Is landscape fabric significant and if so, why conserve it?

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Proceedings of:

IS LANDSCAPE FABRIC SIGNIFICANT, AND IF SO, WHY CONSERVE IT?

Natural landscape fabric is - unlike built fabric - all around us, comprising rock, soil, vegetation, water bodies, etc. So, how to decide what of any of that is significant? The Australian Natural Heritage Charter should be a good starting point. In its definitions, the Charter (2002:7) states that 'Natural Heritage means natural features consisting of physical and biological formations (or groups thereof) which demonstrate *natural significance*'. It then goes on to refer to geological and physiographical formations and areas that constitute *habitats* of indigenous species of animals and plants which demonstrate [my emphasis] natural significance; or natural sites which are significant from the point of view of science, conservation or natural beauty. It points out the importance of ecosystems, biodiversity, geodiversity, and ecological processes ***for their existence value*** for present or future generations, in terms of their scientific, social, aesthetic and life-support values.

It should be noted that only two of the above values – *existence* and *life-support* - are independent of humankind, which is dependent on them! Other values such as scientific, social, aesthetic, natural beauty, and conservation are really a range of human, anthropocentric responses to what is 'out there' in the landscape. These are all 'big picture' concepts and provide little information on the actual fabric of the diverse elements within the landscape, let alone which of them we perceive to have significance, and why.

A NSW Heritage Office Information Sheet (2000:1), published between the AHC's Natural Heritage Charter's first and second edition, states that 'natural heritage encompasses a broad range of areas, including natural ecosystems, geological sites, water systems, modified landscape and parks, gardens and significant trees'. This is getting closer to what this paper is about – landscape fabric.

There are, of course, two types of landscape fabric, namely the inorganic and organic. I mention inorganic first because it comprises the geological and topographical formations which provide the bedrock supporting all that occurs above it. Water and atmospheric action wear the rock down into remarkable shapes and soils, which with the aid of water and some nutrients enable vegetation to grow and flourish. These elements and processes are world-wide, so how or why do we decide which in particular is 'significant'?

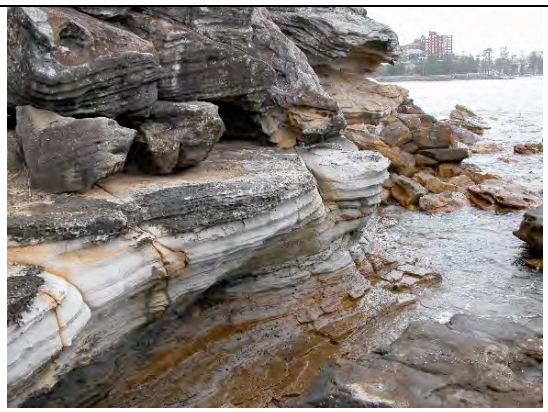
Taking geological formations first, there are volcanoes, volcanic intrusions called dykes, lava flows, and all kinds of formations – some of them fantastic - created by weathering, be it by rain, waves, heat, ice or wind. Over millennia, the residue sediments are deposited in bedding planes, cumulatively generating sedimentary rock of many kinds – the most familiar to Sydney-siders being Hawkesbury sandstone. Some bedding planes are exposed by sea erosion, quarrying, mining or roadway cuttings. But again, with thousands available, how to determine which ones are 'significant' or not.

This begs the question of what 'significance' means in terms of heritage - clearly a human, cultural construct. All the criteria traditionally used to identify it – historical, associational, social, aesthetic, technical achievement, research/scientific or archaeological - are based on *cultural* values formulated originally for built environments. For landscape or natural heritage, they are based on human responses to, or perceptions of, what is 'out there'. It is human assessors who are deciding what is significant and what is not. They try to make it as rational and 'objective' as possible, to avoid undue subjectivity, so their assessments will stand scrutiny in the Land and Environment Court if necessary.

Throughout my career as a heritage landscape consultant, I have often struggled to make the traditional heritage assessment criteria fit or apply to landscape fabric. If we put aside the human/cultural ones, the only ones left are *existence value*, an *ability to be self-perpetuating*,

a remarkable demonstration of *continuing ecological processes*, or a combination of elements providing *habitat* to a range of living things, not just humans.

In terms of *existence value* for inorganic landscape elements, I can point to a range of remarkable rock formations I encountered when doing a geological heritage survey of the foreshores of Manly, near Sydney. See examples in the Table below:

	
Uluru – well known single landscape fabric/element	A fallen, 'honeycomb' boulder at Manly
	
A rare ventifact rock near Forty Baskets Beach	Eroded sandstone bedding exposed at Shelly Beach

When one comes to 'habitat', though, it is a combination or agglomeration of elements, including - but not only - fabric, which may make it significant to living creatures other than just humans. To go into that, however, could be to stray too far from the topic. Instead, I will discuss how to assess the heritage significance of a related, human-made habitat, namely

parks and large gardens, most of which attempt to capture and recreate important or favoured elements of the natural world.

Many local councils had municipality-wide, ‘drive-by’ heritage studies done in the late 1980s through to about 2005. Upon examining the inventory sheets for parks and special open space areas they listed in their heritage schedules, I found that very few assessors provided any detailed reasons why they considered them to be significant. Too often it was only because of an elegant bandstand, a pair of ornamental gate pillars or gates, or other built element/s - a result usually of only architects comprising members of the team. In a few cases, dominant old Figs or Araucaria species were noted as significant, but nothing more. Time and budget constraints usually did not permit a thoughtful analysis of the combination of otherwise ordinary elements that, in that particular place, generated a special or unique character. The combination may have been the result of deliberate and clever landscape design plans, or it may have been coincidental in the sense of a cumulative accretion of elements – as in many parks. However, even in such cases, it is often factors such as ‘aesthetic’ or community esteem values which clinch whether such a park is ultimately heritage listed.

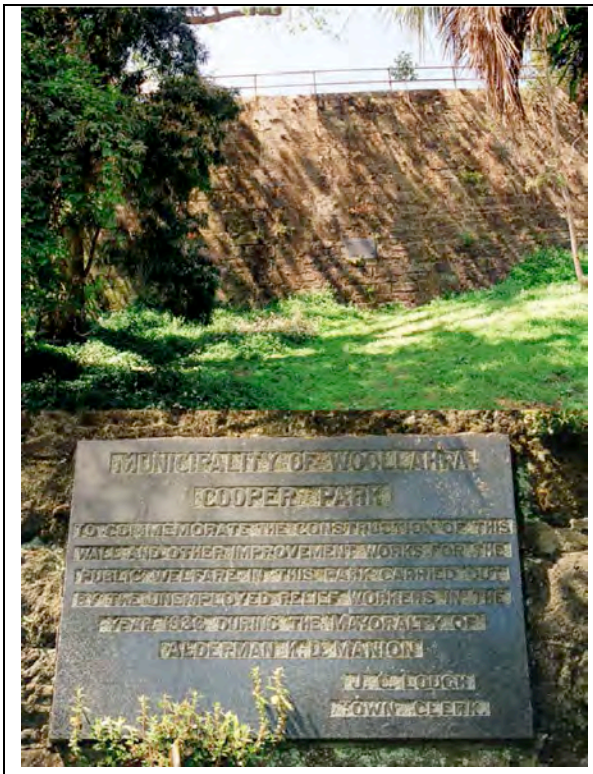
The majority of cases leading to heritage listing of landscape fabric involve its human fashioning for human purposes. Examples include compiling weathered volcanic rock into dry stone walls as in Kiama shire; reshaping and adding safely rails to ocean rock pools for swimming; quarrying of sandstone ridges for building blocks of major public buildings, leaving a horizontal face that reveals millennia of rock bedding – to name but a few. Organic fabric – most often trees, but also shrubs, ground covers, vines, grasses and so on – if planted, ordered, and maintained to a human design or purpose – are more likely to be perceived as ‘significant’. Examples include the famous avenue of Hills Figs in Hyde Park, Sydney, memorial avenues for war dead, parterre gardens, elaborate floral displays, clever designs with grasses, and more recently hanging plants from vertical walls.

	
Weathered volcanic rock used for dry stone walls	A coastal rock swimming pool, South Curl Curl
	
A Saunders' quarry at Pyrmont by A. Tischbauer,1893	The remnant quarry face in 2014, heritage listed

In other words, it is more often what humans do to landscape fabric, how they use or fashion it, and then perceive it, which determines whether it is considered as simply natural, or having heritage significance.

There is one interesting category, not often taken into account, namely whether a particular piece of park fabric was built by Unemployment Relief Fund labour during the Great Depression of the early 1930s. In NSW – and presumably in other States – many pathways, staircases, retaining walls, tree avenues, arbours and pergolas, as well as routine kerbing and guttering laid down in that period still survive; indeed some of those elements still form the backbone of many historic parks even today, albeit rather worn, cracked and generally in need of repair or replacement. Another category of historic remnant is the zig-zag trenches

hastily dug into many Sydney parks during the panic years of 1942. Where they survive, do both these categories warrant heritage listing and conservation?



A sandstone retaining wall, Cooper Park, built by Unemployment Relief labour in 1936

Newly laid out Weekley Park, Stanmore, c. 1935

Curving pergola and seating, Petersham Park

Trees can be a special case, because they may have been deliberately planted to commemorate a visit by a famous dignitary, a birth or death, local service personnel killed in war (as in memorial avenues), marks left by first explorers or by Aboriginals stripping bark for canoes, or simply as landmarks, especially at entrances to rural properties, or within their home grounds. In other cases, trees (and sometimes particular shrubs) may be considered ‘significant’ because they represent the known, preferred taste or fashion of a period or era. This is particularly if that corresponds to the period architecture of a building. (One tree that

is sometimes retained for that reason is the Camphor Laurel, which today is a declared noxious weed in many jurisdictions.)

In other instances, trees may be heritage-listed because they are remnants of indigenous vegetation – e.g. a row of Paperbarks in the Royal Sydney Golf Club, a cluster of Turpentines in Waitara Park, or the Hornsby plateau's Blue Gum High Forest. In the latter two cases, these are threatened species, protected by State and/or Federal legislation. So, significance in those instances relates more to perceived scientific importance, rarity – or even threat of extinction. However, 'representativeness' and/or intactness can sometimes be determinants.

Remnant Blue Gum High Forest, Waitara

Remnant Turpentine forest, Waitara Park

Reams have been written about the methodology of aesthetic or visual quality assessment of landscapes and their fabric - a topic for another paper. A key element, for the purposes of this paper, is the *psychological* response of heritage assessors to landscape fabric, which can depend on their education and cultural background, precepts based on past exposure to various landscape elements, psychological conditioning and mood, and sometimes associative or spiritual valuing. These can vary from person to person - for an excellent discussion on this, read Chapter 1 of George Seddon's *Landprints* (1997). However a 'control' can be the extent to which a wide variety of people express a similar reaction or

assessment - e.g. admiration of the ‘three sisters’ formation at Katoomba or Uluru. This is usually referred to as *community esteem*, or more loosely, *social value*. Testing this, however, can be quite time-consuming and hence costly, so is seldom undertaken.

There are many other factors that influence a decision as to what landscape fabric is ‘significant’: awe of the ‘sublime’; something untouched, primeval; an underlying cultural conditioning of what constitutes ‘picturesque’; a more mundane awareness of tourist responses; or pressures from stakeholders or special interest groups.

So, how should ‘significant’ landscape fabric be conserved?

Obviously, with such diverse elements, different types of landscape fabric require different types of conservation. What type of treatment should be spelt out, firstly, in a considered conservation policy that takes into account place ownership, uses, controls, and so on. This should be followed by a conservation management or action plan, usually with detailed maintenance requirements. It may also need provision for interpretation. In many instances, conservation is best achieved by avoiding disturbance, or of doing as little as possible – a basic Burra Charter principle. This is particularly so for inorganic fabric, which in many cases changes almost imperceptibly and needs little if any active ‘conservation’. Sometimes, only providing adequate drainage is required, or removing detracting or potentially damaging elements likely to reduce or destroy the significance of the fabric. In some cases this may necessitate fencing to protect the landscape item’s fabric, but in many cases this is unnecessary or impractical. In other cases, a curtilage may need to be determined, in order to protect it.

Town or urban parks contain a mix of natural and built elements which, in combination – rather than individually - are usually what generate the park’s significance. This provides a challenging dichotomy of responses. As parks evolve, their organic elements grow, mature,

decay, die and then require replacement – most notably, trees. On the other hand, its inorganic elements – paths, walls, stairs, gates, bandstands, fountains, statues, and so on – may remain little changed – albeit often rather worn if survivors of the 1930s. Strictly speaking these latter are *built* fabric, but in combination with organic fabric, serve a landscape design and amenity role. As built elements, they can be treated – conserved - more directly according to Burra Charter principles than natural or organic ones. The latter may require a variety of horticultural treatments, such as pruning and shaping of trees and hedges, periodic inspection for diseases by arborists, replacement of worn turf, and so on.

In all the continuing processes of growth, change, decay and renewal in parks, accretions are inevitable, the opportunity often being taken to apply the latest fashion or taste, especially to replacement plantings. This poses dilemmas to those trying to determine a park's actual heritage significance. Is there a key period to which a park (or garden) should be restored? Or should it simply reflect all the changes to it, which may have enriched it and increased its complexity and character? Sometimes the answer is the first, in others the second. In yet other cases, such changes may detract from, or undesirably clutter a park's integrity, and need to be undone or removed. Each case has to be considered on its merits.

Trees pose a particularly complex challenge for conservationists. Being organic, they mature, become senescent, and die. The avenue of Hills Fig in Sydney's Hyde Park is a good example of the problems posed, because several of them have died or are in the process of doing so – some from a fungal disease. Several replacement and remedial options have been tried, but in the end, only staged removal (accompanied by careful public education), soil replacement or rectification, and replanting fresh stock is the only way to go.

In other cases, community involvement in identifying, respecting and retaining all the landscape fabric that creates the locally valued sense of place is the best way to go.

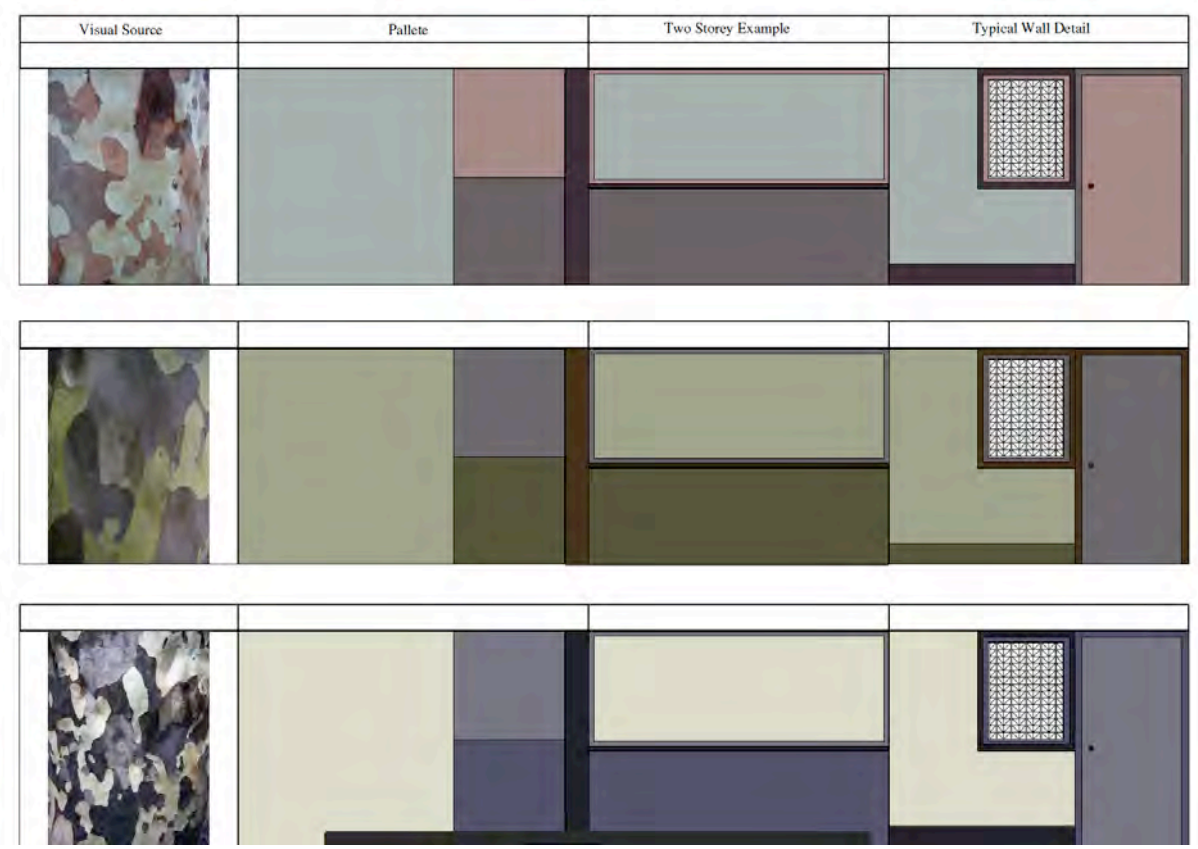
Often, community concern only becomes apparent and vociferous when such fabric is seriously threatened by development or exploitation – e.g. the old growth forests and the Franklin River in Tasmania, mining of uranium in Kakadu, the impacts of mining or farming (fertilizer and insecticide) discharges on the Great Barrier Reef, and so on. Without public campaigns we would have little/no environmental heritage or planning legislation to protect them.

Habitats mostly comprise landscape fabric, assemblages on varying scales, from macro to micro. Particular eucalypts support Koala populations, while spotted gum forests with burrawang ground cover support a certain suite of birds, mammals and insects, and marshes and swamps support other species of birds and fish. These all need to be protected and conserved, e.g. by banning clear felling, bush clearing, or infilling by dredging or dumping.

An inspirational colleague of mine, Trevor King, has demonstrated the importance of paying close attention to the encompassing environment in which each local community lives. He points out that the very landscape fabric among which they move in their everyday lives, fosters – even if through osmosis – an identification with that place. In combination it has a distinctive character, and generates a ‘sense of place’, of ‘belonging’ there.

After a great deal of intensive identification and analysis, Trevor put together a remarkable study which he called ‘Imagining Bermagui’. (King, 2006). In this he drew inspiration from all the elements such as landform, vegetation, and waterbodies present there. He examined in detail the very colour, shape, texture, and even construction of the leaf forms and flowers of indigenous trees, shrubs, ground covers and grasses of its vegetation; the shape, colours, and soils of its topography, and the embayments of its coastline, rivers creeks, and waterbodies.

From these he distilled a palette of materials, colours, textures, shapes and patterns. Local residents and builders will be encouraged to adopt the elements when erecting new dwellings and even commercial premises. An example, using the colour and bark of the local Spotted Gum, *Corymbia maculata*, is shown below:



Trevor has had limited success in encouraging them to do so. Much more remains to be done.

He is now studying how local communities can be encouraged to ‘know’ and respond to their own, special local landscape fabric - what he calls ‘connected place-making’. He believes that interaction with landscape fabric can be the doorway, or means by which, one passes into a place-inspired culture - not something based on imported cultural language and ideas derived from overseas. Like me, he regards Modernist-inspired ‘white boxes’ (favoured in the 1920s-1950s) simply ‘dumped’ on the landscape as if from the air, as the antithesis to this.

Trevor asserts that an appreciation of our geologic, ecological and natural environment that has evolved over deep time has the potential to inspire feelings of awe, reverence and respect. These attributes of appreciation can enrich our community's culture and impact on our relationship to the conservation and management of natural fabric. He is currently interviewing persons in his local shire who have volunteered over many years to plant native trees in the Eurobodalla Regional Botanic Gardens in an effort to reinstate some semblance of the pre-settlement natural landscape. What has struck him most is the sense many have developed of becoming custodians of it – drawing closer to the Aboriginal identification and interdependence with it.

Author Don Watson, in his recent book *The Bush* expresses a similar view:

> 'It can do no harm to settle on the public mind a deeper and more honest knowledge of the land than anything that myth and platitude allow, or to allow love to overrun indifference… Except that we need to love it as it is and can be, not the way it was and never will be again.' (2015: 372)

In assessing the extent to which settlers to Australia are coming to terms with the Australian landscape, author David Malouf has written:

> 'Our ways of thinking and feeling and doing had been developed, and tested, over many centuries [in Europe] before we brought them to this new place and gave them a different turn of meaning, different associations, a different shape and weight and colour on new ground.' (2014:143)

He posits that we should spend time

> 'enriching our consciousness – in both senses of that word: increasing our awareness of what exists around us, making it register on our senses in the most vivid way, but also of taking all that *into* our consciousness and of giving it a second life so that we

> possess the world we inhabit imaginatively as well as in fact. This has been especially important in the case of the land itself, and I mean by that everything that belongs to the land: its many forms as landscape, but also the birds, animals, trees, shrubs, flowers that are elements of its uniqueness; and most of all, the *spirit* of the land as it exists in all these things and can be touched and felt there.' (p. 152)

In concluding this paper I can do no better than again quote Malouf's words:

> 'We are makers, among much else, of landscapes. The land under our hands is shaped by the food we eat, by farming methods… We remake the land in our own image so that it comes in time to reflect both the industry and imagination of its makers, and gives us back, in working land, but also in the idealized version of landscape that is park or garden, an image both of our human nature and our power. Such making is a rich form of possession'. (pp 161 -162)

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