

The Grounds of the University of Melbourne: a brief introduction by Dr Andrew Saniga

Dr Andrew Saniga is Senior Lecturer in Landscape Architecture, Planning and Urbanism at the University of Melbourne and a member of the Landscape and Open Space Committee and the Heritage Committee of the University. He presented this talk to participants of Australian Garden History Society's 'The Botany Behind Gardens' Forum on Saturday 22 October 2011.



The University of Melbourne was established in 1853 with construction of the Quadrangle commencing in 1854. The first master plan was completed by Edward La Trobe Bateman in 1856. Bateman's plan does not survive but an early MMBW plan indicates that the design included the System Gardens in a bold circular layout, much of which has been built over and lost today. A main drive from Grattan Street to the Quad was an important element that is today still respected albeit on a totally new landscape, the South Lawn, dating from the 1970s. Bateman also designed the Professors' Walk and a large ornamental lake (since removed) to the north of Wilson Hall. Much of Bateman's work lasted to the immediate post World War I years and the grounds of the University were a popular source of recreation for the general public. Warm sunny weekends saw hundreds of people flock to the grounds until sunset when gates would be locked. This was very much a romantic beginning for the campus landscape, and one that would be brought to a rapid close in the interwar years when expansion of buildings and pavements saw gradual deterioration in visual amenity.

In 1945 first attempts at a new master plan began and in 1948 and 1951 masterplans prepared by Professor of Architecture Brian Lewis saw the retention of the historic core, largely signified by courtyards and open space, but with the perimeter of the campus to receive tall institutional buildings to accommodate the expanding university. Car parking was retained on kerbs of roads within the campus. The Redmond Barry Building, a tall sinuous cream brick building that marks the axis of Elgin and Johnston Streets, is practically the only notable relic of Lewis's master plan, the rest was never implemented or has been superseded. Problematic positioning of buildings together with car parking pressures continued to destroy the campus environment.

Then, there was a turning point which was marked by two important events. First, a Grounds Sub-Committee was set up in the late 1960s with Professor John Turner as Chair followed by Professor Carrick Chambers. A move was made to reinstate the integrated approach between built form and open space and importantly to deal with the impacts of uncontrolled access and parking issues. Second, a new master plan was commissioned and *The University of Melbourne Master Plan Report 1970* was prepared by architecture and planning firm from Sydney Ancher Mortlock, Murray and Woolley with Bryce Mortlock leading the project. A critical part of their plan was the Main Quadrangle and a series of linked spaces stemming from it. Consultant engineers Harris, Lange and Partners completed a feasibility study for the construction of a large underground car park to alleviate parking and vehicular traffic pressures on the campus's streets. The car park was subsequently designed by Loder and Bayly and today is significant for the hyperbolic paraboloid shells (designed by structural engineer Dick van der Molen of Loder and Bayly), a structural support system that is visually striking with the added bonus of allowing for large trees to be planted directly over, thus accommodating weight, soil and drainage requirements. These car park structures even earned the University a place in Australian film heritage as one of the sites in the film, 'Mad Max'. Pedestrianisation of the campus was the goal. Atop the car park would be a major new open space, which among other purposes would create a unified scene at the core of the campus. A sense of unification was achieved partly through the feeling of expansiveness the South Lawn provided, but it was also the way that landscape

could serve as an integrating element on what had become an array of architectural styles and forms.

And so marked the renewed beginning of the campus as you will experience it today and in some senses the return to the nineteenth-century amenity that the campus once provided. The success of the campus landscape has come as a result of many, with people like Professor Carrick Chambers, and in recent years, Professor Catherin Bull, leading groups of committed individuals and procuring the best consultants to advise on planning, design, conservation and management. The University's grounds staff are critical to managing the landscape to such a high standard, year in, year out.

The campus is undeniably steeped in history, far too much to take in over a short stroll, but please take the time to read the brief discussions in the brochures I provide here. The 'Grounds at the University of Melbourne' brochure focuses on eight sites critical to the historic character of the campus, among these the Central Courtyards, the System Garden, the South Lawn and Ellis Stones Garden, the Professors' Walk and finally, the 1888 Building. The second brochure, the 'Campus Tour' is far more expansive in terms of sites, but less detailed in terms of historic information. Perhaps a combination of the two is required.

Let me conclude by drawing your attention to recent work of the Heritage Committee of the University which is chaired by Professor Philip Goad. The Committee has been particularly active in commissioning Heritage Assessments and Conservation and Management Plans (CMP's) for various buildings and open spaces across this campus, and other campuses of the University of Melbourne including the Burnley Campus. Recent CMP's at Parkville include the Systems Garden, The South Lawn and Ellis Stones Garden, and currently underway are CMP's for Wilson Hall among other sites. Our recent history, that is, the dramatic changes in the post World War II years, is so crucial to the current campus environment. Many buildings and landscapes need attention and we are fortunate that the University is receptive to considering carefully all heritage issues.

I personally have been very much involved in the South Lawn. The recent CMP prepared by Lovell Chen (architects and heritage consultants) for the Underground Car Park and South Lawn has identified many aspects of historic and aesthetic significance relating to the landscape of the South Lawn and Ellis Stones Garden.

There is much work to be done in heritage in an ongoing sense and the rewards of course are the benefits that students and the public alike may gain from our extraordinary University.



Sources.

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