

# Making Landscape Architecture in Australia: Book Review

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*Making Landscape Architecture in Australia, Andrew Saniga, Sydney: UNSW Press, 2012; ISBN 9781742233550*

Andrew Saniga's *Making Landscape Architecture in Australia* sets out several objectives including encapsulating what landscape architecture is, providing a framework for situating additional exemplars and offering a point of critical reflection for practitioners. While the objectives are directed at an Australian readership, they offer value from other perspectives too, including those of us nearby Kiwis, as well as other countries of the New World, particularly the former British Empire. There are shared points in that familial tie, as well as distinctive points of difference, which also shed light on the insistence of regionalism. Aspects of climate, topography and indigenous culture are some of the most salient areas in which histories unfurl in different ways. But in terms of the complexity of how we value the landscape – both natural and cultural – the challenges are common.

One question that haunts any history of landscape architecture is the very nature of the profession itself. Tracing the origins of the term 'landscape architect' is a genealogical crisis that inevitably besets historical texts relating to our profession. Saniga's rehearsing of these origins begs the question of when we will be as confident as architects who do not constantly question their founding terminology. In tracing the development of the profession, Saniga notes those who did or didn't call themselves a landscape architect, and those who used other titles.

The idea that nomenclature defines the profession is a complex one, and although it might clarify when landscape architecture arrived, it can also obscure nuanced developments. Saniga carefully explores the individuals and groups that contributed to what we now think of as landscape architecture. Ranging from garden designers to city planners, and dealing with everything from planting schemes to housing layouts, these eclectic origins underpin the diversity that remains characteristic of the profession.

Some of the main influences in the profession's development came not from those internal to the idea of landscape architecture, but from external drivers such as social change, concerns about the environment and population growth. Saniga highlights the variety of ways in which the burgeoning collective that might be called landscape architecture plotted a course through these sea changes. In some cases, the leaps in development are attributable to individuals; in Australia, for example, the arrival of Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin left an indelible mark on the sensibility of landscape architecture. After winning the

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competition to design Canberra, the Griffins left Chicago to take up residence in Australia in 1912, and their influence spread far beyond Canberra itself. Like many places, Australia benefited from the exodus of talented designers from Europe in the early twentieth century. As with the influence of Walter Gropius and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe in the United States, and Helmut Einhorn and the Plischkes in New Zealand, Australia received immigrants from across Europe, introducing a sensibility born of centuries of refinement. Latvians, Lithuanians, Hungarians, Germans and Czechs, trained in landscape architecture and allied fields, added to the cumulative shifts in design thinking in Australia, including the use of stone and the clean lines of post-war modernism.

A thread tracing through the text is the value attached to indigenous Australian plants. While home owners in the early years of European settlement in cities set about clearing the native vegetation from their properties, Saniga points to the example of Clement Hodgkinson's plan for what was then the East St Kilda Reserve in Melbourne (1867). The plan included an area of protected indigenous vegetation, within an otherwise unremarkable layout. The Griffins, in particular Marion, also had considerable influence on elevating the place of indigenous planting in landscape architecture. Examples like this reveal how the legacy of the forerunners of the profession of landscape architecture provides significant insight. It is also a potent reminder of how our own actions can have positive influences in the landscape centuries later. Landscape architecture is not a profession of immediate gratification, and requires a degree of self-sacrifice by designers who might never see their projects fully realised, especially in relation to vegetation. This altruistic dimension of the profession is true also of the work involved in infrastructure. Saniga describes the highway work that landscape architect Peter Spooner helped shape during the 1960s and how integrated it was with that of the engineers. Landscape architecture, when well done, can become invisible or be so much of a cohesive multi-disciplinary effort that it is indistinguishable.

For New Zealanders, there are many resonances with Saniga's account of landscape architecture in Australia, including the movement of practitioners in both directions across the Tasman. Of course, any comparison between the two countries inevitably brings out the competitive spirit. The publishing of *Making Landscape Architecture in Australia* is testament to a certain maturing of the profession in that country. And, as is the way with 'little sibling' countries like New Zealand, this provides an aspirational goal in terms of realising a critical mass and a sufficient history to make an overview timely. But, it is interesting to note, in the spirit of competition, that New Zealand did beat Australia to the post in terms of the first professional journal. At the time when the first issue of *Landscape Australia* was published in 1979, the New Zealand Institute of Landscape Architect's journal, *The Landscape*, had already been produced for three years.

The other dimension of the close bond between the two countries is a fond familial regard and the respect that comes with that. It is with this sense of fraternity that there is a real pride in Saniga's work and the story of Australia's landscape architecture profession. It is enjoyable to read familiar stories and about battles that have parallels here, and the familiar names – Peter Spooner, Jim Sinatra, George Seddon – who have featured at conferences and other exchanges. Also familiar are the debates over the place of indigenous plants –

and indigenous culture – and what national identity means. While Saniga’s book is emphatically about Australia, it offers something of a mirror for New Zealand. Because Australian landscape architecture is a product of designers from around the world, the book will be a useful reference to the teaching of landscape architectural history globally.