

REGULATORY OVERHAUL PART 1: HERITAGE IN THE BALANCE

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Heritage Landscaping- Does it Matter?**MATTHEW TAYLOR** BLARCH MBE (CONS)Director / Landscape Architect
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With ANZAC Day one month past, this can be seen as opportunistic time to have this talk on heritage as it highlights the importance of where we have come from and positions us for future decisions. Our landscape heritage is a reflection of many aspirations and social change over time.

In our work we prefer to inform the landscape design by acknowledging and understanding what has come in the past. Even for contemporary landscapes it is so important to be informed by both the existing surrounds and what may have come in the past. This in some cases does not have to be a fully detailed and comprehensive history of the site but it may be a situation of having some reference through general background.

I think that the critical element here is that it gives you confidence as a designer on the direction and form that the design may take. It adds a layer that has been missing in many projects in the past and forms an input that you can keep referring back to and testing your design against.

So, does heritage landscaping matter? The obvious answer to this question is yes. The question is based on the morals and intellectual pursuits of what are essentially middle class western values that form a substantial basis of the framework of our society.

Background

Heritage and specifically landscape is a test of community values. What is seen to be important at the time is assessed using contemporary educated values sourced from the very moral fibres of society. I recall Richard Twopenny in his ruminations on the colony of New South Wales reflecting on society's values at the time with comments such as an unkempt garden in full view of the street was a reflection on the low state of the morals of the inhabitants. Much of this 19th century sentiment is alive today.

It is interesting when you work in other areas of the world as I have, because these values that we take for granted as essential to our wellbeing have interesting turns and twists in other societies. What is important to us in a mature and middle class society here in New South Wales are readjusted and realigned for example in the UAE where the need for that society to realise some of its aspirations that have been put on hold for a number of different circumstances are now being realised. Guided in part by the very western sensibilities that we say are important.

So the present issues of environment, density and lifestyle for example that are expressed in current western thought are interpreted and used side by side with obvious displays of wealth tend to create contrasts of approach that appear to conflict. Where cities are being created and a society is in dramatic change this requires vast amounts of energy of all types to create and break thresholds of what were small and disparate populations originally located in this case in a desert environment on the edge of the Arabian Sea.

Heritage Review 2007

I use this example by way of attempting to provide some perspective on the underlying values that are expressed in the Report of the Independent Expert Panel being "A Review of the NSW Heritage Act 1977, dated December 2007. This report reaffirms in principle the values expressed in the Heritage Council Assessment principles and makes some further comment on how this assessment may be better facilitated in being relevant to contemporary values. There is an underlying assumption that heritage is of a value to the society and I concur, I support the values expressed wholeheartedly. It is the interpretation of those values that is a core judgement based on one's education and background is where apparent differences are discerned between practitioners and between community members. Much of this is possible in an open and free democratic society that we pride ourselves and encourage debates regarding relative values.

In dealing with heritage values and in particular landscape issues one must be very careful of how and why sites were listed and the reasons for the listing. When reviewing the listing there is always the advantage of hindsight and time, particularly in regards the early listings many of which were done as part of the first round of local Council heritage plans, a number of which I was involved in. It was important at the time that a line in the sand so to speak was instigated so that a point in time under limited resources and time frame a professional opinion was garnered to recognise the place. It is my opinion that the thematic histories in particular were valuable, as here was presented an overall history of the place that took in broader issues of the establishment of communities within a State wide framework. This was a vital step in forming a perspective on the engagement of society on the land and how and why patterns were created, modified, removed, amended and retained. It has been my experience that in many cases the

resultant contemporary patterns that we experience today are in the majority of cases based on very pragmatic reasons of the opportunities and constraints that were presented to the land owner at the time.

Brush Farm House, Eastwood

Take Brush Farm located at Ryde for example. Developed by Gregory Blaxland who brought the first wine to the colony in the early 1800s, Brush Farm is now finding a new role as a community centre the City of Ryde Council. Blaxland was a prominent member of the colony with an interest in the growing of wine (examples were sent back to England and won a number of awards), terraced the grounds for the cultivation of wine, grew crops for sustenance of the family, located on a spring on a ridge looking over the Parramatta River diagonally opposite his brother Richard Blaxland located in the mansion "Newington" where he cultivated a number of different crops depending on what was the most productive and the best return. Both these brothers had a plausibly flourishing time, before the brothers moved on and both the houses changed hands and ultimately were used for institutional purposes as society's needs altered.

When we look at the listing for these places, one of the primary reasons for the listing has been the association with the Blaxland's and the influence that they had on the early establishment of the colony. Various uses of the sites followed, such as part of Silverwater Jail in the case of Newington and a home for boys in the case of Brush Farm and then subsequently as community use for the City of Ryde. This last use comes at substantial cost to the community.

Brush Farm would be extremely marginalised without its setting, it looks down to the Parramatta River through a relatively recent landscape of trees established in the 1970s that forms an important extended part of its curtilage, allowing the visitor to imagine an adaptation of the rural qualities that are integral to the place. So the landscape is vital to the interpretation of place through this acknowledgement of the more immediate dependency on the land that this house had in its first hundred years. Contrasting to our own experience as city dwellers where for example produce is presented on a shelf in a shop and not around the dwelling that we live in.

Yaralla Estate, Concord

Similarly other estates such as Dame Eadith Walker Hospital (more commonly known as Yaralla) located on the Parramatta River at Concord has similar associations with the land its present extent the result of an Act of Parliament in 1937 on the death of Dame Eadith, the only daughter of Thomas Walker, 19th century entrepreneur and business man who accrued the property and built the house, much of was subsequently modified and reduced in land area as Dame Eadith spent her father's money on a variety of charities, overseas trips, entertainment, modifications to the house and garden resulting in its present layout.

So these places tell us what has occurred in the past and in this present society concerned with the material and style that we live in, provide a vital base for an understanding of how the patterns of civilisation that we have inherited influence in our thinking and provide a more rational path in our own present decision making and make us understand and appreciate more the complexities of our own place and time.

Heritage Landscapes

With heritage landscapes one must be aware of the changes over time the constraints of the vegetation in their life spans and the maintenance required for specific plants. Much of the remanent planting that now occurs in Centennial Park for example are the survivors, much of the original planting schemes having lost the plants that did not make the grade through not being resilient enough or being removed through the personal predilection of gardeners or directors. Much of landscapes expression are the result of personal interest and passion, realised in landscapes and not in other ways, while much of the expression reflects the norms and accepted characteristics of landscape of the time. There is a degree of flexibility within landscape expression that is not so prevalent in architecture that is to be acknowledged. Many landscapes are ephemeral and are not as resilient over time as the built form. In many cases changes can be more easily wrought in the surrounds to buildings leading to evolving changes to the landscape highlighting the contrast between a late 19th century building and an enthusiastic garden of a returned WW1 soldier for example that plants his Canary Island Date Palm in the front garden of his house.

To assess these changes it is important that qualified and experienced heritage practitioners be involved in the assessment and ongoing management of change, to acknowledge that change, and to decide when possible, at critical times, what is a correct decision in regards to the ongoing evolution of the item in question? This is particularly important when sites come under pressure for development and the original and evolving values of the place, contained within a recognised curtilage, are subject to development pressure, Particularly when the built item is in need of substantial monies to maintain its fabric and a new use to facilitate this maintenance has to be found.

Landscape can play a very important role in the accommodation of change, where critical functions and curtilages are identified. Sensitively handled and working in close coordination with a design team, the landscape can create new elements and spaces working within the original spirit of the place, a respect of the layering that has occurred since and a recognition that changes proposed are part of that layering process and should respect the place and indeed turn the changes into a positive addition to the item.

Proposed Changes and their Effects

In regards to the Review of the NSW Heritage Act, in my opinion even on minor items it is important that professional assistance is received. The cost of assessment for "Mums and Dads" scale of projects should be subsidised by the relevant government authority, underlying the importance of proper and comprehensive research. IHAP panels are not in a position to assess the proposal without clear research and background, with papers being provided to the panel with adequate time to review the report and ask questions of the applicant prior to an IHAP meeting. If this position is to be adopted the assessment may have to be made over a number of IHAP meetings to ensure adequate and thorough adjudication on the matter.

In regards to the proposal for Regional and Subregional strategy guiding heritage policy formulation at the local level, this may not recognise the importance of a number of the heritage items within the region and the collective memory of place that these items in part represent. It is layering of place that forms a vital part of the contemporary location that we find ourselves and the relative importance of the heritage items should inform the Regional and Subregional policies, highlighting the differentiation of the region or subregion to its adjacent or broader context. If this difference is not recognised and highlighted, the values that we have inherited will be diluted, just at a time enrichment of our values of society are required in a broadly international context.