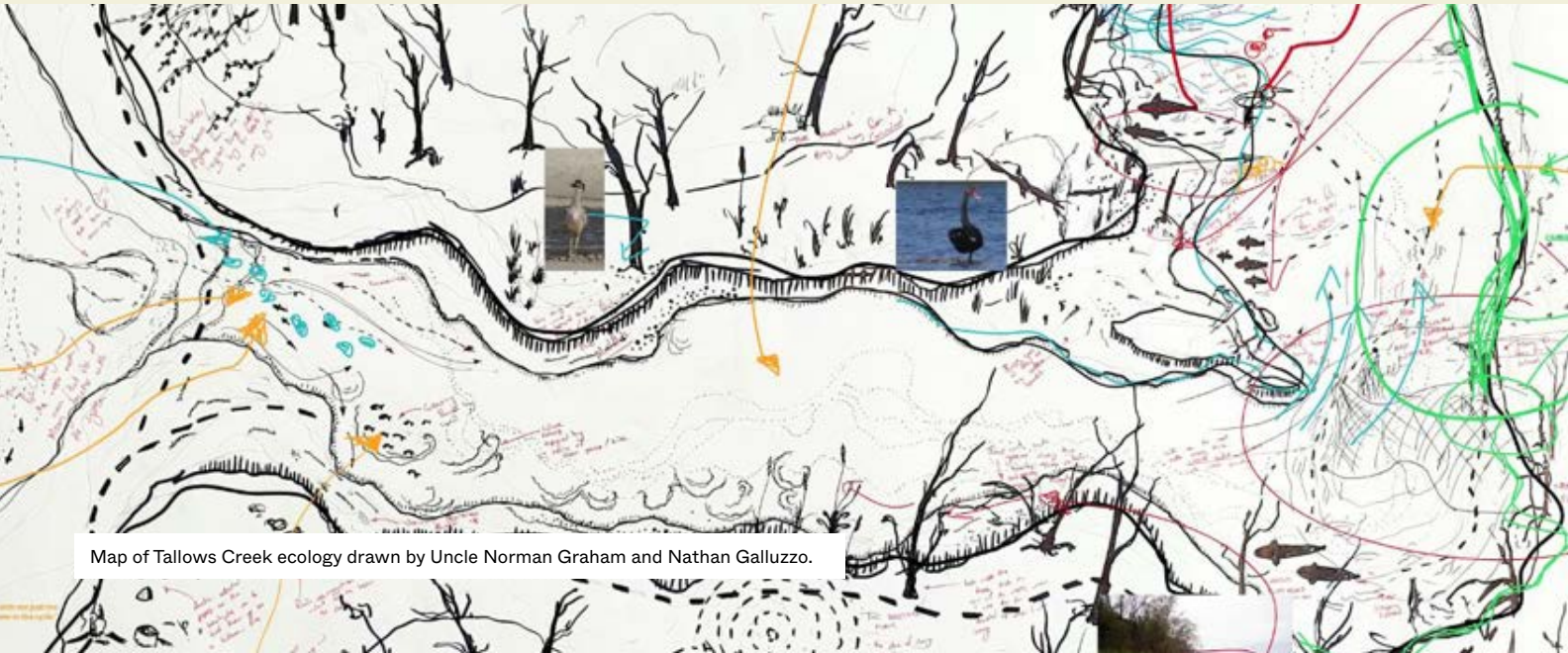
The Richmond River catchment faces significant environmental challenges, from water quality degradation to habitat loss. Despite substantial investments and numerous organisations working on solutions, there was no comprehensive way to visualise these collective efforts or engage the broader community with this vital work.

The Richmond River Catchment Mapping project addresses this gap by developing innovative approaches to mapping that enhance collaboration and storytelling across the catchment. Working with the NSW Department of Energy, Environment, Climate Change and Water, Living Lab Northern Rivers explored how mapping could answer a fundamental question: How do the various organisations working throughout the catchment coordinate their efforts and build public engagement with their work?

What makes this project distinctive is its hybrid approach to mapping. Rather than creating a conventional technical map, the team developed two interconnected mapping styles: a data-based GIS map showing project locations and details, complemented by narrative-based maps that tell the stories behind the data through cross-sections, photographs, and accessible text.

This innovative methodology demonstrates Living Lab Northern Rivers’ convening power by bringing together stakeholders from across government, private, and community sectors for collaborative workshops. The resulting prototype provides a powerful tool for collaborative governance — helping organisations align their work while simultaneously engaging the public with the story of environmental restoration throughout the catchment.

The next phase will expand this prototype into a comprehensive interactive online mapping tool that strengthens connections between technical expertise and community knowledge.



Participants collaborating at the first workshop in 2024.

“The research into alternative mapping transcends the boundaries of traditional cartography, and reframes the map as a tool for communicating resilience-building approaches amongst local communities in a collaborative governance partnership.”

Martin Bryant
Professor of Landscape Architecture
University of Technology Sydney

PROJECT IMPACT

6900

Square kilometres in the Richmond River catchment

300+

Species of trees in the catchment

125

Active projects across the catchment

10

Organisations collaborating on the mapping project

Expanding our impact

With our model proven and infrastructure established, we're ready to scale our impact across the Northern Rivers and beyond. Our foundations in community trust, tested methodologies, and strategic partnerships position us to expand successful pilots, influence policy development, and build lasting regional capacity for resilience.



A Place of Oysters; a collaboration with NORPA, OzFish, Richmond Riverkeeper and InGrained Foundation.
Photo by Clare Bernadette.

Global implications

The Northern Rivers’ experience offers crucial lessons for regions worldwide facing climate challenges. Our initiatives are already gaining international recognition and contributing to global conversations about community-led resilience.

International recognition

The innovative work in the Northern Rivers has drawn significant international attention. The University of Pennsylvania has selected our approach for case study development, positioning our region as a model for community-led resilience. Our methods are now setting graphic standards for global resilience case studies. Through this recognition, we’ve established connections with Kings College London and developed a growing network of global resilience practitioners who are learning from the Northern Rivers experience.

Advancing global practice

Our approach to integrating local knowledge with technical expertise is helping shape international conversations about effective adaptation. By demonstrating how universities and communities can collaborate through new models of engagement, we’re challenging traditional siloed approaches to resilience building. This evidence-based approach shows that meaningful community participation leads to more sustainable outcomes than top-down interventions alone.

Regional transferability

While deeply rooted in the Northern Rivers context, our practical methods for community-led planning and knowledge translation techniques offer valuable insights for other regions. Our experiences in post-disaster recovery provide tested approaches that can inform similar efforts internationally, especially as climate impacts intensify globally. The frameworks we’ve developed can be adapted to diverse geographical and cultural contexts, providing valuable starting points for communities beginning their own resilience journeys.



Visitors explore a data visualisation of recorded major floods in Lismore over 130 a year period. Photo by Elise Derwin.

Foundation for scale

After two years establishing proof of concept, we have built the foundation necessary to expand our impact across the Northern Rivers and beyond. The infrastructure, relationships, and methodologies developed during this period position us for significant growth in our next phase.

TRUST AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

We’ve established credibility across government, academic, industry, and community sectors, building relationships with key stakeholders and demonstrating the value of our approach. This social licence allows us to operate effectively in complex post-disaster environments where trust is essential. The networks we’ve cultivated enable us to convene diverse groups and facilitate collaborations that wouldn’t otherwise occur.

OPERATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Our physical and programmatic foundations provide the essential platform for future work. The CBD shopfront serves as a visible community knowledge hub in Lismore, while our mobile exhibition capability extends our reach throughout the region. Workshop frameworks, documentation systems, and event structures provide tested templates for future engagement activities. Most importantly, the Adaptation Research Network connects leading expertise across disciplines, providing access to specialist knowledge as needs evolve.



Magellan Street, Lismore.
Photo by Elise Derwin.

Strategic growth plan

With our model proven, we will focus on three strategic priorities for our next phase:

1. Scaling successful methodologies

The Look Ahead methodology can be expanded to other communities facing similar adaptation challenges. We will extend housing innovation pilot projects beyond concept development into implementation, working with partners to deliver tangible housing solutions. By documenting these approaches, we’ll create a replicable framework for community-led adaptation that can be shared nationally.

2. Policy development

Our partnership with the NSW Reconstruction Authority has demonstrated how independent organisations can effectively support government-led recovery efforts. We will deepen this collaboration while expanding relationships with other agencies to influence emerging resilience frameworks. By creating prototypes and demonstrating community-centred approaches, we can help shape more effective disaster response and adaptation policies at state and national levels.

3. Regional capacity building

Expanding our ‘Knowledge on the Road’ programme will bring adaptation resources to more communities across the Northern Rivers. By developing targeted partnerships and supporting locally-driven initiatives, we’ll ensure that resilience-building becomes embedded throughout the region. This approach recognises that lasting change requires broad participation—something only possible when communities have the tools and connections to shape their own futures.

Next steps

The Northern Rivers has an unprecedented opportunity to become a global leader in community-centred resilience. The foundation we’ve built provides a launchpad for transformative change.

We connect expertise with community knowledge. We partner with government and universities while maintaining independence and we test new approaches to adaptation in real-world settings.

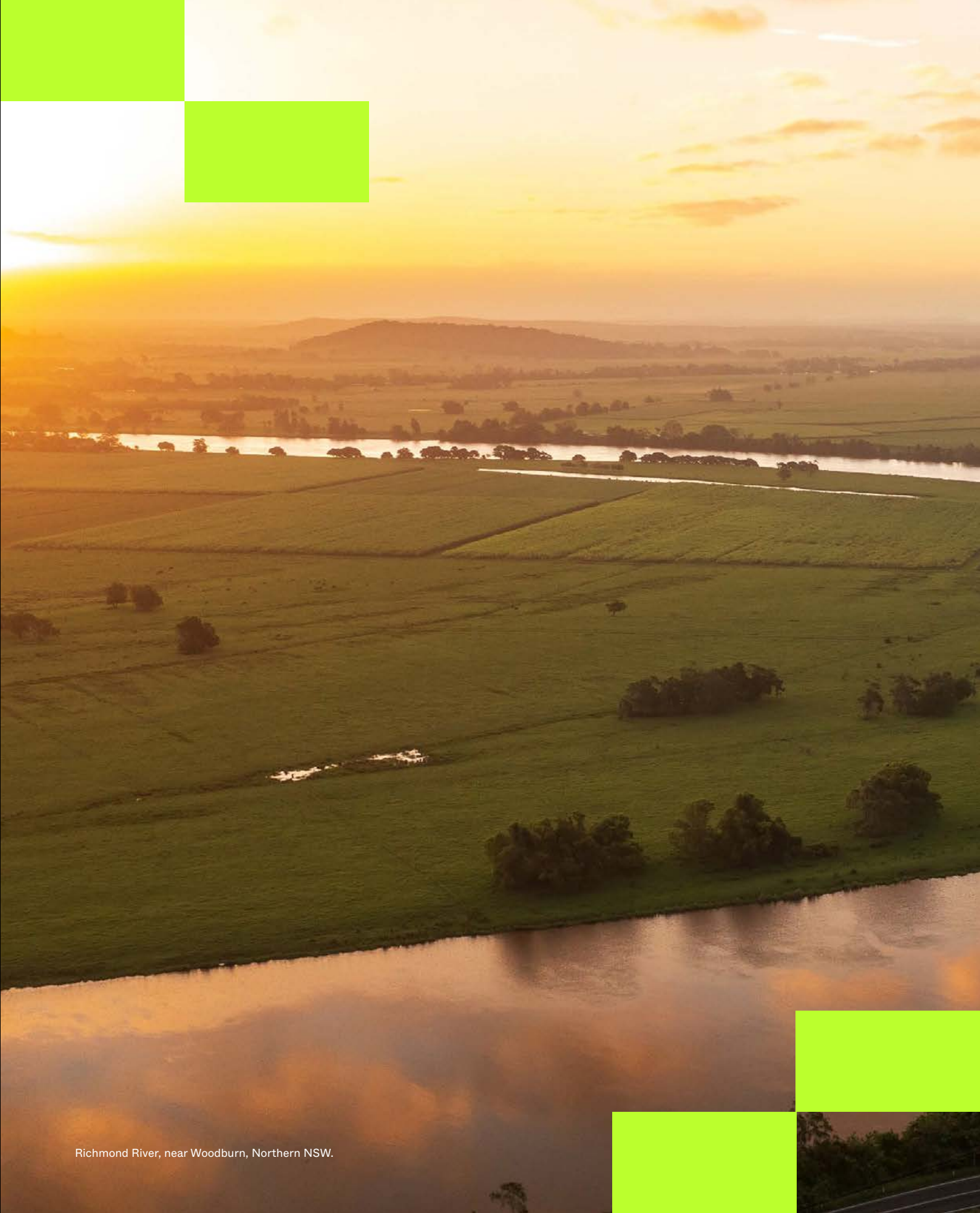
Realising this potential requires sustained commitment from partners across sectors.

Support our work to help ensure this innovative approach benefits not just the Northern Rivers, but sets new standards for how communities worldwide respond to climate challenges.

GET IN TOUCH

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Where research and community come
together for a thriving Northern Rivers.

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