

Vulnerable scenery: the shifting dynamics of a natural aesthetic in Australian postwar gardens

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INTRODUCTION

Modest, modernist houses of the mid-twentieth century were often informed by a range of different interactions with the Australian landscape; as backdrop, as setting, as justification for particular architectural expressions where house and garden were, increasingly, closely integrated. Such a garden was often one that embraced a natural aesthetic, by editing out just enough vegetation to enable a Pettit+Sevitt Lowline 3136¹ to be inserted, for instance. Alternatively, it could be created largely from scratch using an assemblage of predominantly Australian plants. The resulting design expressions coincided with a complex set of factors, including contemporary concern for preserving and representing natural landscapes, with an emphasis on simulating the effects of natural bushland.

Critical to shifts towards a natural aesthetic in the postwar suburban garden were advancements in horticulture and an increase in nurseries attempting to specialise in Australian plants.² Complicit was the proliferation of more widely circulating and popular home magazines and gardening treatises espousing the use of Australian plants and the creation of gardens embodying a natural aesthetic.³ Modernity, the rush of postwar development with an ethos of progress-at-any-cost, and, later, drought conditions in the late sixties also prepared the ground for a seemingly environmentally sympathetic and responsible approach to gardens and gardening in like-minded clients, landscape architects, and architects.

Despite these broad changes, the performance of Australian plants confounded the loved/'unloved' quality of these gardens. This has contributed to their subsequent vulnerability, along with other present-day pressures echoing those threatening the simple modern house: ever-increasing house sizes (smaller gardens); rising land values (different aspirations); changing lifestyles (little time for gardening); changing trends (highly constructed, created-in-a-moment outdoor rooms, the current vogue of spiky plants and gravel); and urban consolidation, for instance.

Drawing on selected works (physical places and ideas) this paper explores how the performance of these landscapes often fell short of horticultural and cultural expectations, before turning to challenges associated with identification, documentation, and conservation.

My emphasis is not so much a detailed narrative of events, as on the issues and challenges presented by these places and their conservation—by precise definition (Nara Document on Authenticity, Appendix II Definitions, and Article 1.4 of the Burra Charter 1999). Some of the issues are offered as representative of wider urban and suburban postwar Australian experiences, such as those that might also be encountered in public gardens and settings to postwar civic buildings and institutions (such as libraries, council chambers, university and college campuses) that embrace a similar aesthetic or a design ethos where building and 'natural' landscape are closely integrated.

In the context of this paper, *natural aesthetic* means gardens comprising predominantly Australian plants and intended to simulate the effects of natural bushland; the concept of natural bushland being largely a cultural and imaginative construct. As a trend, it gained momentum in the urban landscape and suburban garden in the decades following the Second World War. The term refers to what is often described in contemporary and recent literature as bush gardens⁴, and which are also described in terms of a 'native plant movement'⁵, 'artless naturalism'⁶, 'artful and imaginative landscape interpretations'⁷, 'idealised bush'⁸, 'native landscaping'⁹, a 'native

garden aesthetic¹⁰, 'the natural garden'¹¹, 'the natural Australian garden'¹², the "natural" style of gardening¹³, 'the "Bush School"'¹⁴.

PREPARING THE GROUND

A rapidly modernising urban environment, extraordinarily rapid growth in population contributing to immense social change, increasingly international thinking, and the decline of Empire were symptomatic of the time. These same factors contributed to rising ecological consciousness and provided fertile ground for renewed debates on matters of national and cultural identity. In such a context, a natural aesthetic embracing the effects and informality of natural bushland emerged alongside other concerns for increasing the content of Australian plants in suburban gardens.¹⁵

European interest in and affection for Australian plants existed from 1770, ranging from the scientific to a wider Darwinian-inspired craze for natural history¹⁶, from tourism to garden use. Until around the mid-twentieth century, however, Australian plants in horticulture were largely appropriated into imported European gardening traditions. From the mid-nineteenth century, Australian plants were promoted in popular gardening magazines for their symbolic value (such as their state-floral-emblem worthiness) or for their showiness. Waratahs, banksias, and acacias valiantly jostled for attention with 'glorious glads', 'dazzling delphiniums', and more and 'more about dahlias'!¹⁷

By the 1960s the same popular media began to feature articles and photographic representations of gardens embracing a natural aesthetic in a more holistic sense.¹⁸ The postwar period also saw a proliferation of natural aesthetic garden focused book and chapter-length publications, including the small, inexpensive, and beautifully illustrated *Designing Australian Bush Gardens* (1966) and *More About Bush Gardens* (1967) by Betty Maloney and Jean Walker. By 1968, adoption of a natural aesthetic by professional and amateur garden designers, garden writers, and gardeners was suitably widespread to warrant description as a 'native plant movement' by J.M. Freeland in *Architecture in Australia*. While '...small, almost esoteric in its wholehearted form,' observed Freeland, '[...] in a diluted form it affected a wide section of the populace who unexpectedly found the despised gum trees had primeval beauty. They planted them'.¹⁹ (own emphasis)

For some mid-twentieth-century gardeners, however, hardiness²⁰, showiness²¹, tidiness, and the ability to control remained important attributes for Australian plants within the suburban garden.²² Incorporating the odd specimen of Geraldton wax, grevillea, banksia, waratah, wattle, or eucalypt did not immediately unsettle such aspirations. For some, this gesture towards 'renouncing the old ways' was enough to engender a sense of modernity.²³ As McMahon (2005) writes, in such an approach, 'the onus for change was on the plants'.²⁴ For those others who embraced the trend more holistically, the onus for change shifted from the plants to cultural expectations. It is this more holistic adoption of a natural aesthetic that I am concerned with in this paper.

CONFOUNDING LOVED/UNLOVED QUALITIES

Paradoxically, some of those attributes that played a role in generating general appeal for a natural aesthetic in suburban gardens could be argued as complicit in their subsequent decline in popularity. While there was a growing body of knowledge about Australian plants, and many successful examples of a natural aesthetic in postwar gardens and designed landscapes were created²⁵, gardening with Australian plants was still largely experimental—even within professional design and horticultural milieux.

Freeland's *they* purchased and planted Australian plants, many opting for a non-purist form of bush garden. Sometimes the plants came with sound information on where and how to grow them, or this could be supplemented by reference to one of a growing number of gardening treatises with a focus on gardening with Australian plants. Equally likely, however, Australian plants would be purchased (sometimes within a fairly haphazard mixed collection²⁶) and grown by the unsuspecting gardener in the belief that the resulting garden would be simple, inexpensive,

would not require watering, and, even better in a society enjoying newly-defined concepts of leisure, it would be maintenance free.

'...your native garden—ag arden which will require no maintenance ... no weeding ... no lawnmowing.'²⁷

The enthusiast could also feel a measure of virtue, having created a garden that was 'in harmony with our own very wonderful environment'²⁸ by following those ideas designed '...for the reader who wishes to ensure the survival of his own area of bushland'.²⁹ Furthermore, by taking up with a garden culture seen as '...imperative to their [native plants'] survival', *they* could '...defeat, to some extent at least, the savage depredations of the bulldozer'.³⁰

Embedded in a number of the magazine articles promoting the use of native plants from the fifties, was the message that the 'favourites' (i.e. the waratah) were not difficult to grow, pre-empting reservations and encouraging even the most conservative or inexperienced garden to plant them.³¹ To some extent, advocating the aesthetic as something anyone with a sense of environmental responsibility and love of the natural environment could achieve, by expending little to no effort, contributed to a waning enthusiasm for the natural aesthetic. This was accentuated by those non-specialist nurseries who 'got on the bandwagon', selling Australian plants often without adequate advice about drainage and soil types, appropriate maintenance, light and space requirements to unsuspecting customers.³² In 1965, Thistle Harris tempered generalisations about native plants and simplicity by alerting her readers to the fact that experimental work was continuing, and that '[c]ertainly the task is not as straightforward as the culture of roses, camellias, or azaleas, about which a wealth of literature has been compiled during the centuries of their cultivation'.³³ There were also matters yet to be thought about in any substantial way, many of which would bring problems later. Potential for weediness is one example. As well, with varying competitive strategies of particular plants relatively unknown, just how different species within a designed/contived vegetation community (as opposed to a naturally-occurring vegetation community) might perform, or indeed be out-performed, remained to be tested. That the desirable appearance of a number of plants found in nature might be the result of 'pruning' by grazing local fauna or fire also did not quite reflect the 'no maintenance' misnomer espoused in much of the popular literature.

The effects in some suburban gardens, however, were quite profound, and included plants failing, becoming leggy, too big, or the whole effect beginning to look messy and un-cared for. By 1980, agitated by those 'trendy' native bush gardens, *Australian House & Garden* indicted them with '...bringing the house down'.³⁴

Finally, in relation to the above point about the natural aesthetic appearing *un-cared for*, a further important factor confounding the loved/unloved quality of the natural aesthetic garden seemingly stems from entrenched cultural attitudes about nature, gardens, and gardening. Exploring landscape perception and appreciation of ecological quality and naturalness, American landscape architect Joan Iverson Nassauer concludes that people's appreciation is unconsciously mediated through the pictorial conventions of the picturesque, 'a cultural not ecological concept'.³⁵ In her landscape perception research, Nassauer identifies that because of this cultural concept, in order for designed, nature-like landscapes to be appreciated and therefore maintained, the landscape must include 'recognizable landscape language that communicates human intention'.³⁶ Human intention, to use Nassauer's terminology, is summarised as *cues to care*. These *cues to care* can take one of a number of forms, but should be understood as distinct from tidiness and more as a frame, shaped by cultural expectations, through which one might understand and appreciate naturalness. The important unifying factor for nature-like landscapes to be appreciated, Nassauer concludes, is that the person experiencing the landscape is able to discern evidence of care or human intent. Over time, under-maintained, and misunderstood, many suburban examples of a natural aesthetic lost this apparently essential blend of naturalness and care and ostensibly, with this, their widespread appeal.

CONSERVATION CHALLENGES

Challenges associated with identification, documentation, and conservation of postwar gardens embodying a natural aesthetic are potentially manifold. As Philip Goad noted in relation to conservation, modernism, and architecture in a paper delivered at the 1999 conference *Fibro House: Opera House*, such challenges are strongly linked to discourse; specifically a lack of critical analyses considering the wider contexts and meaning of postwar architecture, landscape, architecture, and urban design, and within which to frame an understanding of their significance.³⁷ A wider context is especially important for framing questions about historic significance beyond physical fabric in the static sense, and critical for places with values perhaps less immediately obvious to the uninitiated, and where the values of a place more strongly emphasise continuity than clear divisions between past and present.

Typically, there is a time lag between debates on conservation issues relating to architecture and those that embrace the wider landscape, which has expanded from monument, to site, to cultural landscape, and from things to values. Current discourse on twentieth century heritage is following a similar pattern. Scholarly discussion on twentieth century landscape design is emerging, however. In a local context this has included critical analyses by Goad (2002), Saniga (2004), McMahon (2007 [2005]), and Buchanan (2002).³⁸ A small number of monographs, general garden history anthologies, and heritage studies since 1983 have also recognised the work of individual and less well-known landscape designers and their works.³⁹

Translating this into practical experience. Encountering a modest, suburban Merchant Builders house and garden in a recent local government heritage study⁴⁰ and then looking for sources to research and understand its potential significance, few tools were found for comparative evaluation or to understand the history of the place itself. Often no original planting schedules or 'as-built plans exist'⁴¹, reflecting, undoubtedly also often, that many such designs were thought through in situ.⁴² In an approach described by Melbourne-based landscape architect Paul Thompson, the process can be intuitive, beginning with the plants rather than with a design on paper or in mind.⁴³ For many a home gardener, there was no external designer. The proliferation of more widely-circulating gardening literature tapped into a culture of do-it-yourself. Megan Martin (2000) writes how postwar Australia 'was the great era of the owner-builder and do-it-yourself construction'.⁴⁴ While Martin was referring to housing, the notion of looking beyond the place-specific for sources to assist understanding and evaluating significance usefully extends into the postwar garden. Fortunately, turning to the State Library of Victoria collection for example, as presented in *Gardenesque* (2004)⁴⁵, it seems the extent of publicly-accessible sources has been slowly increasing from around 1988, through gifts and lodgments of plans, photographs, sketches, and other pictorial and manuscript materials of sole practitioners and larger firms designing landscapes in the postwar period. This is helping to remedy the lack-of-evaluative-tools situation. However, as Tim North articulated in his opening address to the 2008 Australian Garden History annual national conference: '...much remains to be done'.⁴⁶

Returning to the Merchant Builders' house, though. Situated within an unfortunately spare, hard-edged, and possibly much-altered garden setting, first impressions were that, without a closely-integrated natural aesthetic garden, the integrity of the original had been lost. Therefore, was its significance compromised? Certainly its integrity seemed difficult to defend because of the amount of supposed change to the place as a whole, highlighting how changes to or loss of an original garden setting can contribute to the vulnerability of the modest, modernist suburban house divorced from an original, closely-integrated bushland/bush garden setting.

A further challenge to identification and conservation is the absence of debate about issues such as integrity and, related to this, managing change in circumstances where continuity forms an integral and inevitable part of a place. In recent discussions about conservation and twentieth century landscape design the problem of change and continuity emerge as a persistent theme.⁴⁷ As questioned by Elizabeth Meyer, 'does [change] mean integrity will be difficult to defend...?'⁴⁸ Reference to the Nara Document on Authenticity could usefully inform such a conversation, as

might Richard Clough's reflections on gardens of the past, acknowledging that while attempts should be made to understand them, this should be tempered by the inevitability of continuity:

'...we can't actually retain them as they were. Gardens, unlike architecture, are constantly changing...there are a certain limited number of gardens that can be retained exactly as they were designed but in almost all cases gardens depend very much on the gardener. The...person who created them...shaped the plants...combined the colours...did the weeding...made the changes. And people's interest...wasn't in establishing a single unity that's unchanging, their interest...was in change and if we stop change then we stop the real essence of a lot of gardens. We've got to accept change...to realise that garden history isn't about preservation solely in the sense of keeping them as documents.'⁴⁹

Accentuating the vulnerability of natural aesthetic gardens, are the fragility and ephemeral qualities inherent in all gardens. As physical places they are organic, dynamic, and constantly subject to the processes of growth, decline, and decay. Their continued life depends upon continued processes of gardening. As Californian-based landscape architect Peter Walker observed in 1999 at a symposium on preserving modern landscape architecture: '...it is axiomatic that a garden must be grown over time rather than constructed in a moment like architecture.'⁵⁰ In those gardens that embody a natural aesthetic by using predominantly Australian native plants the rate of change can be accelerated, but not always. Moreover, as with all gardens, this rate of change between and within genera, species, and forms, is highly variable thus adding a further layer of complexity to the realisation of a native garden, its continued life, and its ongoing maintenance. Confounding the longevity of the postwar natural aesthetic garden's appeal was the fact that this information had yet to be learned.

Also in terms of change, what happens when the original owner moves on? In two citations for significant postwar places, each comprising an 'integrated dwelling (adobe residence) and native garden', both have 'original and continuing owners'. Consequently, the conservation recommendations read: (1) 'The garden is currently not under threat *so long* as it remains in the hands of [the original owners]' (own emphasis); (2) 'The garden is currently under the ownership of its original creator and this has secured the vigour and quality of the garden. [...] The garden is in excellent condition and retains its integrity...'⁵¹ Other than recommending protection through listing, including on the then active Register of the National Estate which did not eventuate, there is little direction for resolving those concerns now pressing, more or less a decade later, associated with change and continuity and hinted at in the *so long as* proviso.

Returning to Elizabeth Meyer, where continuity and process form such an integral part of the place, 'does this give [...] extraordinary license for change?'⁵² While this approach may be appropriate for some places, if not firmly grounded in significance it is also potentially a very slippery slope.

Birnbaum writes that 'Masterworks should be documented, especially if they are threatened with change.'⁵³ In an Australian context, this is particularly important for works that have 'contributed to the appreciation of the aesthetics of the Australian landscape'⁵⁴, and that had 'an enormous influence on the natural Australian garden development that...swept the country since 1950'.⁵⁵ However, with change/continuity inherent, what should be recorded? 'Where does the past end and the present begin?'⁵⁶ In response to this question, documentation of the physical place could valuably be supplemented by a wide range of sources, both place-specific and all other information that 'make it possible to know the nature, specifications, meaning and history of the place'.⁵⁷

Sometimes place-specific information does survive. In theory this should provide the type of information necessary for soundly-based decisions about conservation, in particular for restoration and reconstruction where original material has been lost over time. However, this is not necessarily always the case, as restoration of the Ellis Stones Rockery at Burnley Gardens, Richmond, Melbourne) well illustrates. The Rockery was created in 1962 by Stones using a

planting schedule developed by him and later lodged in the State Library of Victoria (SLV). In c.2002–03, the rockery was restored using the documentary evidence of Stones' original planting lists from the SLV, through a grant from the Friends of Burnley Gardens. The original rockwork was uncovered and cleaned, and species as close as possible to Stones' original list were planted. Unfortunately many of the plants failed. A second attempt in 2004–05, using less-diverse planting and more of the species which had survived the first, was also unsuccessful. What had changed? Two reasons have been sensibly suggested to me. First, that the site conditions into which the plants were inserted were 'significantly different', and second, that the maintenance inputs of 1962 were no longer available.⁵⁸ While interesting and valuable historical artefacts, original documentary evidence in this case did not result in successful conservation, suggesting its primacy should be carefully reconsidered and, importantly, in context with potentially very altered maintenance, site-specific, and wider climate conditions when developing conservation approaches for similar places.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In the absence of sufficient sources, discourse, or evidence on which to base understanding of a natural aesthetic gardens—in their own right, or as backdrop, setting, or integrated garden to modest modernist houses—let alone argue a case for their significance, what are some of the questions we, as heritage conservation practitioners, should be asking when encountering and debating conservation issues pertinent to postwar natural aesthetic gardens?

In terms of identification and documentation and confronted with a lack of discourse, questions might include: Can the hand of a designer be discerned? What features characterise the garden? In the absence of as-built plans and other place-specific evidence, what other external sources or related places could be used to develop an understanding of the place's significance (designer's original intent, philosophy, and spirit of the place) and therefore guide conservation? Could the place be/have been part of a larger whole—as closely integrated residence and natural aesthetic garden, for instance? In such a context, if either building or natural aesthetic garden setting is lost, how does this impact on traditional notions of authenticity and integrity? Is there a wider context, beyond physical fabric, that gives the place meaning?

In terms of conservation: Are there ways of appreciating the place's wider significance beyond or in addition to conservation of physical fabric? How could the significance and integrity of the whole be maintained and enhanced while also accommodating change? In this sense, change relates to three factors: first, the potential accretion of elements such as new structures or subdivisions. Second, it relates to the diminution of resources such as water and maintenance inputs and as a result of changes to the micro-climate over time. Third, it relates to the reality of original owners moving on.

Finally, in terms of building a more substantial and useful bank of knowledge about the less-widely-appreciated heritage of postwar natural aesthetic gardens and their closely integrated modest modernist houses, the knowledge gradually acquired about these places needs to be better harnessed, to ensure the comparative sources and discourse are expanded (and nationally accessible), and that the values of these and other similar places are promoted to a wider 'unconverted' audience.⁵⁹

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- 2 From the 1950s, there was an explosion of nurseries attempting to specialise in Australian plants. Victorian examples included: Boddy's Eastern Park Nursery in Geelong (1951–68); and Schuberts Nursery in Noble Park (established 1952). The Natural Resources Conservation League (NRCL) established a nursery on Springvale Road, in Springvale (c.1957–c.2000) on land owned by Alex Wilke. Alex Wilke, formerly of the NCRL, later established Treeplanters nursery on the opposite side of Springvale Road from the NRCL (1958–). Austraflo, established by Rodger and

- Gwen Elliot in 1963, expanded in 1968 before passing to Bill Molyneux in 1973. Smaller operations in the sixties were established by Glen Wilson (Leschenaultia, in Springvale), and by French-born Cecile Glass in the garden of Tanton, the Eltham property of Cecile and Peter Glass. Precursors to these were Edwin Ashby, who established in 1936 one of the first specialist Australian native plant nurseries in Australia, at Blackwood, in the Adelaide Hills, and George Althofer's Nindathana Nursery, in Dripstone NSW. Nindathana was self-promoted as 'the Pioneer Native Plant Specialist'. Source: Aitken, R., and Looker, M. eds (2002) *The Oxford Companion to Australian Gardens*, published in association with the Australian Garden History Society by Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, Victoria, pp. 18, 33, 36–50
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 - 9 Ramsay (1991) pp. 22 and 54
 - 10 Cerwonka, Allaine (2004). *Native to the Nation: Disciplining Landscapes and Bodies in Australia*, Borderlines, Volume 21, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, p. 3
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 - 12 Ford, Gordon with Ford, Gwen (1999) [title]
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 - 15 See McMahon, Philippa (2005). 'Improving Australianness: the Native Plant Breeding Project at the Melbourne Botanic Gardens, 1949–1957' in *Australian Studies*, Vol. 20, [publ 2007], pp. 55–76
 - 16 See Griffiths, Tom (1996). *Hunters and collectors: the antiquarian imagination in Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; Melbourne, pp. 9–12. Griffiths explores the idea of natural history (anthropology) as both a suitable, respectable pastime for the middle-classes (p. 16–17) and in relation to identity-making. As in post-Independence America, colonial and Federated Australians turned to nature and *collecting* nature for definitions of national greatness and, in the absence of deeply rooted cultural traditions, nature seemingly became the 'proving grounds of nationhood'. (p. 18)
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 - 19 Freeland, J.M. (1968). *Architecture in Australia: A history*, F.W. Cheshire, Melbourne, p. 283
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 - 22 For discussion of such organisational attitudes towards Australian plants, in relation to the Maud Gibson Trust Native Plant Breeding Project (under the Royal Botanic Gardens, Melbourne), see McMahon (2005).
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 - 24 McMahon (2005), p. 61
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- 54 Saniga (2004), p. 144
- 55 Knox, Alistair (1980). *We are what we stand on: A personal history of the Eltham community*, Adobe Press, Eltham [Victoria], p. 100
- 56 A question posed by Australian historian Tom Griffiths in *Hunters and Collectors* *Hunters and collectors: the antiquarian imagination in Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; Melbourne, 1996, p. 100. Exploring Aboriginal notions of history, Griffiths writes that Aboriginal culture 'place greater emphasis on continuity and re-creation and less on separation and preservation'. The latter, Griffiths identifies as characteristic of modern western society's 'obsession with material heritage [and] preservation as our principal means of appreciating the past.' While the issues Griffiths writes about are wider and more complex than the spectrum of this paper, his question in relation to continuity provides a useful frame for considering a typical conservation process, recording.
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- 58 John Rayner, personal communication with Christina Dyson via email, 8 April 2009

59 In debates about the preservation of modern landscape architecture, one suggestion for protecting culturally significant gardens once an original owner has moved on, is to try matching important landscapes/gardens—in this instance those designed by Thomas Church in California—with new owners who appreciate them. Jost, Daniel (2008). 'The Church Ladies' in *Landscape Architecture*, Magazine of the American Society of Landscape Architects, December 2008, p. 54

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Andrew Saniga, Geoff Ashley, and John Rayner for their insightful and helpful suggestions in developing this paper, and Richard Aitken for pointing me in the direction of some entirely apposite sources.