The recent registration of Melbourne’s Orica House and its grounds on the National Heritage List has highlighted the credibility of contemporary design as possessing heritage merit. It has also pointed to the undervalued design work by landscape architect John Stevens (b.1920). While the majority of Stevens’ projects were in Victoria and the ACT, there is one project that he undertook in South Australia that has long been forgotten and is relatively intact, hidden on the University of Adelaide’s North Terrace campus.

Stevens, a graduate in horticulture from Burnley and agriculture from the University of Melbourne, worked as a garden designer with Melbourne contractors R P Knight & Co. With the encouragement of architect Roy Grounds, Stevens established his own landscape architecture practice in 1952 and rapidly attracted a client partnership with some of the most innovative and contemporary architects in Melbourne including Grounds, Robin Boyd, Stephenson & Turner, Bates Smart & McCutcheon, and Godfrey Spowers. In 1964 he left private practice to become landscape architect to the Australian National University (1964-87) and much of its acclaimed landscape setting today is witness to the skill of Stevens.

The characteristic design style of Stevens in the late 1950s and early 1960s was very much influenced by Brazilian landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx and his designs and ideas. Marx was passionate about the use of art in landscape design and applied this through a strong use of dramatic shapes and colours in forms and plants. Stevens applied the same palette and approach using abstract sculptural forms, succulents and feature fountains and pools all of which could be observed from the perimeters and from windows in buildings.

In contrast to Marx’s colourful South American plant palette, Stevens used succulents and often plants with architectural forms to accentuate the design. He also used slate, concrete pavers, river pebbles as features - river pebbled embedded concrete pavers, or river pebbles embedded in abstract shaped concrete form work - to create his designs. While most of these designs were strategically crafted to be looked into and down upon, many allowed human access enabling people to wander and rest in the spaces.

Precedent projects in Melbourne by Stevens included the former ICI House sculpture garden (1958), the former Southgate Fountain (1958-59), the surrounds of Wilson Hall at the University of Melbourne (1956), and the Memorial Park Crematorium at Altona North (1958-62).

As part of expansion works at the University of Adelaide in 1960, architects Bates Smart & McCutcheon were selected to design and supervise the erection of the Napier Building...
complex following a limited competition. Stevens was drawn into this commission to guide the design of plaza ground surfaces around the Building and also to design the courtyard. BSM engaged local innovative architects Cheesman Doley Brabham & Neighbour to supervise the building works. Coincidentally, landscape architect Allan Correy was employed by the University in 1963 to design the adjacent Walter Young Garden which drew upon the design style established in the Napier Building including river pebbled embedded rectangular pre-cast concrete pavers with Correy’s penchant for indigenous species.

The Napier Courtyard design, prepared by Stevens in February 1961, repeats the design style he was using in Melbourne as characterized in the Orica House courtyard. It is a classic example of his translation of Marx’s design style employing the plant and hard surface materials that Stevens was commonly using at the time.

The Courtyard is a square shape surrounded by 4 floors of building that house academic and administrative offices associated with humanities and social science programs. Within the square, Stevens crafted an organic flowing lawn and then draped a Y-shaped abstract sculptural form over the lawn. The form was articulated by concrete form work with river pebbles embedded in the formwork.

To the western side of the square was a rectangular pre-cast concrete paved plaza space with a feature free-form poured, square-shaped, concrete seat in the north-western corner and a river pebble lined organic-shaped pool in the south-western corner. The latter was positioned under the Jacaranda (Jacaranda mimosifolia) tree and is home today to a family of ducks and ducklings.

While the courtyard served as a feature to the Building, it was also positioned on top of the lower lecture theatre complex. Accordingly, Stevens had to design a roof garden, with needs to accommodate the roots of the two feature trees, and two circular air conditioning ducts. These constraints were successfully tackled as the courtyard is a visually delightful feature today and one would not know that it is a roof garden. While the Silk Tree (Albizia julibrissin) was later removed, the Jacaranda (Jacaranda mimosifolia) thrives in its location. The only main change has been to the air conditioning ducts. These ducts, enabling air to be released from the below ground air conditioning plant, were designed with inverted arcing wrought iron rod covers that were flush to the ground level. Unfortunately the noise from the original air conditioning plant was unacceptable to the Building’s occupants and the University erected a 1.4m high concrete cylinder over one of the ducts and added a 1.4m high square-shaped duct in the north-eastern corner of the Courtyard.

Within the lawn was positioned a young Silk Tree (Albizia julibrissin) and a young Jacaranda (Jacaranda mimosifolia). Surrounding the lawn was a series of garden beds dominated by colourful succulents, so relevant to Adelaide’s Mediterranean landscape, but typical of his Melbourne plant palette. These gardens were dominated by Kalanchoe fedtschenkoi, Echeveria gibbiflora ‘Metallica’, Cotyledon macrantha or virescens, Graptopetalum paraguayense, Euphorbia ledienii, Agave attenuata, Xanthosoma flaveda, Tibouchina sp, Hypericum cerasioides, Kunzea pomifera, Thymus serpyllum, and an arc-shaped carpet of Lesser Periwinkle (Vinca minor f. alba).

Today the Courtyard remains forgotten within the building footprint of the University as it is not on an access route but rather is only seen by the occupants of the adjacent offices. While many of the succulents have been replaced by the University gardening staff, the overall design is intact providing a quality space with considerable interest and quiet refuge for the resident duck family.

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