

# Design with meaning<sup>1</sup>

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*Places become marked with our emotions as if they were indelible stains. What we felt when we were there at the time is enough to damn or bless the city for ever.*

Jonathan Keats (1991) *Italian Journeys*, Ch.6.

LANDSCAPE DESIGN is an interventionist act. In a way that ameliorates the act, we frequently—and correctly—refer to landscape design involving a mediation between art and nature. Designers may (indeed should) see themselves as enticing users to share or experience the designer's artifice and discover meaning. As part of this connection with underlying reasons for design, words like 'context', 'meaning' and 'significance' occur in our design language. Our engaging with these terms as metaphors for understanding design has become a focus for enquiry in landscape architecture. This engagement is accompanied by a welcome resurgence in discussion on landscape architecture as an art form and parallels the post-modern focus on the arts and humanities (see Simon Swaffield Editorial: languages of landscape architecture, *Landscape Review*, 1995:2). This essay looks at these issues from an Australian perspective. It uses a number of designs as illustrations of context, meaning and significance after attempting to tease out definitions of the terms. They are difficult terms to define, but because we use them increasingly we need to reflect on their meaning.

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IN THE LAST 20 YEARS or so there has been a modest flow of writing within Australian landscape architecture on design matters that reflect Australian themes. Earlier in the period, the focus of much of the writing was on style, later moving to considerations of ethos. Implicit in the early style discussions, but not necessarily articulated, is an undercurrent of the art of designing with meaning. This undercurrent surfaced about a decade ago, with the word 'meaning' occurring in our language of design. References to 'context' and 'significance' have joined the semantic debate.

Internationally the 1970s saw scholarly enquiry into landscape meaning and related human values by cultural geographers building on a foundation of studies from the turn of the century. Art historical and cultural studies joined in by the early 1980s. The breadth of disciplines impinging on landscape research, including that of cultural preferences and meaning, is illustrated in the contributions to *Landscape Research* from the early 1980s onwards.<sup>2</sup> Landscape architecture entered the debate in the late 1980s with commentaries on meaning in design. *Landscape Journal* in 1988, 7(2) produced a special issue 'Nature, Form, and Meaning'. But as a profession we were late in joining the debate. David Lowenthal in 1990 gave a reason (some would see it as an excuse) when he posited that 'Landscape is everyone's interest ... Those who make it their central focus—mostly landscape architects—are few and infernally occupied; they are busy shaping landscapes, not philosophising about them'.<sup>3</sup> Should we be philosophising? The answer must be yes, not least in order to help critical examination of our beliefs and ideas and to develop theoretical stances for understanding design.

## KEY WORDS

*Context*  
*Meaning*  
*Significance*  
*Experience*

## REFLECTIONS

Expressions of meaning, particularly in the relationship between people and nature, have been the domain of garden writers and designers, including Australian examples, for considerable time. I often regret that there has been some disregard in the Australian landscape architecture profession in the past 20 years or so for the idea and ideology of gardens.<sup>4</sup> This attitude side-steps the garden as a major setting for human activity, and ignores gardens as places of experience with spiritual connections which 'attempt to *establish meaning by giving forms to nature*' (Riley 1988, p.136). Perhaps there has been a tendency to think of gardens in terms of form rather than content, and a form not worthy of a design profession's attention.

Conversely, the tradition of garden writing in Australia, with the idea of gardens as places of experience, is strong. It includes the work of Edna Walling, Beatrice Bligh and Ellis Stones. Edna Walling's later work and the work of Ellis Stones emphasised an Australian theme. This theme was also reflected in the larger scale design work and, occasionally, writings of various landscape architects in the 1970s, including Grace Fraser, Mervyn Davies, Beryl Mann, Jean Brodie-Hall (Verschuer), John Oldham, Marion Blackwell, Glen Wilson and Bruce Mackenzie. Wilson and Mackenzie from time to time over the past 15 years have contributed to *Landscape Australia* on an Australian theme, substantially as advocates for the indigenous environment and plant material in landscape design, touching on experiential aspects as well as ecological. However, the writings often leave many questions to be answered, are not always conceptually strong and are sometimes not necessarily convincing. But they have helped to fuel the growing debate on ideas of relevance and meaning in Australian landscape design.

Others have written on conceptual issues in *Landscape Australia*, including George Seddon on an Australian *Genius Loci* ethic; Rodney Wulff on context and ethos; Catherin Bull on style and meaning in the ecological age.<sup>5</sup> George Seddon consistently offers us intellectual food for thought in his writings on a sense of place in Perth and the Swan River. *Landscape Review* has advanced the dialogue on 'conceptualising the form, content, and processes of landscape architecture' (Editorial 1995:2, p.1) through two previous theme issues: 'Languages of landscape architecture' (1995:2 and 1996:2(3)). The papers provide a critical enquiry into linguistic metaphors in describing landscape as design subject and design process.

My purpose is twofold; first, to enquire into theoretical aspects of the use of the words 'meaning', 'context' and 'significance' and their application to designed landscapes. Secondly, my purpose is to illustrate the discussion by reference to selected current Australian design examples.

## DEFINITIONS

What do we mean by meaning, context and significance? Is the application of this trio to the activity of design important? If so, for whom?: the users, the designer, or both? Should we expect landscape designs to have context and to communicate meaning and significance immediately to users, or do these develop over time, particularly significance?

## MEANING

Meaning is connected with interpretation and presentation of not just the physical form of a place, but also the associationism inherent in the ideas and

ideologies that underlie the physical form of a landscape, including a designed landscape. Ann Bermingham (1986) in *Landscape and Ideology* draws attention to the historical precedence for associationism in human relationships with landscape. She does so particularly through reference to Richard Payne Knight's eighteenth century intellectual discourse centred on landscape as an association of ideas 'derived from the minds of viewers'. Expressed simply, association of meaning in landscape is to do with the inter-relationship of people, places and events through time. Design presents an opportunity to add to this inter-relationship. In this way we may see that designed landscapes are a system of signs both to the designer and receiver, or the user. John Dixon Hunt (1991, p.28) decisively summarises this with his aphorism that:

Gardens, too, mean rather than are. Their various signs are constituted of all the elements that compose them ... signs, to be read by outsiders in time and space for what they tell of a certain society.

A considerable body of writing on meaning which has relevance to landscape architecture is concerned with everyday landscapes. Cultural geographers have been foremost in this field, concentrating on reading and interpreting landscapes and deciphering meaning. They see landscape as a cultural construct, a product of our ideologies taking concrete form (Duncan, J and Duncan, N 1988; Baker and Biger 1992). Landscape thereby reflects the character of society. It is a cultural phenomenon 'defined by our vision and interpreted by our minds'. (Meinig, D 1979, p.3). Place meaning has also been embraced by cultural heritage professionals with a focus on the inter-relationship between people, events and places through time. The underlying intellectual and professional concern is for the way in which meanings, embedded in place, accrue through association of ideas and their interpretation for the community (Taylor, K 1997).

Landscapes have a plurality of meaning. Landscape architects must learn to deconstruct these meanings in a variety of ways: through reading the landscape; through research; through interpreting human attachment; and through understanding landscapes—including designed landscapes—as a system of signs. To do so should be second nature before writing the landscape (designing) to create humanly relevant designs where users can connect with the power of place and landscape as memory. Dolores Hayden (1995) points out how urban landscapes are storehouses of social memory, meaning and shared values, and the lessons in this for urban landscape design work. She indicates that design work often does not need lavish municipal spending to enhance meaning in public places. Rather, it needs to connect with human experiences and public history, where such history provides a connecting thread between people and place meaning.

An apposite example cited by Hayden is that of large scale urban renewal and streetscape design that has destroyed the sense of place and shared memories of ordinary places held by their inhabitants. The battles in Sydney over two decades ago to save nineteenth century housing at Glebe and Woollahroomooloo are cases of people fighting to save places because of their shared and private meanings as home, not merely housing. This grass roots mood also came to the fore in 1987 with trenchant opposition to the redevelopment proposal which was to have seen the historic Finger Wharf at Woollahroomooloo demolished to build a marina. The conservation argument focussed on the view that this particular structure is an

integral part of Sydney's, and Australia's, social history and is an unsurpassed example of innovative building. Finger Wharf reflects the importance of Australia's wool industry; it was the arrival point for thousands of migrants or people returning to Australia; it was the embarkation point for Australian troops in both World Wars; and it is important in the social history of Woolloomooloo. Opponents to its conservation could see little value in it, mainly viewing it as a physical thing, and ignoring its social value. In contrast, Tom Uren summarised its meaning in a letter to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 April 1993:

The Finger Wharf is one of the great remaining timber structures in the southern hemisphere. It is deeply steeped in the development and struggles of our ordinary people. It should be accessible to the people of Woolloomooloo and the community.

Meaning and interpretation are closely connected. Interpretation of place meaning will be enhanced by a sense of participation by the observer or user, which is well understood in the field of heritage management. There are two linked challenges here for designers: how to engage users intellectually and emotionally in the design through interpretative means; and how to give users the feeling of participation. In this way meanings and attachment will accrue and enrich user experiences over time. This may present difficulties for meaning attaching to designed places. Often these are meanings intended and manufactured by the designer. This suggests that philosophical enquiry into how to connect these meanings with the geographer's experiential phenomenological construct of place meaning is worthwhile.

Relph's *Place and Placelessness* (1976) is instructive in understanding the meaning attached to places. Relph's thesis is grounded in the 1970s reaction by a group of distinguished geographers to the positivistic, quantitative methods of the 1960s. In the Preface to his book he suggests that these earlier methods are unsatisfactory as approaches to understanding human behaviour because they are frequently mechanical and simplify the world into structures and models which ignore the subtlety and significance of everyday experience. Phenomenological interpretation is raised in this essay because I believe it has application in understanding meaning and significance in designed places (see for example figures 1 and 3) in that it offers a philosophical basis for understanding everyday places, and hence the social sense of place. The significance of phenomenological interpretation is grounded in the proposal that as a philosophy and science it 'thus turns away from the objects themselves and to the way in which the objects are given—to their *objectedness*; to their being as phenomena, ie objects of experience' (Pickles 1988). The import here for designed places is that meaning will attach to the experience of designed forms, not simply the forms themselves as lines, patterns, structures and spaces. It should also be stated that Relph's phenomenological interpretation of sense of place contrasts with other qualitative geographical research approaches. Notable is the structural materialist approach proposed by Eyles (1985) whose view is that the lack of rigorous empirical methods in phenomenology is a weakness. Eyles does not deny the importance of the identification of place meaning, but his concern is the representation of social reality and the need to study specific cases or places supported by materialist data, rather than reliance solely on general theories (Eyles 1988). He further notes (1988, p.2) that 'interpretative geography searches for and accepts meanings of the social world' but additionally attempts to reconstruct 'reality by revealing the taken-for-granted assumptions of individuals and groups in space ... but does not take for granted the everyday'. He goes on to claim (1988,

p.5) 'that statistical surveys and quantitative analysis remain relevant for interpretative research'.

Relph uses the term 'space' on the proposition that space involves an associated sense of place and provides context for, and derives meaning from, places. I am uncomfortable with the term 'space', preferring 'place' for the same reason as that offered by Heidegger (quoted in Relph 1976, p.28) that 'spaces receive their being from places not from the "space"'. Space connotes architectural volume, whilst place connotes being and dwelling in, 'where we experience the meaningful events of our existence' (Norberg-Schultz 1971, p.19). Nevertheless Relph outlines different, but interconnected, sorts of space. These include perceptual space (connected with experiences and emotions) and existential space (lived-in space). Within the latter are various types, including, for our purpose, geographical space and architectural/planning space. Geographical and perceptual space connect with enquiries into place meaning by cultural geographers. This is where meaning, according to Relph, is attached to deep associations, which are themselves sources of identity and belonging.

The concept of architectural space refers to the deliberate creation of spaces in which Relph acknowledges the modernist ideal of functional architectural space. Nevertheless, he agrees that architectural space can involve experience in addition to functionalism. This is important for designed spaces and transactions with meaning. Such space 'has a variety of expressions, these are initially concerned with the *imaginative experience* [my italics] of space; the ability to create architectural space which encourages such experiences is very dependent on individual genius, but the possibility of achieving them appears to be greatest where abstract ideas of space are most highly developed' (Gauldie 1969, cited in Relph 1976, p.23). We may assume that abstract ideas will involve human-place/space emotional interaction.

There is a challenge for designers to engage users and lead them to understand what is meant. Meaning in designs may be apparent or it may need interpretation and accumulate with time; it will be based on experiences (including the challenge of new experiences as well as that born of familiarity or connection with history), human values and sense of fit.

## CONTEXT

Context is perhaps more readily assimilated than meaning. Context is the way in which we make comparisons with other places; it is related to our range of cultural experiences through which we situate a place, see it and interpret it, and construct meaning from it. Landscape architects need to understand and cross-reference the notion of cultural context as essential to design.<sup>6</sup> The alternative, of planning and design activities proceeding in a cultural vacuum, is unpalatable, although it has historically occurred in some environmental design projects in Australia, particularly on large urban projects and in the field of landscape assessment.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, many landscape architects now explain their designs within a framework of references to nature—or more correctly, the raw materials and forms of nature—and the relationship between art and nature, or to an historical perspective. In effect a cultural context is offered. This itself is not new; it has its own historical perspective in the intellectual ideas underpinning, for example, Italian Renaissance gardens or the English eighteenth century landscape movement where relationships between art and nature were deeply felt and expressed.

The enquiry inherent in my discussion is that related to the proposition that we should locate design ideas and actions within a cultural context so that they have the opportunity to acquire, over time, layers of symbolism, meaning and significance available to the community. We should also see this as an opportunity to design in a pluralistic society, which brings a range of cultural baggage to the ways in which landscape is seen and interpreted.

Like discussions on meaning, discourse on context for landscape design work is to be welcomed. It has associations with the current interest in Australian history and its cultural contexts where people see places and landscapes within a personal or collective memory framework and are able to articulate their feelings about a sense of place. This is also a possible antidote to the 'design as problem solving' syndrome. The thought-provoking essay "Context" vs "Concept?" Regenerating Form and Content in Landscape Architecture' by Kathy Poole (1995) is on the importance of context. Poole critically reviews the use of concept and questions it as a reductive, generalising and decontextualising approach to design with origins in the Beaux Arts and Bauhaus Schools. She proposes that landscape architects should shift their focus from concepts to context as a way of generating form and meaning. Her rationale is particularly convincing but, because I doubt that landscape architects will jettison 'concept' from their language, my preference is to redefine concept to include context as an inseparable part.

Australian references to context are additionally welcome given the current scientific positivist view from some teachers and students that sees only true value in what is called 'natural'. It is a concept espoused with zeal through the idiom of self-righteous ecological metaphor. The irony is that what is espoused is itself a cultural construct (Griffiths 1991; Taylor 1992), a way of seeing which is rooted in the eighteenth and nineteenth century landscape aesthetic philosophy of the sublime and picturesque. The rationale is often that of restoring a site through landscape design treatment to an assumed ecologically correct and sustaining format, based on hazy ideas of a 'natural' landscape. It is worth any landscape architect reading *The Future Eaters* (Flannery 1994) or Rhys Jones' (1975) work on firestick farming to see how much the Australian landscape was not pristinely natural 200 years ago, but was an Aboriginal artefact.

On hearing the comment 'it's an ecologically correct design' (or an 'ecological design', whatever that is) in relation to the use of native vegetation or a 'natural' water feature, my question is 'why?'. A few years ago I was asked to look over student projects on an historic site of national significance. The brief for the project was to introduce visitor facilities into the setting. Only a minority of the design proposals looked seriously at the cultural context of the site. Most of the schemes latched onto restoring 'natural' conditions as the design theme, with comforting comments on ecologically sustainable development, although no one could satisfactorily say why this was necessary. In effect, the design brief and site were inter-related problems to be solved. The result was that the designs connected with concept, but not with the cultural context or sense of place. I do not intend this to be a polemic against landscape ecology. The concern for the ecology of the natural world is a proper one which has joined the mosaic of ideas that contribute to meaning in landscape design. My concern is that the insularity of the concept problem solving approach and that of eco-fundamentalism have contrived to marginalise landscape architecture as a field

of artistic endeavour with cultural abstractions of nature and rich relationships with the history of ideas and people through time, as well as marginalising its own history.

The particularly limiting aspects of the fundamental ecological approach, with its avoidance of discussion on form and aesthetics in favour of concentration on analysis, are similarly noted by Marc Treib in a recent essay in *Landscape Australia* (1994:1, p.31, footnote 1) and by Laurie Olin (1988) in his essay, 'Form, Meaning, and Expression in Landscape Architecture'. Olin refers to the recent development of an anti-cultural stance that eschews aesthetic concerns in landscape architecture and links to it the new deterministic moral certitude of fundamentalist ecology. He puts the sound counter-argument that whilst landscape design forms derive from nature and its processes, these are translated through a series of abstractions and artistic expressions determined by cultural norms.

## SIGNIFICANCE

Significance is a more difficult term. Significance suggests importance, connection with events and/or people of note. 'Of note' does not mean exclusively or predominantly the well-known and famous. Significance inheres in ordinary places—ordinarily sacred—connected with ordinary people. But whether icons or ordinary places, significance is a metaphor for symbolism. Significant places are symbols of who we are and of our connections with places through emotions. Significance therefore suggests places having meaning indicative of their perceived cultural importance. It is connected with tangible evidence—what we see as physical form—and also with intangible associations and relationships, and hence human values. To obfuscate matters, meaning and significance are often used interchangeably. There is clearly a semantic and conceptual link with significance which is evolving from understanding and feeling the meaning and symbolism of a place.

Significance can be expressed as the response we make to knowing and understanding a place. It is a human value judgement. Cultural heritage practice offers a definition of the concept of significance which can be transferred to a discussion on design. Because of this cultural significance as a concept helps in estimating the *value* of places, where those places that are likely to be significant are those which help an understanding of the past or enrich the present and will be of value to future generations.<sup>8</sup>

Symbolism and significance are often more readily invoked in landscapes of iconographic status. The National Triangle in Canberra and its extension along Anzac Parade is a striking example. Its origin lies in the Griffin Plan as the geometric and spiritual focus for the land and water axes and national institutions. Rather than as a space dominated by buildings, as in the Griffin Plan, the National Triangle has developed over time as a landscape space of generous proportions. It has acquired deep symbolism for many people in the community associated with landscape meaning, sense of place/identity and historic continuity. It symbolises the vastness of the Australian continent, whilst its formal character is in dynamic tension with bush-clad Mount Ainslie which dramatically terminates the land-axis vista along Anzac Parade. In contrast, urban design 'solutions' are periodically wheeled out with proposals for buildings to fill the space. We are told by some designers that the space lacks structural symbolism and

meaning and that this can best be achieved by buildings in the space. I use inverted commas for the word 'solutions' because it assumes a problem. But the existing openness is not a problem to many people in the community.

A design exercise for the National Triangle some three years ago was undertaken by the then National Capital Planning Authority. Notably, the exercise omitted any review of the cultural heritage significance of the Triangle as it has developed into its present landscape form. In effect, the design exercise was undertaken in a cultural vacuum. The big design idea emerged only to be criticised. In 1995 at the Canberra public presentation by the National Capital Planning Authority and a panel of design professionals, members of the community articulated their view quite clearly that the landscape space *in its present form* has meaning and symbolism for them and that it does not require further buildings. It is notable that people appreciate the space as a landscape space, not a void waiting to be filled. There was only one panel member who acknowledged this,<sup>9</sup> which he did with spirited vigour. He linked the Triangle to the wider implications of the meaning and significance of the landscape character of Canberra as it has developed over time, acknowledging the changes in identity of the space that have occurred over time. Also notable are current heritage listings of the Triangle, which refer to its essential landscape character demonstrating historic, social and aesthetic values. These relate to historic plantings and to the people responsible for them, such as Charles Weston and AE Bruce, important figures in Canberra's landscape history. As a landscape place it has accrued identity, meaning and symbolic significance.<sup>10</sup> It still connects to the Griffin ideal, but in a different form. For the design team, buildings were imperative to define the space as a large-scale open space, not a place. The community, however, seemed not to share the acute sense of agoraphobia of the designers. This difference had previously been noted by Roger Johnson in 1991, when a proposal to site the National Museum in the Triangle was severely criticised at a public forum.

In addition to icons such as the Canberra example, ordinary places also accrue significance. In each, time is a crucial factor. This raises the question of whether meaning and significance can be designed into landscape designs at the outset. In attempting to address this, it is useful to review some theoretical aspects of meaning and significance and landscape design examples.

### *Theory and practice*

#### IDENTITY

Axiomatic to discussion of theoretical aspects of place meaning and significance is the proposition that 'improved knowledge of the nature of place can contribute to the maintenance and manipulation of existing places and the creation of new places' (Relph 1976, p.44). Central to this concept is that identity is fundamental in everyday life: all places have identity, and this is relevant to landscape designs as places for people. Also of relevance is Relph's view (p.61) that 'identity of place is comprised of three interrelated components, each irreducible to the other—physical features or appearance, observable activities and functions, and meaning or symbols'. Both tangible or physical identity (biophysical factors) and intangible identity related to existential distinctiveness and human experiences are inextricably inter-woven with place meaning and significance. Fundamental to the intangible aspects of identity are various components. The components which appear important to me in landscape design terms are discussed below.<sup>11</sup>



## SENSE OF PLACE

One approach to questions of meaning, context and significance in landscape design, and one with a distinguished place in the history of ideas, is that of evoking a sense or spirit of place or, if preferred, genius of the place (*genius loci*). Sense of place has become part of the common language of landscape architecture. It is often referred to as a design outcome, but is it? If landscape design is an art form, which I believe it is, and if we accept Frank Lloyd Wright's proposal that design can be defined as 'art with a purpose', is the imbuing of a sense of place a part of the purpose and how does it arise? The designer may envisage a particular sense of place meaning and significance for his/her design, but does this necessarily inhere in the design for users through engaging their emotions? To do so may need artful interpretative techniques to engage users.

The issue of the genius of the place may be slippery if applied narrowly to many designs in urban settings, where the original underlying natural elements and forces or past human history have been obliterated. Does 'genius of the place' signify recapturing earlier site conditions and character, or is it to do with creating something which has associative connections? Ideally it is a combination of both, such as in the eighteenth century English landscape movement where allusion to genius of the place meant not just capturing physical character and locale. Genius of the place then referred equally to the associations with the spirit of a place as a result of the relationship between people, place and memory. As an intellectual movement it was informed by an ideology of landscape as a cultural construct with socio-political implications. Physical locale and idea are combined, for example, in Alexander Pope's dictum in his *Epistle to Lord Burlington* (1731):

Consult the Genius of the Place in all,  
That tells the Waters or to rise, or fall,

...

*Paints* as you plant, and as you work, *Designs*.

Here Pope incisively links the art of landscape design with painting. Thereby he demonstrates its claim to be an art form able to stimulate the mind and imagination, to arouse the senses and to give pleasure. Similar is Richard Payne Knight's *The Landscape, A Didactic Poem* (1794), in particular the lines 'Yet in the picture all delusions fly, And nature's genuine charms we there descry; / Hence let us learn, in real scenes, to trace The true ingredients of the painter's grace'. In Australia and New Zealand there is a strong cultural link between the way landscape is experienced and given identity and our histories of landscape painting. This link offers opportunities in landscape design of enquiry into design form and accrual of meanings over time. I am not sure that we have really grasped this concept. One area in which the link can be fruitfully applied and offer cultural context is in the teaching of history/theory of landscape architecture through the concept of appreciation which Allen Carlson (1993) maintains is common to the appreciation of both art and nature. He points to the ease with which we are able to move 'from the appreciation of landscapes to appreciation of paintings' (p.199). The relationship between the two forms involves human values and meanings we bring to the appreciation of what we see because both are cultural constructs (Berleant 1993). The connection for landscape design must be obvious, given that much of

our work is an art form involving abstractions of nature. The proposition that in aesthetic appreciation of the two, engagement of the viewer is central (Berleant) is important for a theory of landscape design. This is akin to my earlier point that participation will enhance place meaning and has implications for landscape designs.

A strong relationship between place meaning and identity on the one hand and cultural and historical factors on the other is apparent. By this I do not refer to the mindless copying of design formats from history, a sort of eclectic historical pastiche, but to where designs imply continuity of human experience, are situated within a cultural and conceptual context and have potential to be read by users as part of the experience and enjoyment of the designed place. They are those designs where the designer opens opportunity for transaction and dialogue—participation—between the designed place and users. Such transactions and dialogue will be based on users' existing experiences and cultural background and on historical connections. The designer should also take the opportunity to provoke the imagination of users, giving them new experiences and making new connections with place. James Corner (1991) refers to this as 'critically engaging contemporary circumstances and tradition' (p.115: Abstract). Ian Thompson (1995, p.64), in a critique of Geoffrey Jellicoe's theory of aesthetics and landscape design as an art form, neatly summarises the point in reference to Suzanne Langer's (1953) proposal that works of art—including some landscapes—are 'analogues for our emotions'.

More discourse is needed on how landscape designs can involve what is referred to in *Poetics of Gardens* as 'the emotions and mind of the spectator' (Moore *et al* 1989, p.81). There is no doubt, for example, that some landscape design work in Australia has been, and will continue to be, influenced by landscape architects making cultural connections. I suspect that there is rather more than we know about. It would be rewarding to see more critical written presentations from practitioners to stimulate exchange of ideas. *Poetics of Gardens* proposes the celebration of landscape architecture as an art form where designs are 'adventures of the imagination' (p.188). Notably the reference to 'the emotions and mind of the spectator' is taken from a discussion by the filmmaker Eisenstein, where he alludes to the montage effect of emotions and mind, and how 'the image of a scene, a sequence, of a whole creation, exists not as something fixed and ready-made. It has to arise, to unfold before the senses of the spectator'.

Like Eisenstein's sense of all scenes being a process of montage, so are all landscapes a montage or series of layers, a text which can be read and which can tell a story, and can be interpreted to reveal meaning and significance. This suggests that in landscape design work we need to design with layers of meaning which open up opportunities for exercises of imagination by users within a cultural context. The design for Ann Cashman Reserve, Rozelle (Sydney) unassumingly addresses these points (figure 1). This vernacular pocket urban park, where the brief called for a multi-purpose neighbourhood facility, is highly popular with local residents. Peter Lawson took the universally recognised historic symbolism of stone circles as the cultural context underlying the design form. This device also offers the opportunity for a sense of identity to evolve for users where external symbolic references overlie local association with the place.

The design, completed in 1988, successfully recycled a former open space. It subtly incorporates previous components and new ones, and introduces symbolism through the use of recycled granite kerbstones forming the circles.

### MEMORY, NATURE AND CULTURE

Central to the idea of *genius loci* and of layers in the landscape, including designed landscapes, is the theme in *Landscape and Memory* (Schama 1995). All landscape, Schama claims, is ineluctably the work of the mind and memory. In the Introduction he emphasises his main thesis that landscape:

Before it can ever be a repose for the senses ... is the work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock. (pp.6-7)

Transposing the conflation of landscape, mind and memory to designed landscapes opens interesting opportunities for shaping landscapes, in which personal and collective memory allusions are translated. The challenge for the designer is the



Figure 1: Ann Cashman Reserve, Rozelle, Sydney (CLASP). This small park redesigned in 1986 is in a densely built-up inner city residential area. The simple plan with a circle as the core arose from research into symbolism and historic occurrence of rings and circles. It represents a meeting place, defence strategy and has religious connections. Remnant granite kerbstones define the circle and the design is enhanced by existing spreading trees. It is a social space which has become a place reflecting a phenomenological design approach.

interpretation and presentation of the allusions in the design in a way that is available for users. Three contemporary examples serve to illustrate the point. Mort Bay Park, Balmain, Sydney, designed in 1991 (Hassell and Partners, Sydney), was formerly a major ship building and repair yard for over 100 years. It was the site of Australia's first large-scale dry dock, built in 1854 by Thomas Mort. The dock and its associated facilities formed a workplace for several generations of local people; it was an essential part of the community. During World War II 12 corvettes of the Bathurst Class were built there and two plaques commemorate these historic events. Former crew members of the corvettes dedicated their plaque to the shipyard and the men who built the ships. The sandstone edge of the dry dock is preserved in the park layout. In the simple landscape treatment of the park, the planting, design vocabulary and the plaques, resides a sense of place for the visitor as well as the local community. The interpretative result is the presentation of a park that makes cultural connections. The design was informed by enquiry into history of people connected with the place, and the place itself. Structurally, the planting of *Ficus rubiginosa* (Port Jackson Fig) and *Castanospermum australe* (Black Bean), water-edge treatment of sandstone blocks, incorporation of modern docks and the outline of the dry dock evoke the vernacular genius of the place.

Newcastle Foreshore design (Tract Consultants) dating from 1982 is an ongoing large-scale project with important community connections. It represents the re-marriage of a community with its harbour frontage along the Hunter River, a landscape element on which the city has traditionally turned its back, but which is an essential component of the city's history and *raison d'être*. Historical allusions and recapturing sense of place are critical to the design intent (figure 2). Dyeworks Park, Prahran, Melbourne (Mark McWha 1994) is a pocket-sized urban park (0.5 ha), combining traditional park components with a compellingly fresh palette of ideas grounded in a cultural context (figure 3). The site is that of a former dyeworks, the colours of which are picked up in the seemingly abstract, but highly controlled, paving patterns. The ensuing design suggests an intriguing local sense of the stream of time within a framework speaking of the present and the future. The design is intended to unfold itself in a pluralistic presence. The park responds to the condition of the contemporary city and, like the city, reflects a series of layers of history which are apparent in the intersecting forms of the design.

If history forms memory patterns for landscape designs, so does nature, or at least abstractions of nature. Even here cultural history and modes of seeing the landscape which are informed by abstractions of nature in art and literature will affect our responses. In this vein, landscape architects such as Catherine Howett (1987) and Anne Spirn (1988) have written on an aesthetic paradigm for landscape design that combines nature, culture and art. In contrast to eco-fundamental correctness, theirs is a humanistic approach where a complementary dialogue between nature, culture and art is foremost. It is an holistic approach 'that encompasses both nature and culture, that embodies function, sensory perception, and symbolic meaning, and that embraces both the making of things and places and the sensing, using, and contemplating of them' (Spirn 1988; Abstract, p.108).

In an Australian context, the small, early 1970s park at Peacock Point, Balmain (Sydney), illustrates the point. In the January 1979 issue of *Landscape Australia*, Bruce Mackenzie set out his ideas on people-nature relationships. His

philosophy for this small and highly successful waterfront urban park endures. Mackenzie wrote of ‘capturing the mood experience of remote natural places within the confines of the city’. (In passing I must say that I am unsure about the reality of the idea of remoteness, even in Australia; but again it is part of an associative memory set.) The park maintains the role of being a microcosm of the successful meeting point of nature and culture in the heart of the city set against the vibrant backdrop of Sydney Harbour. This setting is boldly reflected in the Lloyd Rees painting *The City* (1963).<sup>12</sup> Mackenzie has summarised the park’s *genius loci* and its vitality:

The city park, in whatever form, can hardly be expected to match the scale and the grandeur of nature. Therefore, one refers to the physical and visual characteristics of natural places as a means of extracting the essence of the untamed for a theme to be applied and made beneficial in the urban environment. (p.21)

Peacock Point acts as both a ‘doing’ space and a ‘seeing’ space. The rugged use of local materials for paving and walls, the revealing of sandstone outcrops from the



*Figure 2: Newcastle Foreshore, Newcastle (Tract Consultants). Newcastle, north of Sydney, was a convict settlement and then developed as an industrial city in the nineteenth century, based on coal mining and ship building. The harbour fronts the Hunter River, but the city has traditionally turned its back on the river. The design objective was to open up the harbour to the city. The design is informed by four historic profiles in Newcastle’s history and is intended essentially as a people’s park which enriches the urban fabric and catches representations of Newcastle’s past.*



original Port Jackson foreshore and use of local plant material spell out *genius loci*. Do users see it as 'extracting the essence of natural places', notwithstanding the exotic grass lawns, so that it is 'a meaningful reflection of nature's forms'? (ibid. p.22). The answer is probably yes, and that it also reflects collectively the received images of Australia as place.

### CULTURAL LANDSCAPE MODEL

Parallel and relevant to an enquiry into meaning, and one from which landscape design criticism can learn if it so chooses, is the ever-growing interest in everyday cultural (vernacular) landscapes. Here, the central tenet is that landscapes are not what we see, but a way of seeing (Cosgrove 1984). It is a humanistic approach to interpreting landscape as a cultural construct which has shifted logically to the understanding that landscapes can not only be read but also interpreted as texts in which ideologies are transformed into concrete forms (Duncan, J and Duncan, N 1988). The touchstone for this development was the insight gained on symbolism in landscapes, promulgated in writings pre-

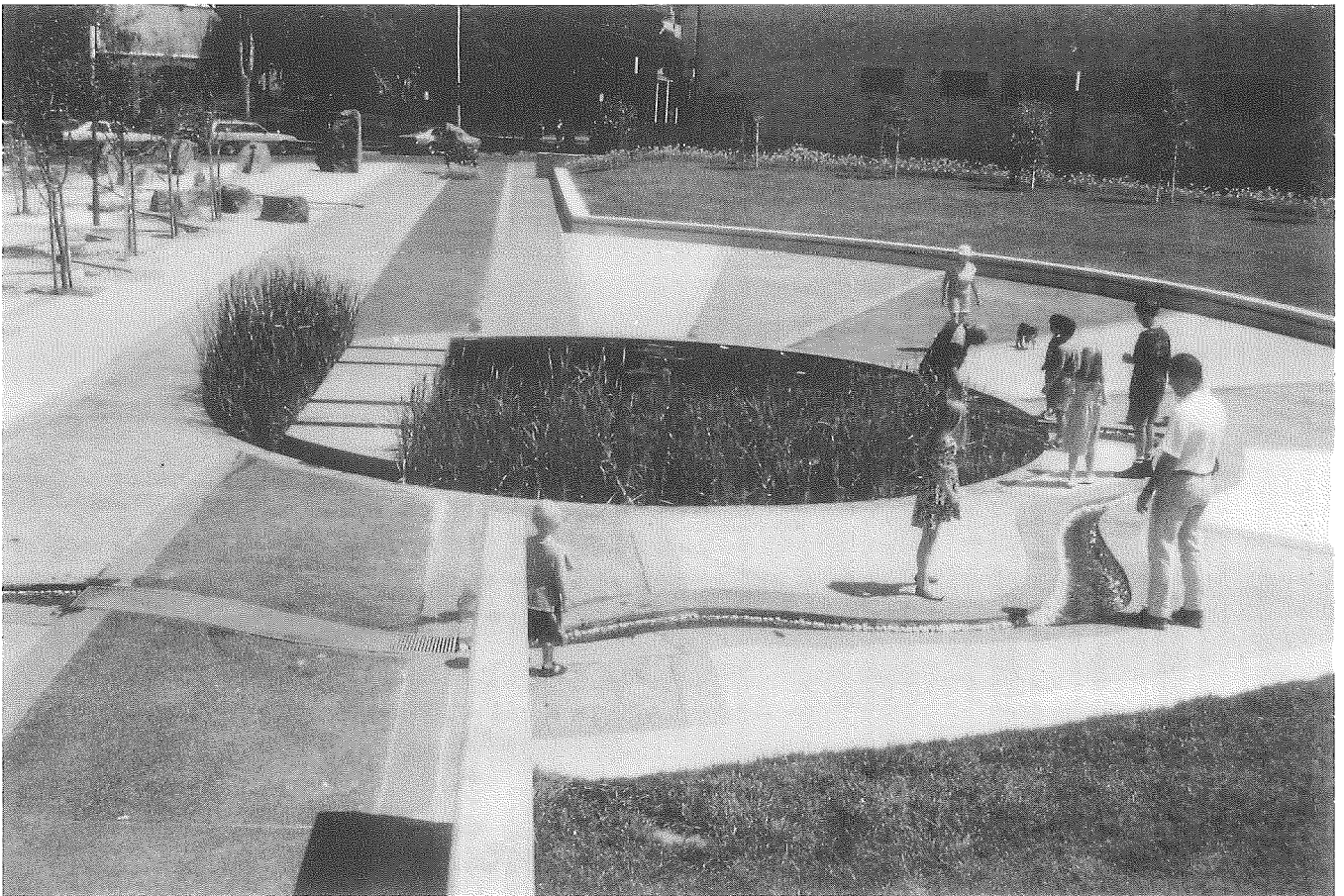


Figure 3: Dyeworks Park, Prahran, Melbourne (Mark McWha), is a small plaza/park in an inner area of Melbourne with adjacent government housing. Traditional elements—grass, trees, water—are more than images of the past. These elements are represented in the design together with skilful use of hard materials in a way which provokes imagination and relationship with the contemporary and with tradition. The design suggests an interesting discourse in form-related symbolism and identity, where design as a problem-solving functional exercise takes the back seat it deserves in favour of a phenomenological approach to design.

dominantly by cultural geographers in the 1970s. Interest in cultural landscape theory and associated practice is an international phenomenon, as Jacques (1995) demonstrates in 'The Rise of Cultural Landscapes'. He indicates the extent of work in various countries, including Australia and New Zealand, and its application in land-use planning. A 1992 study at Wingecarribee in New South Wales, for example, has led to the development of a landscape conservation zone by Wingecarribee Shire Council over a defined area of key historic landscapes. These are landscapes where particular meaning, based on historic values and heritage significance, was identified and where community opinion concurred (see Taylor and Tallents 1996).

Baker and Biger (1992) extend the concept that all landscapes are symbolic and reflect human ideologies. They address the way landscapes are encoded with messages waiting to be deciphered. Baker, in 'Introduction: on ideology and landscape', lucidly reviews the symbolism and ideology behind landscape meaning, indicating that landscape actions are the outcome of attitudes and 'that understanding of landscapes must rest upon the historical recovery of ideologies' (p.3). In the context of this essay, the landscapes in question are designed cultural landscapes which I see as equally created within an ideological framework. We could learn much from putting these designs within a theoretical and intellectual perspective by reference to cultural landscape epistemology, particularly the interpretation and presentation of meaning and significance and relationship to context.

## AESTHETICS AND MEANING

Questions of aesthetics and landscape design could obviously be a single and lengthy focus of discussion. Perhaps it ought to be, for, as a profession, landscape architects do seem to skirt such discussion. John Dixon Hunt (1993) reflects on this lack of debate on aesthetic questions with the qualifying challenge that 'modern designers have not sufficiently bothered to find out what people really want of private and public gardens' and that in an effort to recover meanings (significances, cultural topics), as in eighteenth century gardens, there is a need 'to establish a new agenda of meanings for the garden, an agenda that offers plurality, variety, and not simply formal maneuvers [*sic*]' (p.138). The implication is that aesthetics involve place identity related to human emotions and experience, and thereby aesthetic questions are central to meaning. Aesthetics is not primarily to do with formal questions of line and form in design.

Eagleton (1990) is helpful to the discussion, offering the proposition that 'Aesthetics is a discourse of the body ... the term refers ... to the whole region of human perception and sensation, in contrast to the more rarefied domain of conceptual thought' (p.13). He further proposes that aesthetics is to do with affections and aversions, the whole of our sensate life, which post-Cartesian philosophy has managed to overlook. Aesthetics, therefore, concerns cultural context, associations and ways of seeing. Humanistic implications for meaning in landscape designs are clear. The influence of twentieth century modernism has been to try to objectify aesthetics and locate it in the designed object, removing it from the province of interpretation and intention. This is akin to Kant's eighteenth century school of thought that aesthetic experience involves detachment or disinterestedness. It is one where 'the object of appreciation [*is*] isolated and divorced from its interrelationships with other things ... The result is a purified

aesthetic object, divorced from its own history, even from the fact that it is the product of a designer' (Carlson 1993, p.206).

The point here is that landscapes, including landscape designs, can never be isolated. All landscape is representational and its aesthetic appreciation involves interaction between place and the experiences we bring to engagement with place or landscape. There is a parallel with Dewey's (1958) reflection that in matters of aesthetic quality an artist in approaching a scene does not merely see formal lines and colours. The artist 'observes the scene with meaning and values brought to his perception by prior experience' (p.89). Designs are (one hopes) representational of the experiences and emotions of the designer. There should also be engagement with the emotions and experiences of the viewer/user, otherwise meaning and significance are opaque or, worse still, are absent.

### *Conclusion*

Can modern designed landscapes innately convey meaning and have significance from their inception in the way in which we understand examples from history did? Or are they more akin to cultural landscapes where meaning and significance accumulate over time. John Dixon Hunt (1991) contends that meanings encoded in eighteenth century English landscape parks and gardens were immediately understood by the people who owned them and by others in the same class of society. They represented a commonly shared way of seeing landscape as ideology and political entity. The same may be said of Italian Renaissance gardens and others in history which were seen as works of art. But such commonality of ideals no longer holds, society consists of different groups with different ideals.

Nevertheless, if meaning is connected with presentation of physical signs and symbols which are capable of interpretation by users through associationism, then designs can and do have meaning for those who understand these signs and symbols and their encoded messages. The essence of meaning essentially depends on the landscape architect being able to communicate with the receiver or user. Such a transaction will occur where the signs and symbols are understood as part of a shared system of beliefs or common ground. It will also occur where the receiver wants to know more about the intellectual origins of a designed place or is led by the designer to discover these and is then able to relate the result to his/her own sense of place in time. We need to foster continuing debate on the notion of landscape designs as works of art replete with meanings, as 'expressions or representations of a culture's position vis-à-vis nature' (Hunt 1993, p.140). Perhaps as designers we should also learn more about interpretative techniques practised in museums or in heritage management. It is generally accepted, for example, that the more knowledge that accrues about a place and its layers, the more is the social sense of attachment. Landscape architects, therefore, need to interpret and present their designs so that users can read them.

On the question of significance we need to be more cautious, particularly in present-day society where the system of beliefs is more diffuse than, say, in eighteenth century Britain. Significance is a characteristic that develops over time through understanding symbolism in places. Clues to symbolism can be built into a design and will assist the emergence of significance over time. To help this emergence, we should try to understand more about experience of



landscape and how to capture an essence of locality and place meaning. In developing meaning and significance in landscape designs, we must also relate to the modern context as well as to history and memory so that designed places can make a plurality of cultural connections and engage continuity.

Perhaps we ought also, from time to time, to respond to Luis Barragán's proposal (quoted in Krog 1991, p.103) that in view of the environmental, social, psychological and political chaos of the twentieth century, it is the duty of every garden to offer a place of serenity. To this I would add the notion of landscape designs giving pleasure and enjoyment to our senses in the long honoured tradition of the sensibility of the pleasure garden. This is a common sensual theme throughout different cultures and it resonates through our historical and philosophical underpinnings as a profession. It suggests a common experiential need in human beings, offering the philosophical foundation for a phenomenological approach to design. This approach is one where cultural context and meaning inextricably weave a web of richness and diversity which is suggestive of deeply felt human ideas on the relationship between art, culture and nature. Such a mix may then be seen as an experiential equation where human identity in landscape designs evolves from Relph's three components—physical features, activities/functions and symbolism/meaning—and itself becomes the touchstone for human significance to accrue in designs.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This essay arises from revisions to a paper presented at *Research for Landscape Architecture, The Fourth International Symposium of Japan and Korea*, Japanese Institute of Landscape Architecture and Korean Institute of Landscape Architecture; International House, Osaka, Japan, October 1995.

<sup>2</sup> See Peter Howard's Editorial: A Dawning Discipline? in *Landscape Research* 15(2), 1990.

<sup>3</sup> See again *Landscape Research* (1990) 15(2), 27–29.

<sup>4</sup> The appeal of the two garden conferences in recent years in Melbourne is noteworthy. Similar to this is the popularity of the Australian Garden History Society which has carried a number of editorial commentaries on an Australian garden style, with one on an Australian ethos in the February 1997 edition.

<sup>5</sup> This list is intended to give some idea of the fact that something has been and is stirring. I am not attempting to be comprehensive and regret any glaring omissions.

<sup>6</sup> It is now some eight years since Rodney Wulff wrote about context and direction for landscape design. See *Landscape Australia*, 4, 1987.

<sup>7</sup> Here I am thinking of those that have tried to objectify and/or mathematically rank visual attributes of landscape, or those that have observers rank photographs of scenes. The latter exercise has been neatly categorised by George Seddon (1986 p.340) as a 'trivial pastime'. These approaches have marginalised the crucial role of cultural context in understanding landscape where landscape itself is a cultural construct, not a quasi-scientific one.

<sup>8</sup> See The Australia ICOMOS Charter for the Conservation of Places of Cultural Significance (The Burra Charter), Guidelines on Cultural Significance.

<sup>9</sup> Patrick Troy, Director Urban Research Unit, The Australian National University.

<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that recently the National Capital Authority has announced its intention to upgrade interpretative and visitor facilities in the Triangle as it currently exists.

<sup>11</sup> I do not claim my list is exclusive.

<sup>12</sup> *The City* is a medley of harbour, rocks, vegetation, boats, nineteenth century housing and harbour-side buildings: it is a vibrant urban landscape setting where nature and culture meet.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to the following landscape architects for their generous help in supplying information and illustrations for various schemes referred to in the essay.

Peter Lawson (Clasp Consultants) for Ann Cashman Reserve; Tony McCormick (Hassell and Partners, Sydney) for Mort Bay Park; Mark McWha (Collingwood) for Dyeworks Park and Rodney Wulff (Tract Consultants, Melbourne) for Newcastle Foreshore. Their elucidation of the ideas relating to the social history and history of use of the sites which informed their designs was particularly helpful. Each design was purposely chosen as a vernacular scheme. I am also grateful to Bruce Mackenzie for information on Peacock Point.

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