



# Green Gown Awards Australasia

## Student Engagement

2020 Case Study



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**NEWCASTLE**  
AUSTRALIA

**out(fit)**

out(fit) offers students the opportunity to utilise their technical skills and passion to benefit the community in a dynamic, and supported project-based initiative. This ethos drives all of our projects. out(fit) is based entirely on teamwork and was founded on the idea of design activism: using our collective skills set as students embarking on careers in architecture, design and research to:

- identify a problem, or a need, in the community and /or in the Built Environment industry
- use our initiative, organising skills and combined energy to address the problem
- demonstrate the strength of teamwork and
- deliver an outstanding result.

Since out(fit)'s inception, we have had over 50 inquiries from various communities in need, with demand for assistance increasing every year. We select our projects based on the impact on the daily lives of women and children, the client's willingness to work with students in a hands-on learning environment, and the effect our limited resources will have on delivering high quality design outcomes on very tight budgets. out(fit)'s project list has gone from one primary build project in 2016 to four in 2018, with over 6 events and build projects planned for 2020/21. Our vision is to grow out(fit)'s capacity to meet the community

need. We aim to build strong and enduring relationships with our volunteers, clients and local industry partners. out(fit) receives significant in-kind support, and some direct funding, from the University of Newcastle. We have a core team of 3 professional staff, who are supported by volunteers consisting of university students, graduates and local businesses. These volunteers, from certified builders to visual artists, offer their time and services to work on our projects and support our student volunteers in the form of working bees. These working bees give our student volunteers the opportunity to engage in meaningful community projects and connect with industry professionals. out(fit) has established links to many local architecture firms and other businesses which also provide in-kind donations of materials and services. By building strong and enduring relationships with our volunteers, clients and local industry partners, we aim to establish a group committed to the same mission. To date, out(fit) and the university have raised funds on an as-needed basis for specific projects and are now working towards strategic funds and partnerships to support a longer term, sustainable operation.

out(fit) is committed to improving the lives of women and children who have experienced domestic violence. We have completed several refurbishments of women's refuges, including Jenny's Place (Newcastle) and Warlga Ngurra -(Wallsend), with plans to complete similar works with Allira House (Lake Macquarie), Singleton Family Support and Carrie's Place (Maitland), in this financial year.

Our team also worked with St Dominic's Centre (Mayfield) and St Kevin's Primary School (Cardiff) to design and build play spaces for children with autism.

Our most recent achievement has been to custom build and operate a community outreach truck. The outreach truck has enabled out(fit) to engage in promotion and provide event support to many University of Newcastle affiliated events, raising out(fit)'s

profile and engagement of the student cohort and the broader community. Once the COVID pandemic restrictions lift, the truck will facilitate activities and projects further afield in regional NSW which will allow our students to engage in a broader range of activities, from traditional pro bono design consultations for non-profit organisations to informal events and exhibitions which engage the broader community, sharing knowledge and empowering people to assess and change their own built environment.

## FIND OUT MORE



## Environmental & Social Benefits

Within each of our projects, out(fit) aims to positively impact underrepresented communities through pro-bono design and build projects, providing solutions to address the needs of our communities by improving personal safety, health and wellbeing.

Female student volunteers are given the opportunity to develop skills in project development, management and leadership. They also gain hands on construction experience whilst volunteering on the working bees. It is a goal of out(fit), that the combination of hands on, real world experience, combined with the empowerment of knowing their labour has contributed to a greater good, allows female students the opportunity to find motivation to stay engaged in a profession that preforms poorly in retaining and promoting women.

## Leadership & Engagement

out(fit) combines both student engagement and community benefit through the lens of gender equity. With a focus on the disadvantages women and children face and exacerbated by the spaces they interact with. out(fit) aims to make measurable change to people's lives through interventions to their built environment. out(fit) also aims to build capacity and confidence within our female student volunteers, building resilience as they enter the built environment professions, where female participation is significantly underrepresented.

# Wider Societal Impact

Out(fit)'s recent activities have focused on the provision of outdoor spaces that offer refuge to women and children. Although the projects may be small in scope, the women and children accessing these works experience a greater quality and diversity of facility through the delivery of safe, secure spaces for play, respite, and rejuvenation. There is extensive research in the field of environmental psychology exploring the design of crisis accommodation which emphasizes the importance of varied outdoor areas. These spaces allow women and children to feel secure to play/interact with nature, re-igniting their imaginations and providing vital stimulation to parasympathetic nervous systems through physical activity. Additionally, these spaces allow for mothers to re-establish trust and bond with their children, fostering parental attachment after traumatic events; it is with this research in mind that out(fit) approaches the work we do in family centres and shelters.

Access to gardens, nature and sensory experiences is a crucial element in play spaces for all children, but especially children who are actively processing trauma or suffer from PTSD.

The frontline workers who support, assist and house these women and children will also benefit from improved facilities. This upgraded space enables them to deliver their essential service into the community with increased capacity, rigor and reach. The spaces that will emerge from this project can also be utilised to conduct art therapy sessions, garden spaces to hold support meetings, engage with family members and strengthen networks, or the simplest of improvements: somewhere to just be a kid.

Disadvantaged communities around New South Wales lack access to well-designed spaces and design thinking.

The 'Dropping off the Edge Report 2015' has identified areas across Australia with persistent locational disadvantage. These areas are often overlooked, with the built environment neglected and vital services being run out of less than ideal situations. The prevalence of domestic and family violence and intimate partner violence are noted in the report as one of the core characteristics of disadvantaged communities, having significant individual and social costs. Exposure to domestic violence is a risk factor for homelessness, mental health problems and juvenile offending (all key drivers of poverty).

In the Hunter region there is an average of 11 female assaults every day.

The local government areas of Cessnock, Maitland and Muswellbrook have each recorded domestic violence related assault rates in the top 25 per cent of the state. As the most common cause of violence against women, domestic and family violence not only impacts the women experiencing it but has life-long effects on their children. Growing up in an environment where you are exposed to violence can profoundly impact a child's capacity for healthy future relationships, emotional wellbeing, education and engagement with work and community and is also closely linked to intergenerational cycles of violence. When women gain the courage to flee domestic violence with their children, they often end up at a local women's refuge. These centres are severely underfunded, with their physical environments focusing on security but not on comfort or play spaces for children. These women and their children in refuges are often in hiding. They cannot take their children to local parks or play-grounds. Thus, the need for quality external environments to support children who are suffering from trauma as well as giving respite to their mothers, is paramount.

Another key area of out(fit)'s focus includes play spaces for children with autism. Many schools in NSW have special needs children, and while classrooms have been retrofitted and teaching programs adapted specifically for these children, unfortunately, the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and State Government improvement funding does not cover the costs of outdoor play spaces. This provision of appropriate play space has become an area of focus for out(fit)'s project team.

## Top 3 Learnings

By allowing students to gain new skills in a supported environment, our female graduates are confident when joining a predominately male dominated workforce

Contributing to projects that benefit disadvantaged communities, working with diverse stakeholders builds empathy and broadens our student's experience

Through volunteering with out(fit) students develop skills in Leadership, Communication, Self-Awareness and gain the ability to think critically about life and future decisions