

MARGO LEWERS' GARDEN AND THE ANCHER HOUSE: ENGAGING WITH THE ORIGINAL DESIGNER VIA FAMILY AND FRIENDS

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CONSERVATION PLANNING AND HERITAGE GARDENS¹

When consultants are engaged to prepare a conservation management plan, it is not unusual for the client to remark that they just want to know 'what to do', implying that when they know 'what to do', they will do it. The heritage practitioner is keen to comply, but would also like the custodians to appreciate, connect or engage with the significance of the place, and all its detail; to get to love the place, and transfer their appreciation to others.

However, even if the heritage practitioner provides the advice about 'what to do', it's not always followed, especially if it conflicts with the knowledge and expectations of the managers, or contemporary practice for heritage building or gardens. Often, the information that captures the interest of managers, and prompts their enthusiasm, is the detailed stories and anecdotes about the people who lived at the place.

Working with mid 20th century places often provides the opportunity (and obligation) to engage with the original designer and occupants, and to discover the stories and anecdotes of the place, its use and meaning to its designers, owners and users.

Caring for gardens is often problematic because the concepts and garden practice of the designer cannot always be discerned from looking at the garden itself, or from photographs or descriptions. For example, a person analysing a garden photograph might like to know if it was taken when the designer was happy with the presentation of the garden, or not.

The commission to prepare a conservation management plan for the garden at the Penrith Regional Gallery and Lewers Bequest (PRG&LB), provided the opportunity for the study team to engage with the Lewers family who owned the property from the late 1940s until 1980.

The consultant team was Michael Lehany, landscape architect – head consultant, Meredith Walker, heritage practitioner, and Gina Plate, horticulturalist, landscape architect and gardener. Gina was a niece of Margo Lewers (daughter of Margo's brother artist Carl Plate), and had visited the garden numerous times in childhood, developing in her a love of gardens and gardening.

In 1980, the daughters of Margo Lewers, Darani Lewers and Tanya Crothers, bequeathed the family property at New River Road, Emu Plains (at the foot of the Blue Mountains) to the Penrith City Council for an art gallery. The bequest included a large collection of their parents' works, sculptor Gerald Lewers and designer and painter Margo Lewers, and other contemporary modern Australian artists. Gerald and Margo were leading figures in the Sydney's modern art world. They were members of the Contemporary art Society of Australia and Gerald helped to establish the Society of Sculptors and Associates in 1951.²

Margo Lewers died of cancer in 1978 and the bequest followed her wish that the property continue as a place for art and artists. Gerald Lewers had died in a riding accident on 6th August 1962. In an obituary 'Gerry Lewers has left us', in the Sydney Morning Herald, Patrick White

¹ This paper derives from: Michael Lehany & Meredith Walker & Gina Plate, 'Penrith Regional Gallery and Lewers Bequest Landscape Conservation Management Plan', four volumes, December 2004, prepared for Penrith City Council; and the experiences and knowledge acquired by the author of this paper, as part of the study team.

² Michael Crayford, 'Lewers, Hettie Margaret Ernestine (Margo) (1908 - 1978)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 15, [Melbourne University Press](https://www.melbourneuniversitypress.com.au/), 2000, pp 89-90

In the first decades of living at Emu Plains, the garden was the combined work of Gerald and Margo Lewers, with Margo initiating most of the work, and with Syd Ancher's addition and garden wall creating an enclosure for outdoor living. After Gerald's death in 1962, from a riding accident, near Chillagoe in North Queensland, Margo managed the garden until her death in 1978.

From a relatively bare garden in 1947, shown in family photos and aerial photographs, the garden evolved into a series dense and varied gardens spaces, each with its own character. Works by Gerald Lewers had become a feature and Margo had created mosaics and other works on walls and floors in both the Lewers house wing and the Ancher house. By the late 1970s, there were 44 art works as part of the permanent fabric of gardens and buildings.

To manage the garden and achieve her creative projects, Margo called on her neighbours, family and friends for help with the garden, as well as engaging the young artists, living in Gerald's studio or the Ancher house, to help with maintenance. University friends of Darani and Tanya came to help on weekends and stay overnight. After Margo became ill, the neighbors took a greater role in maintaining the garden, and this continued after Margo's death and morphed into a Garden Committee of the new gallery, which also included Darani Lewers.

The gallery engaged a full time gardener, directed by the garden committee, who also worked in the garden. For the neighbours, it was a labour of love: love of the garden and love and appreciation of Margo as a neighbour, artist and friend. Using photographs and oral accounts, the consultants were able to build up knowledge of the evolution of the garden, its design, new works and management.

Among the most valuable sources were essays and notes prepared at the request of the consultants: 'Garden Philosophy and Design', by Darani Lewers, and 'The use of the garden by the family', by Gina Plate. Although some aspects of the garden (such as the relationship between plants and sculpture) might be inferred as 'design' by observation, Darani's essay substantiated the design intent of many of the garden features – relationships that might otherwise have been regarded as fortuitous or happen-stance, rather than creative works.



In 1956 The Garden won the Sydney Morning Herald competition. Photo SMH, in the PRG&LB collection

The writings and remarks of family and friends substantiated the garden as a creative work – a work of art, as well as the setting for creative works, family life and memorable parties. For example, Gina Plate's account of the vegetable garden

... it was always a pleasure to be sent to the vegetable garden to collect salad and vegetables for what we knew would be another delicious meal: the luscious vegetables growing in the well-tended vegetable plot had an order about their arrangement in formal rows not experienced in the rest of the garden where a profusion of plants and colours were encouraged to spill out of their beds and onto pathways and surrounding areas of lawn. The neat formality of the vegetable garden still had a 'Margo' feel however, as the rows of vegetable and salad plants were interspersed with flowering annuals and flowering herbs which Margo would pick and strew over her salads with stunning visual effect. Edible flowering plants particularly favoured were violas, violets, nasturtium, calendula, marigold, heart's-ease, bergamot, borage and chives which all looked pretty peeping out between the vegetable and salad plants and pretty when scattered over the beautifully arranged platters of food – bright blue borage flowers on the orange of a grated carrot salad, rusty red nasturtiums and rich yellow calendula on green salad and subtle purple-pink of chive flowers and snipped green chive leaves over a potato salad for example.⁵

To provide the consultants with a more comprehensive understanding of Margo's approach to entertaining at Emu Plains, Tanya and John Crothers invited them to an informal dinner at which all the food was prepared and served following Margo's distinctive style. It was indicative of the family's appreciation of Margo's garden and their wish for its significance to be fully appreciated and sustained.



Darani Lewers giving a tour of the garden, August 2004

Darani Lewers' and Gina Plate's essays were quoted in the body of the report, in the Garden Practice notes, and as a major source for advice about each garden precinct. The contributions made possible the preparation of two substantial documents:

⁵ Ibid, Volume 1 p34.

- A manual of garden practice and maintenance, with advice about practical aspects of gardening and the presentation of the garden⁶⁷; and
- A Garden plant list –of 400 plants past and present, prepared by Brenda Niccol, a neighbour and member of the Garden Committee and Gina Plate⁸ (with both common and botanical names).

Both these documents have on-going relevance. They can be added to, for example with further photographs showing good practice, or as a result of further oral histories- by retuning to previously recorded people with specific questions, or recording 'new people'.

The Garden Practice notes combined direct advice about maintenance with background information about Margo's garden practice, and advice about potential sources of further information about Margo's garden practice. Here are some samples of the advice supplied by Darani Lewers and Gina Plate about Margo's garden practice:

On pruning:

Shrubs and trees were carefully pruned to form graceful, sculptural shapes while retaining their natural character. Selected branches were removed to encourage asymmetrical growth. Their shaped branches contributed to the design of the garden and were an important element in the whole integrated concept. No shrubs or trees were ever pruned into formal shapes such as spheres, rectangles, squares or triangles (pyramids); such a practice would have destroyed the character of the garden. {DL}

Margo pruned severely when necessary, [more severely than contemporary or present day practice] especially the Willows at the corners of the Lewers house verandahs when they were interfering with the verandah roof. When she pruned the Magnolia in the front garden, she would use the cuttings in her flower arrangements in the house. {DL}

On mulch:

"Mulch as its known today was not a surface treatment, rather her own compost (of kitchen waste and garden clippings) was used as a soil conditioner, being both spread on the surface and dug in. Bare patches of earth were rarely seen but where they occurred through natural loss of a plant (e.g. death of a perennial or an annual), or through Margo's 'editing' of the planting, the gap created was either planted up by her or colonised by self-seeding plants – either perennials or annuals.

Margo did not use any hay-like mulch on top of the beds, only compost {GP}

Wood chips and/or hay were never used to retain moisture because they detract from the visual appearance of the garden. {DL}"

On stones (a feature of the garden), an anecdote from Gina

"Margo once sent me with a vacuum cleaner to remove dirt and dust from the Ancher house service courtyard. I presume she used a vacuum cleaner rather than a broom as sweeping sends dust into the air so is not so effective and as vacuuming is less strenuous and time consuming.{GP}"

On garden beds and edges

"There were no defined edges to the flower gardens with the exception of the northern courtyard in Ancher house which has a low stone border. The stone paving and concrete paths that butt up against lawns and gardens were not edged.

⁶ 'Garden Practice and Maintenance', in PRG&LB, Landscape Conservation Management Plan, 2004, Volume 2 Garden Manual, pp11-28.

⁷ The Garden Practice notes were compiled by Meredith Walker with input from Gina Plate and Michael Lehany and using the essays by Darani Lewers and Gina plates and information from discussions during the project etc.

⁸ Garden Plant List, in PRG&LB, Landscape Conservation Management Plan, 2004, Volume 2 Garden Manual, pp97-121

Grass was lifted around the garden beds and sand added to deter the lawns from overgrowing into the beds. Edges were always soft and asymmetrical – in keeping with the asymmetry of the plants. Lawns were clipped very carefully around beds to avoid the destruction of plants and to allow them to spill naturally onto the grass.
{DL}

At paving or boulder edged transitions with planted areas, species were deliberately placed or allowed to selectively grow over and obscure edges. This appeared to be serendipitous (informal) but in fact was ruthlessly controlled to create this informal effect.{GP}.

From these extracts, it is easy to see potential conflicts between Margo Lewers' garden practice and current practices and the value of engaging with the original designer, or in this case the next best sources- family and friends, and seeking as much detail as possible.

MARGO LEWERS AND THE ANCHER HOUSE

At the end of 1960, Margo Lewers engaged Syd Ancher to design a new house at Emu Plains. The house was completed in 1964, slowed by the deaths, in 1962 of Margo's mother, for whom it was originally intended, and the death later in the year of Gerald Lewers, and the shortage of funds.

The house was lived in by a variety of tenants, usually young artists, who also helped with the garden. In 1967, Margo the house was used for an exhibition by Carl Plate, her brother, and two years later she held a one man exhibition of her own.⁹

The new house was always known in the family as the Ancher house; but what was the role of Margo Lewers in its design? How did her ideas about gardening affect the design?

In an essay in *Margo Lewers Retrospective*, Andrew Andersons describes the Ancher house (and the modifications of the 1901 farmhouse) as a collaboration with Syd Ancher:

*"Margo's hand is especially evident in the stained cork fitted furniture on the two Ancher buildings, as well as the mosaic floors, creating the kind of fusion of art and architecture that was the aspiration of William Morris and his followers a century earlier and almost unparalleled in twentieth-century Australia."*¹⁰

Darani Lewers introduces her description of the gardens at the Ancher house as follows:

*"The gardens have been designed and the artworks selected to moderate the severity of this low lying inward looking house. Plants edge the front verandah while the artworks have been placed in selected locations amongst compatible planting. The building is walled on three sides, opening only at the front to a view of the river. The height of trees and shrubs on and near the bank decreases from the tank stand to the northeast corner. A large lawn at the front acts as a counter-balance to the simple rectangular building. Border gardens run along the lawn on the north and east - defining the Ancher House curtilage. Small gardens on either side of the original entry from the road reinforce this incursion into this space. Here, carefully selected bush rocks, miniature succulents, flowers and ground cover were tightly planted like a piece of embroidery. Adjacent shrubs and trees on the south side included Japonica, Spanish Broom and a tall Fire Wheel tree."*¹¹

Tanya Crothers describes the house and gardens:

"the gardens were an integral part of the project. Courtyards and glass connected the exterior and interior while her experiences as a mosaic artist and interior designer came together to produce specially designed details - furniture, mosaic

⁹ Denise Hickey, Gerald and Margo Lewers their lives and their work, Grasstree Press, 1982, p105

¹⁰ Andrew Andersons, 'Margo Lewers – An Architect's View' in Pamela Bell, *Margo Lewers Retrospective*, National Trust of Australia (NSW), 2002, p50.

¹¹ Darani Lewers, 'Lewers Garden – Philosophy and Design', Volume 4, PRG&LB Landscape Conservation Management Plan, 2004

floors and so on. Darani and I helped install a wall and cupboards faced with small panels of cork veneer, each piece dyed in a different and subtle variation of blue. The edging of white Formica created a Mondrian-like structure of strong horizontal and vertical lines."¹²



Anchor house courtyard garden being established c1964. Darani Lewers & Tanya Crothers collection in PRG&LB archives.

¹² Tanya Crothers, 'Margo at home' in Pamela Bell, *Margo Lewers Retrospective*, National Trust of Australia (NSW), 2002, p55.



Anchor house service courtyard, late 1960s. Darani Lewers & Tanya Crothers collection in PRG&LB archives.

If both Margo and Syd were both involved in the 'original design' how did this collaboration operate? And, does the building and its relationship with the garden have precedents in other houses designed by Syd Ancher (other than the previous work to the farmhouse)? Answering these questions was not critical for the management of the garden, but research has the potential to reveal 'new information' in unexpected locations.

Research in the archives of the architectural practice Ancher, Mortlock, Murray and Woolley, held by Ken Woolley, provided insights into the source of the design, as well as correspondence between Margo Lewers and Sydney Ancher.

By 1961, Sydney Ancher had designed houses for over 90 clients. Most of the sites were sloping land on Sydney's north shore and peninsula, and many of the design had verandah-balconies overlooking a sloping garden. One design, a house for John Weeks at Hudson Parade, Clareville, designed in 1958, has a similar plan to the Anchor house, on a single level. It is a clear precedent for the Anchor house in its scale and arrangement of rooms. The plans in the archive are mostly working drawings, and therefore do not indicate the evolution of design; however, the correspondence illuminates the nature of the collaboration between the artist Margo Lewers and Syd Ancher.

CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN MARGO LEWERS TO SYD ANCHER

There are fifteen surviving letters from Margo Lewers to Syd Ancher in the Woolley archives, written on average of one per month (if Christmas is excluded) from November 1960 to March 1962. Some of Margo's letters are annotated by Syd and there are two letters in reply, a draft (in the Woolley archive) and a long letter held in the PRG&LB archives.

Of course, the design process would also have included telephone calls, site visits, meetings and drawings. But Margo was good at keeping records, and her letters can be regarded as a reliable source.

It is clear that Margo took responsibility for managing much of the building work – similar to what is now called an owner-builder, with Syd Ancher keeping an eye on progress and providing crucial advice and detailed drawings. It is likely that Syd Ancher was undertaking the work free of charge - *bro bono*, and that he undertook the remodeling of the farmhouse wing on a similar basis. Ken Woolley has a Gerald Lewers' sculpture from the company's Mount Street office, in his living room which he believes was a gift to Syd Ancher from the Lewers, instead of fees.

Syd Ancher and his family were good friends of the Lewers family, with many friends in common. In some letters, Margo mentions family matters and the progress of her work, especially the large mosaic for the University of Western Australia which was completed and installed in 1961.

Margo suggested ideas and sources for materials and contractors, and changes to ensure that funds were used in the most beneficial way, especially by reducing future maintenance needs. She also questioned the appearance and reasoning for materials and finishes or roof, ceiling and floors, light levels, roof design, air-conditioning ('we don't want to hear the slightest sound'¹³). Margo requested the removal of the sunhoods and pergola and over the northern courtyards (to minimize costs), and the window and doorframes were changed from timber to aluminium for the same reason - especially to avoid white ant damage which had recently occurred in the Lewers house¹⁴.

From the remaining drawing and the house itself, it appears that all her suggestions were acceded to. In the initial design, the much-used walk through windows in the farmhouse were adapted for the new house, but became doors- presumably because it was realised that much lower ceiling height in the new house meant that the windows couldn't operate as walk through easy access. The result is a set of doors that were infrequently opened for ventilation or access.

Read as a whole Margo's letters indicate a thorough approach to the project and her straightforward ability to explain her own views. The letters also indicate that Margo respected Syd Ancher's design skills and knowledge and wanted him to engage with the design and to be proud of the house. These extracts illustrate their flavour and content, as well as Margo's contribution to the design.

Margo Lewers' letter to Syd Ancher (March 27th 1961) reveals her influence on the design of the wall facing the Lewers house:

Syd dear, I was absolutely delighted to receive the plans on Saturday. There are a few details. I would prefer the southern aspect (the one that runs along side) to have no windows. If Gilly is no longer with (us) when the house is finished I don't want our neighbours to look at us. I don't mind if the ventilation runs at ceiling height or through the roof. Also the opening on the northern wall (is this for additional light into the central courtyard, or is it just another exit? I would prefer it blank.

After receiving the plans, she shows them to the builder Mr Griva (who is undertaking repairs at the Lewers house), to get an estimate of the construction cost.. The costs of repairs influence her response and indicate that Ancher's original design was for a flat roof. [The house as constructed has a low-pitched gable roof]

Is there an alternative to malthoid? Mr Griva has been patching and repainting the area outside the living room and Mother has spent hundreds of pounds on Murdoch Street

In the same letter Margo mentions her intention to design the mosaic-tiled floors in bath, laundry and kitchen and also the cupboards:

I hadn't realised that entire kitchen, laundry & drying room were to be tiled; apart from expense (although I would do most of it myself) I wouldn't like it.' From my experience in bathrooms there are problems with condensation.

¹³ Margo Lewers letter to Syd Ancher March 22nd 1961.

¹⁴ Margo Lewers Letter to Syd Ancher May 12th, 1961.

And further to design the location of cupboards ['I want as many cupboards as possible – I'm very cupboard-minded']

No cupboards are shown in living room, I suppose you are waiting for some indication from me; could you send a rough sketch to me so I can see where I don't want them. This would enable me to visualise something...

In this letter and others, Margo explains her dislike to downpipes and guttering (which resulted in the copper downpipe, designed by Darani Lewers, at the end of the front verandah:

As you know I find gutters and downpipes unsightly, but you do appear firm in this regard. May be there could be fewer and larger ones? Better still couldn't we have a large feature, splashing water on top of a rubble sump? I quite definitely want aluminium or copper. I have acquired the price on copper (so far no price on aluminium) and I think it would be well worth the extra cost.

And in August 31st, 1961,

'I still have bright ideas about a master downpipe splashing into a rock garden with a rubble drainage (sic) beneath



Margo Lewers mentions her intention to use stone paving on the verandah 'obtained locally' in the probable use of 'the stone from the old fowl house':

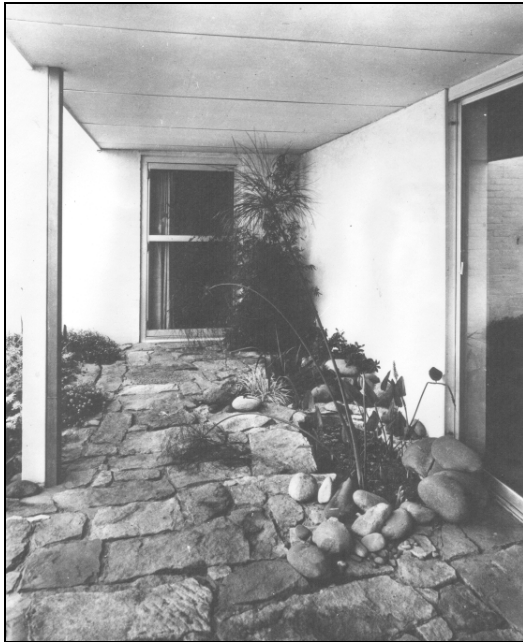
*"We are taking down the old stone work from the adjoining land and we are hoping this will be sufficient (when split) to flag the verandahs and possibly most of the central courtyard. I think this will be a pleasant solution to the verandahs and do hope you approve? I don't care for slabs of concrete and tiling is so impersonal, unless done in mosaic, and I could not tackle such vast areas as well as inside."*¹⁵

As completed, the split-stone flagged verandah included a small pond with papyrus, and in the corner, Japanese sacred bamboo. These striking, idiosyncratic features were part of Margo's

¹⁵ Margo Lewers letter to Syd Ancher, May 12th and June 17th 1961.

design objective to fully integrate garden planting and architecture. The pond and plantings were removed c1985 'because of damp problems'.¹⁶

In both the Ancher and Lewers houses, the gardens and their interface with verandahs, appear to have been influenced by oriental design concepts and use of materials. There are no direct references for such an influence, but it is likely that both Gerry and Margo would have been aware of Chinese and Japanese garden design via other Australians who were taking an increasing interest in Asian architecture and design in 1950s and 60s.



Ancher house courtyard verandah, 1965

Margo Lewers visited China and Japan in 1958; aware of this, Gina Plate has suggested a likely source, or influence, for the buffet/fitment designed for the end of the living room, nearest the kitchen¹⁷. Last year when visiting the Katsura Imperial Palace at Kyoto (originally constructed in the seventeenth century), Gina noticed in the summer house a wall with squares in shades of blue (made of a material similar to cork), and immediately thought of Margo's fitment at the Ancher house.¹⁸

It is common practice for designs to evolve in response to the clients' needs and preferences, and the cumulative effect on this Ancher house, might not be substantially different from the process followed for many architect designed privately commissioned houses. But Margo's letters at least make it clear that, in the case of this Ancher house, there was not a single original designer.

There can be no doubt that the Ancher house design was a collaboration between Syd Ancher, who provided the initial plan and adapted it to accommodate Margo's advice; and Margo Lewers, who commissioned the design, requested and suggested changes, designed several internal features (the mosaic tiled floors, cupboards and buffet fitment), supervised the verandah floors, commissioned the downpipe, and most importantly, created the gardens in courtyards and front

¹⁶ PRG&LB Landscape conservation Management Plan, Vol 1 page 48.

¹⁷ Works undertaken to the Ancher house in 2006 included an new entrance to the Ancher house from the main gallery courtyard, and to accommodate this the fitment has been moved to the other end of the living room, near the bedrooms (now used for gallery archives).

¹⁸ Gina Plate, conversation with and email (with photo attached) to Meredith Walker 3 June 2009.

garden. In some ways, the Anchor house can be seen as a modernist shell for a modernist artist to apply her creative skills in design and gardening.

A note about recent changes to the garden

In 2007, a copper fountain designed by Gerald Lewers at the front corner of the Anchor house garden was stolen. In response, all the fountains, birdbaths and other sculptures by Gerald Lewers have been removed from the garden for safekeeping.