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Adelaide Park Lands: a possible World Heritage nomination

The issue of the future of the Adelaide Park Lands is again topical in the Adelaide community. Prompted by a series of public versus government debates and actions there are moves afoot to clarify this debate and establish a political future for this expansive landscape that engulfs the City of Adelaide.

In the last six years steps, directly and indirectly, by the public, the Corporation of the City of Adelaide Council, and the South Australian state government have culminated in the recent interim registration of the Adelaide Plan (including the Park Lands) on the Register of the National Estate. The path towards a potential world heritage nomination is a matter of time and state political discretion. 1

This paper examines the context of this important cultural landscape and significant designed landscape, and considers issues necessary to revitalise the Park Lands to accord with its design and better serve the constantly evolving city of Adelaide. Areas alienated in the Park Lands are not considered in this discussion.

There is one issue in this debate: "what is the appropriate form in which to manage the future of the Park Lands?" In terms of heritage conservation, there are two themes. First, what is significant? The Adelaide Plan, often termed 'Light's Plan', itself, or the Adelaide Park Lands as a collective entity. Second, there is insufficient research to date to qualify and make an informed judgement—and thereby a World Heritage nomination submission—on both options.

Historical Setting

Without entering into a contemporary Adelaide debate, Adelaide was designed in London in about September 1835 under the hand of George Strickland Kingston. 2 Colonel William Light surveyed Adelaide in January 1837 on the basis of this ‘design’, including determining street widths, 3 and the two authors massaged the design to increase the number of saleable allotments having regard to topographical and design considerations. This argument draws upon fellow surveyor BT Finniss’ claim in 1837 that "the city of Adelaide was planned in England," the limited time that Light had in London and on-site to devise a design; the request to Kingston by the Colonization Commissioners on 18 September 1835 for "a town plan;" the period language of surveying: the training and experience of both men in design and planning; and, the later naïve plans of Gawler and Glenelg prepared by Light that lacked proportion, strength and park lands.

In the months following the survey of Adelaide, Light also surveyed the whole of the Adelaide plain, strategically positioning Adelaide as its central node. All this history is documented and debated in various recently published texts and articles. 4

In terms of the Park Lands itself:

*No, we mustn't take these parklands for granted. They're part of Adelaide's treasure, a necklace of emerald and gold, amber and topaz that all of us can wear.*
Adelaidians do take for granted the significance of the Park Land ring. The Park Lands have also become a 'sacred cow' garnering a level of mystic and a sense of communal ownership meaning that results in the slightest incursion or proposal being featured on the front page of The Advertiser.

There are vertical and horizontal layers of designs within the Park Lands. Much of the horizontal layers are in the planting strategies and the vertical layers are in intensive designed components or spaces.

No management plan or strategy was historically devised for the Park Lands, other than references in pieces of legislation as to a council's responsibility, until A Report for a System of Planting of the Adelaide Park Lands (1880) was prepared by South Australian Conservator of Forests, John Ednie Brown. Notionally none of the Report's design and management recommendations were executed but recent research has shown to the contrary.

Contemporary Setting

Concern as to the Park Lands future re-surfaced in contemporary public debates and in state government and Council initiatives in the late 1990s. Notwithstanding this re-examination, there have been a repeated series of council re-assessments about the Park Lands, including versions by Brown (1880) and Colonel Veale (1958).

In 1996 an Adelaide 21 City Centre Strategy focus group did not recognise or discuss the Park Lands in their urban design workshops until the issue was raised by landscape architects. It was thereupon elevated to the opening paragraph in the Adelaide 21 Urban Design Strategy (1996):

*Develop a robust urban design framework to respond to and support the development strategy for the city. This would include a comprehensive plan for the use and enhancement of the park lands, which are seen both as urgently needing attention and providing unique opportunities for strategic development and symbolism.*

Over the last 6 years there has been a series community initiatives to protect the Park Lands from further encroachment and or alienation by state government inspired and part-funded projects. At the same time there has been increasing concern by the public, the City of Adelaide and the state government, to clarify and establish a long-term management framework for the Park Lands. The community-based Adelaide Park Lands Preservation Association, with support in the South Australian Legislative Council through Australian Democrat Ian Gilfillian MLC, has sought to raise public awareness and to protect the Park Lands as a whole.

Public debate about the future of the Hackney Tram Barns sharply divided the Adelaide community, including the National Trust of South Australia membership, and resulted in considerable public antipathy to the state government's responsibility to the Park Lands. The latter 'battle' resulted in the part demolition of the Tram...
Barns to enable the erection of the National Wine Centre, the relocation of the Botanic Gardens of Adelaide administrative offices and Herbarium, and the design and planting of an International Rose Garden. The latter actions have often been construed as political offerings to offset the friction caused by excising Park Land for the National Wine Centre. Part of the state government's argument, at the time, was that land alienated by the tram barn and depot complex was now being returned to the public domain. This was despite the fact that most of the land was to be fenced and to have restricted or monitored public access, including the International Rose Garden.

Council sought to resolve this impasse by devising a suitable management plan for the Park Lands. Since its original creation by Light there had been no reputedly implemented management plan for the Park Lands. Instead, Council and state government imperatives and desires had set the agenda for which lands were to be alienated for non-public access and use, for leasehold use, for regular regulated recreation use, and for irregular public events. The legacy has been a disjointed and unorganised management approach, which has impacted upon the quality of the Park Lands environment, and that has displayed no vision or responsibility to the cultural asset. Ironically, this intransigence has impacted little upon the spatial integrity of 'Light's Plan'.

In early 1999 Council released the draft Park Lands Management Strategy (1999) which was subsequently adopted in November 1999. The recommendations and vision were abstracted into City Strategies: Park Lands Management Strategy (2000), complementing the City Strategies: Environmental Management Plan – Local Agenda 21 (2000) and City Strategies: Economic Development Strategy (2000), for ease of distribution. Coincidentally, Council funded the Adelaide Oval Conservation Study (2001) for the South Australian Cricket Association which, included terms of reference to consider the Oval's landscape environs, setting, and social meanings, in its recommendations has raised questions of Park Lands heritage overall as well as precincts within the Park Lands.

The Cultural Significance of the Adelaide Park Lands (1998) informed the Strategy (1999) providing a developmental sequential and literature review of existing published research about the Park Lands. The Statement of Cultural Significance, prepared as part of that report, proposed that:

The Adelaide Park Lands are of immense significance. They are an essential component William Light's plan of the City of Adelaide, which remains a prime example of 19TH Century town planning ideas and has had a profound influence throughout South Australia and the world. The essence of the plan remains intact and continues to give Adelaide its particular character and identity.

The Park Lands included places of great heritage significance because of their identification with major developments associated with the history of the City, and the State, from colonisation to the present.
The Park Lands continue to be a place of great cultural value to people and a defining aspect of Adelaide's special character.

The Vision statement in the Strategy (1999) proposed that:

The Adelaide Park Lands, along with the Squares, form a unique open space system which creates a distinctive image for the City and supports the economic and social life of Adelaide and South Australia. The environmental and recreational landscapes of the Park Lands are highly valued by the citizens of South Australia and visitors to our State. They will therefore be protected, nurtured and enhanced for the enjoyment and well being of the whole community and for future generations.

The Park Lands will be a model for excellence for the provision, maintenance and development of:

- an integrated open space system;
- environmental sustainability;
- a diverse range of recreational opportunities and cultural experiences;
- indigenous, European and other landscapes.

The Strategy (1999) provides the present strategic framework and management policies for the Park Lands. The Management Strategy (1999) provided no comparative assessment of comparable plans, park land layouts or park land areas, in their own right, as would normally form a heritage conservation study.

In 1998 Council undertook a review of its public realm and prepared an urban design strategy entitled Streets, Squares and Park Lands (1999). The report provided an integrated urban design strategy with performance and implementation guidelines, including furniture, lighting, paving, etc. This report establishes a public realm design framework for the Park Lands and the City, and complements the Strategy (1999) that sought to establish a cohesive management vision and framework for the future of this regional asset. This latter Strategy (1999) sets out management strategies and actions for the Park Lands overall.


Accordingly, both Council and state government agree that the 'conservation' of the Park Lands is essential. But, they differ on the mode and form of 'conservation' resulting in differing views on how to enshrine this objective in the Strategy (1999) and through legislation.
While these machinations were occurring the Council prepared a nomination for the Register of the National Estate for the 'Adelaide City Plan', often called 'Light's Plan'. The scope of the nomination, since adopted as an interim registration by the Australian Heritage Commission, embraces:

"the entire area of the City of Adelaide as it embodies the overall concept of the Colonel Light Plan for the City of Adelaide, with emphasis on the Park Lands, the hierarchy of the town acres, the layout of the six town squares, the grid of major and minor roads, and the views and vistas created by that layout but excluding all buildings, structures, plantings, and individual features within the area nominated. It is not intended to impose management obligations on property owners, but to identify and to encourage public interest in the heritage significance of the Colonel Light Plan."

Thereby the registration includes the spirit and master design embedded in Colonel Light's Plan but not the physical heritage and non-heritage fabric (built form and landscape) contained within the scope of the nomination area. Or, "the significance of the Light Plan relates specifically to the Park Lands, the layout of the town acres, the layout of the six town squares, the hierarchical grid of major and minor roads, and the views and vistas created by that layout. It is not intended that this nomination protect or affect any building, structure, planting, or individual feature within the area nominated."

Argument for significance was based upon six criterion:

The Light Plan has **historical significance** as it represents a remarkable optimism for the development of the colony of South Australia in 1836. It demonstrates the history of European settlement of South Australia, established as a commercial venture, rather than a penal colony, later taken over by British colonial government. The Light Plan accommodated the needs of the new settlers and the British government, as well as commercial interests of the South Australian Company. It enabled rapid settlement of land, certainty of title, wide streets and abundant public open spaces close to the city.

The Light Plan has **historic associational significance** because it was established by Colonel William Light, an historical figure in South Australia who was critical to its colonisation; influenced by Edward Gibbon Wakefield, a staunch advocate of systematic colonisation; and consolidated by Governor Gawler after 1838.

The Light Plan has **social, aesthetic and technical significance** as evidence of current social philosophy of its time, in striving for a new type of city, far removed both physically and practically from the nineteenth century industrial cities from which many settlers had come. It reflected Jeremy Bentham's **doctrine of Utilitarianism**, interested in the application of the principle of 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number'. In addition, the Light Plan
responded to the topography of the Adelaide plains and maximised views and vistas. The influence of the Light Plan on later planning and social movements, such as Ebenezer Howard's Garden City movement, has been recognised by Australian as well as international planning experts. The enduring appreciation of the Light Plan by the local community, as well as national and international observers, is evidence of its social, aesthetic and technical significance.

The Light Plan, and in particular the open spaces, are of Aboriginal significance as evidence of the relationship between the European settlers and the Aboriginal community. Before European settlement, the Adelaide Plains were occupied by the Kaurna people. Upon European settlement, these open spaces assumed great significance as the only areas available for indigenous use, as Aboriginal people were forced out of the City proper. All activities associated with indigenous use are said to have occurred in these areas, for instance, ceremonies, meetings, trade, hunting, burials and camping.  

Justification for, and subsequent acceptance of the nomination, was based upon the argument that the nomination met the following National Estate criterion:

**Criterion A**, recognising the historical importance of the Light Plan for its association with the settlement of South Australia.

**Criterion C**, recognising its Aboriginal significance as providing information about the history of human occupation of Australia.

**Criterion E**, recognising the aesthetic importance of the Plan in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics valued by a community or cultural groups.

**Criterion F**, recognising the technical importance of the Plan in demonstrating a high degree of creative or technical achievement at a particular period.

**Criterion G**, recognising the importance of the Light Plan, and in particular the open spaces, to the local community.

**Criterion H**, recognising the special association of the Plan with the life or works of a person, or group of persons, of importance in Australia's natural or cultural history. 

At the same time there has been increasing interest by various members of the Council together with the local member and state government Minister, Michael Armitage, to investigate the process towards and implications of seeking a World Heritage nomination for the Adelaide City Plan or the Park Lands as a whole. A cabinet submission prepared by Minister Armitage recommend an internal feasibility study for a nomination but was deferred in 2000.

Notwithstanding these steps, the cultural heritage significance of the park lands,
and ‘Light’s Plan’ itself, has been given cursory attention in the Strategy (1999); the whole ‘Plan’, “park land,” park land blocks/precincts, spaces and artefacts within the Park Lands have not been assessed. This is notwithstanding the additional City of Adelaide Heritage Study: Landscape-Streetscape Inventory (1983) and The Adelaide Parks Lands: Consultation Paper (2000).³⁷

**Theoretical Setting**

Landscapes are an increasingly important realm for conservation consideration. While extensive theoretical discussion has been entertained in Australia and the United States, Australia is still apprehensive in venturing into conservation activities for any landscape that possesses cultural traditions, artefacts and arrangements notwithstanding their historical, botanical, scientific, design or social values and significance to its heritage.

Key cultural heritage components of the Adelaide Plan or Adelaide Park Lands, are:

- the design and form or ‘Light’s Plan’ for Adelaide, including its model as a Park Lands town for subsequent surveying practice and land subdivision design in South Australia, as well as its use as a planning model by Ebenezer Howard in *Garden Cities of To-Morrow* (1902).²⁸ The design is also significant because it represents the exemplar that GW Goyder subsequently adopted for the 1840s to 1860s town surveys in South Australia euphemistically called the ‘Park Lands Towns’.²⁹

- the role of the Park Lands as a landscape design model arising from John Ednie Brown’s *A Report for a System of Planting the Adelaide Park Lands* (1880) which was in part implemented by Brown (as ‘Conservator of Park Lands’ (1882)) and a subsequent City Gardener, August Wilhelm Pelzer (1890-1932);

- the collective assemblage of cultural spaces, gardens, and institutions that alienated portions of the Park Lands while at the same time enhancing its design, cultural, social, botanical, and architectural merits, resulting in an identifiable ring of culture around the city ‘blocks’.

The first component is embodied in the intent of the nomination. Howard used the Adelaide plan as a key example in his 1902 text:

> Consider for a moment the case of a city in Australia which in some measure illustrates the principle for which I am contending. The city of Adelaide ... is surrounded by its “Park Lands”. The city is built up. How does it grow? It grows by leaping over the “Park Lands” and establishing North Adelaide. And this is the principle which it is intended to follow, but improve upon, in Garden City.²⁸

In South Australia, what constitutes a designed landscape or garden has received little attention until recently. A circumspect *Historic Gardens Study*³⁰ identified a
Endnotes

1 An expansion of this paper was presented at the Australia ICOMOS Conference - Urban Consolidation, 21-24 March 1996, Heidelberg & Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, entitled "The Emergents of Adelaide: Impacts and Dilemmas of Growth and Change Upon Adelaide’s Park Lands."


3 Light's instructions from the Colonization Commissioners were:
You will make the streets of ample width, and arrange them with reference to the convenience of the inhabitants, the beauty and salubrity of the town; and you will make the necessary reserves for squares, public works and parks. These instructions were given to Light on 9 March 1836, a day before the planned departure of the Rapid, but the vessel was delayed until May 1 due to Light's ill-health. Quoted from: Colonization Commissioners for South Australia 1836, First Report, pp 24-35. London, UK: SA Colonization Commissioners.


9 Brown, JE 1889, A Report on a System of

suite of prominent examples validating nominations of several gardens to the State Heritage Register and the National Estate Register. But only eight gardens have been identified and registered at state level, no landscapes are within these, and no Park Lands or ‘Parkland Town’ designs are yet to be formally considered. In contrast a recent thematic survey of designed landscapes in SA has identified a plethora of exemplars both typologically and stylistically rich. The Adelaide Park Lands, as a type, also sits uncomfortably within the ‘Public Parks, Gardens, Domains and Public Reserves’ category proposed by Juliet Ramsay for the Australian Heritage Commission.

UNESCO perceives that cultural landscapes fall into three main categories, of which the first is most is relevant here:

39. Cultural landscapes fall into three main categories, namely:

The most easily identifiable is the clearly defined landscape designed and created intentionally by man. This embraces garden and parkland landscapes constructed for aesthetic reasons which are often (but not always) associated with religious or other monumental buildings and ensembles.

The Park Lands, and its configuration within ‘Light’s Plan’, itself would fall within the definition of a ‘cultural landscape’ under the Convention and possesses, by virtue of its various layers of heritage, potential eligibility for a world heritage nomination. Examples of ‘clearly defined landscapes’, included on the World Heritage List, include several notable cultural landscapes: Versailles and Fontainebleau (France), the Potsdam landscape (Germany), the Garden Tomb of Humayun (India), the Shalimar Gardens in Lahore (Pakistan) and Blenheim and Sydley Royal (UK).

The categories of cultural landscapes proposed by Robert Melnick for the U.S. National Park Service are also relevant. Melnick identified five forms (historic scenes, historic site, historic designed landscapes, historic vernacular landscapes, and ethnographic landscapes) of which the historic designed landscape is most relevant to the Park Lands, being:

A landscape where designer, form, layout and other design elements are the primary reasons for significance. Historic designed landscapes typically include large and small parks, parkways, estate grounds, gardens, and similar landscapes.

The legitimacy of recent nominations, acquisitions and registrations in the United States of America, through the National Park Service, of several projects by Frederick Law Olmsted, Warren Manning, Marion Coffin, for example, rest on this category. But we have been apprehensive in Australia to venture into the landscape creations of Bruce MacKenzie, William Guiffoyle, Edna Walling, Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony, or Charles Reade. Notwithstanding this, the Park Lands represents a design,
• it espouses and is an implementation of a significant city planning theory,
• it has hosted a number of important designers, it has an unique signature form,
• its layout integrity has remained relatively intact since original survey and planting design actions, and
• it possesses several important design elements or sub-designs some of which have already been registered.

All of these are tied together by the design framework.

The dilemma is that the emerald necklace is multi-layered and faceted in its design and significance, and a complex place to grapple with under one category or compartmentalised as a 'garden'. It is a dynamic and consciously crafted landscape. It represents a whole filled with design layers and assemblages collectively tied together by its symbolism and structure. Such are typical concerns associated with landscapes - their dynamic and evolving personality.

Directions

As stated above, the Park Lands are now back on the strategic planning agenda in Adelaide. The Park Lands can be dislocated from the Light survey plan, but conceptually should be read as a whole with the survey plan. Minister Armitage's cabinet submission was not accepted by cabinet. Instead, cabinet agreed to the establishment of a Legislative Assembly "Select Committee on Adelaide Park Lands Protection" with the task:

To assess the long-term protection of the Adelaide Park Lands as land for public benefit, recreation and enjoyment, including:

(a) desirable protective measures to ensure the continuing availability of land for public recreational purpose;
(b) arrangements for management responsibility and accountability;
(c) the desirability of legislative protection and the form of legislation, if considered necessary;
(d) the impact and feasibility of seeking to list the Adelaide Park Lands on the World Heritage List; and
(e) any other related matter.*

The committee option deferred the politicization of the Park Lands question until after the forthcoming state election (due early 2002), and permits community and political self-reflection on the "impact and feasibility of seeking to list the Adelaide Park Lands on the World Heritage List."

It is very unlikely that the question of world heritage nomination will disappear from public debate over the next five years as it is clearly being driven by long term council strategic planning directions, has cross-party support in state parliament, and has support through a community group with strong political connections.
Time will tell. But the Plan and the Park Lands will remain. Their design integrity are conceptually the same as that proposed by Light, and successive cultural layers and artefacts have been added over time that simply enhance the original concept of the park land and re-expressed by Howard in his treatise.

Note:

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