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# Adelaide bush gardens of the 1950s–1960s

by David Jones

Lemon-scented gums and ironbarks are symbols of Adelaide's entry into the bush garden style in the late 1950s leading up to the 1970s. The trees were used both in domestic gardens and in select street avenue plantings.

But their use was contrary to the gardening conservatism in Adelaide in the 1960s. While the bush garden style had a strong influence in Melbourne and Sydney in the 1960s its strength and expression in Adelaide was mixed. Part of the reasons are the lack of a horticultural school and personalities that argued for this approach in community; the strong English garden tradition that still dominate Adelaide garden and public park design today; and the Adelaide's predominant alkaline soils and Mediterranean climate.

Given these constraints only a few landscape designers found support and patronage. While most of these clients were largely private there was a philosophical change in the government agencies in the mid to late 1960s. Of these designers, the work of Robin Hill and Allan Correy charted expressions of the bush garden style and were the most prominent landscape designers in Adelaide in the 1960s.

## DESIGNER IN THE SPIRIT OF THOMAS CHURCH

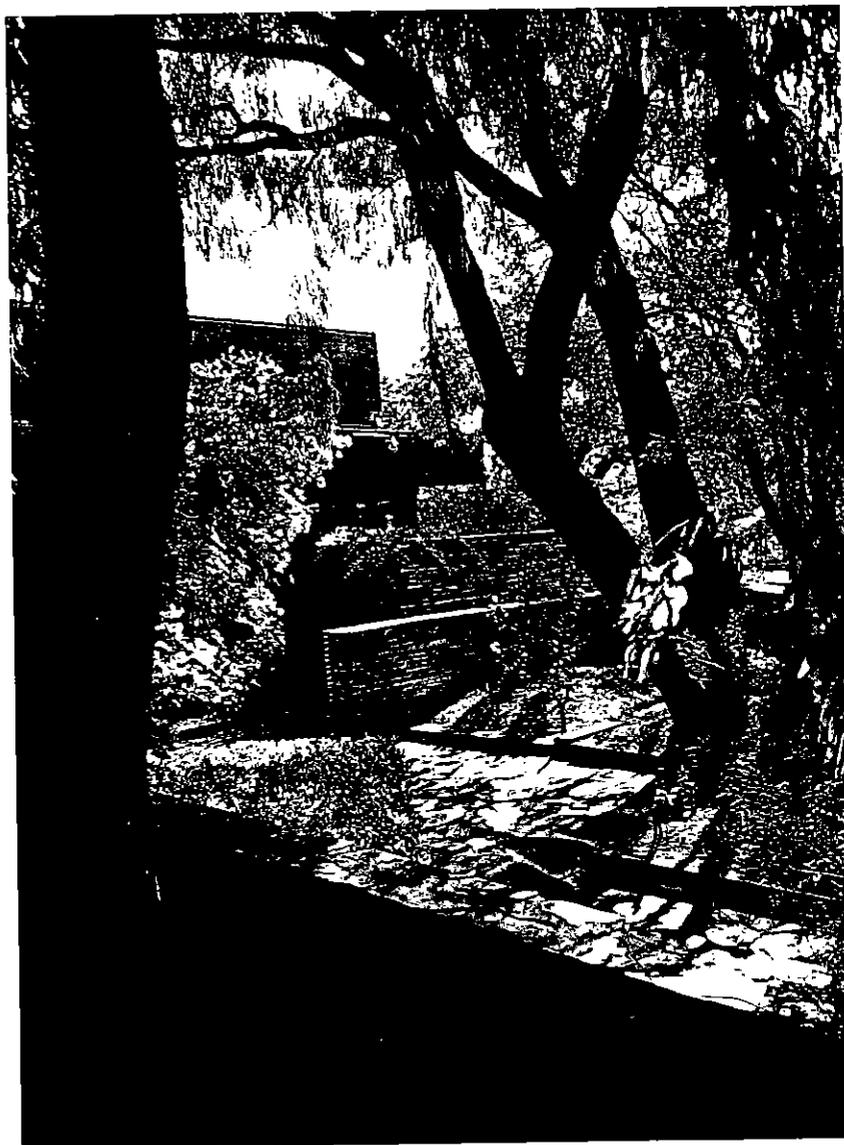
Self-trained, Hill gained an apprenticeship at Kemp's Nursery in Kingswood in the 1940s.<sup>1</sup> The Nursery management supported Adelaide's penchant for formalism in rose gardens, box hedges, perennial walks, Mintaro slate pavers, endorsing the virtues of this "English bourgeois outpost."<sup>2</sup> Typically each design site was on the singly flat Adelaide Plains and each with "diverse site problems to solve." The Nursery progressively introduced topography with low random rubble stone retaining walls, free-form lawns, and dabbled in expensive Mintaro slate slabs as paving to deal with this flatness. Leaving Kemp's in 1952, Hill established the first landscape design practice in Adelaide with his colleague Richard Massey. Hill found inspiration in the writings of Californian

Thomas Church and in his mixture of fluid and angular forms.<sup>3</sup> Railway sleepers, free-forms, appropriation of distant landscapes, and enhancing indigenous vegetation formed the primary ingredients of Church's design which Hill also progressively adopted. By the late 1950s Hill was exploring ground plane manipulation, the sculpturing of land to embrace drainage lines, the use of indigenous trees and shrubs, the careful use of stone, and the expression of the design in perspective more than in plan. Sole practice in 1959 permitted Hill to weave his earlier training in sculpture together with his

## FOOTNOTES

- 1 Jones, DS 1997, "Robin Sinclair Hill: confronting traditionalism in Adelaide," *Landscape Australia* 4/1997: 338–341; Jones, DS, "20th century landscape design in Adelaide: three significant designers," *Journal of the Historical Society of South Australia* 25: 49–53.
- 2 Correspondence, Hill to Jones, March 5, 1997, p. 2.
- 3 Church, T 1955, *Gardens are for People*. New York, NY: Macmillan.

The former IPEC Building in Frewville with its decorative use of ironbarks and Willunga slate.

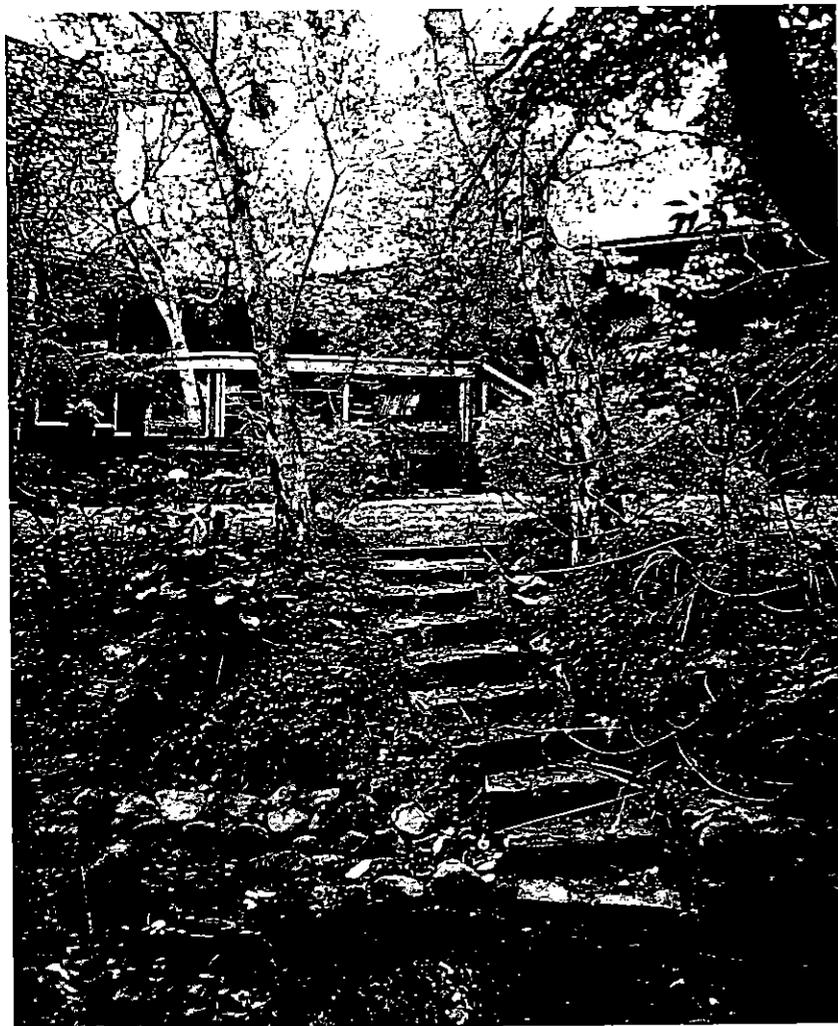


4 Drew, P 1980, "Muller, Peter," in M Emanuel, ed., *Contemporary Architects*, pp.571-572. London, UK: Macmillan.



(right) The sculptured internal garden of the Michell residence in Medindie.

(below) One of a number of stone crafted paths to the creek edge at the Bonython residence.



European readings and Church's ideas, and permitted him to explore the forms and qualities in indigenous plants.

Part of Hill's ideas are expressed in his former Le Corbusier influenced residence at Norton Summit (1964-65). Cantilevering, resting next to Third Creek, the two storey stone residence and studio today nestles in a forest of rich-flowering and scented eucalypts, allocasuarinas, grevilleas and related shrubs. Indigenous trees have been retained and Hill planted the narrow flat creek-side site extensively in local species creating a bushland setting, and the sloping part of the allotment became his experimental nursery to test species as to their receptability to Adelaide's soils and climate. Carey and Horsnell Gully sandstone faces all structures, and railway sleepers are used as retaining walls, bridges, and edgings.

Of Hill's work the Michell residence in Medindie (1964) and the IPEC regional headquarters (1964), both designed by Peter Muller, stand out as significant modernist translations of the bush garden style.<sup>4</sup> Hill was introduced to Muller as a possible landscape designer and instantly found a sympathiser and a challenge. Muller gave Hill a free charter for both projects but encouraged the use of 'book-leaf' freestone walls drawn from his architectural designs that intruded into spaces creating sub-spaces together with large unweathered randomly positioned



stones. Artistically these extended Hill and his craft at ground and space manipulation, paving stone assemblage, use of vegetation, and simplicity with strength in differing paving surfaces produced two remarkable designs.<sup>5</sup>

In his design work Hill found more love in the ideas he created than in the execution of projects. He tested and challenged the lack of relevancy in Adelaide landscape design, and in particular domestic design, and found heart in its Mediterranean and Californian translations. Natural stone, pergolas, walls, colours, the manipulation of ground planes and spaces, the use of vegetation for their textures and forms rather than their allegiances, all speak of an exploration with Adelaide regional landscape design. He views his experimental 'manipulation of spaces' as still being important in his personal design inquiry. 'My designs portrayed a structural core with vegetation acting as an overlapping medium.'<sup>6</sup>

#### DESIGNER IN THE SPIRIT OF JENS JENSEN

Educated in landscape architecture at Durham and Illinois, Correy was drawn into Adelaide in 1961 to prepare the master plan for the Mount Lofty Botanic Garden.<sup>7</sup> While this project absorbed most of his time, Correy had to search for an appropriate landscape design style for this

landscape. In the absence of these cues he progressively explored an amalgam of the ideas of Chicago landscape architect Jens Jensen, and the gardens and writings of Garrett Eckbo and James Rose in private garden designs.<sup>8</sup>

In retrospect Correy has observed:

*While I have often used Australian species of plants I have never taken a purist approach to this ... Probably as a result of this I don't think that I ever developed a particular style, although I did have characteristic hallmarks such as railway sleepers, dry-laid paving, landform modelling & favourite species such as Chinese elm, smooth-barked eucalypts, cushion bush, Cape daisy, Boston ivy, dusky coral pea, oyster plant, Megasia spp & Myoporum parvifolium.<sup>9</sup>*

Part of this 'Prairie School' philosophy was exhibited in Correy's manipulation of the ground and the selection of plants and building materials. The surface was sculptured to create topographical interest and to reinforce the presence of contours. Plants were used to provide strength, verticality, colour and texture. Eucalypts, particularly Lemon-scented Gums, South Australian Blue Gums<sup>10</sup> and Ironbarks were extensively used. Shrubs tended to highlight tree colour and texture. Ground covers, including Creeping Boobialla, Purple Coral-pea,

View through the landscaped gully to the River Murray at the Clark residence.

#### FOOTNOTES

- 5 Hill, pers. comm., 1997.
- 6 Hill, pers. comm., 1997.
- 7 Correy, AD 1965, Report on the proposed development for Mount Lofty Botanic Garden, South Australia, Adelaide, SA: Landscape Section, Adelaide Botanic Gardens; Jones, DS 1977, "20th century landscape design in Adelaide: three significant designers," *Journal of the Historical Society of South Australia* 25: 53-57.
- 8 Correy, A 1992, "most influential books," *Landscape Australia* 3/92, p. 206.
- 9 Correspondence, Correy to Jones, November 25, 1996, p. 8.
- 10 South Australian Blue Gums (*Eucalyptus leucocylon*).

(right) Hill residence at Horsnell's Gully nestled in Ironbark and River Red Gum woodland planted in 1964-65.

(below right) A bush garden in urbanity: Correy's expression in the Walter Young Garden at the University of Adelaide with its play on light, verticality and textured barks.

and *Hypericum patulum* were used in masses rather than as decorative features. Local rock or stone, often in conjunction with disused railway sleepers, was applied as edges to accentuate topographical changes and as textured focal points. Sleepers were an essential item in garden staircase design.

Private residential commissions by Correy provided the outlet for him to explore the bush garden style and remain significant design examples today.

Architect John Chappel engaged Correy to advise on the siting and landscape design of the Bonython property (1965) in Leabrook. This design had to accommodate a private art gallery onto an awkward site dissected by Second Creek and possessing several mature River Red Gums. Chappel later wrote glowingly of the 'magnificent gums, and the winding creek ... [that were] carefully retained in the final planning of the house and garden.' While the gums were retained, several Lemon-scented Gums added, and shade tolerant species dominated, including *Acanthus mollis*, *Nepeta hederaceae*, *Bambusa nigra*, *Fatsia japonica*, *Cotoneaster salicifolia* with Boston Ivy on the walls.<sup>11</sup>

In the Clark garden (1967) Correy was presented with a barren cliff-edge overlooking the River Murray in the Riverland town of Loxton. The design proposed transformed a small semi-arid channel into a green haven, retained the one Eucalypt and a cluster of Pepper Trees, and crafted the low-slung house to ensure a shaded overlook over the River. The design ingredients were Lemon-scented Gums, Ironbarks, Jacaranda and Hackberry. The Clarks were also introduced to railway sleepers and limestone dry-stone walling, both of which are lovingly maintained today.<sup>12</sup>

The Wilson garden (1965) at 'Ringmer' was designed to retain the mature gums in the former gardens of 'Ringmer' and 'Kurralta' on the newly subdivided allotment, to retain 'the old South African plants that survived with little water,' and 'to keep the feeling of the site.' The design ingredients were the use of railway sleepers, stone as paving slabs set in lawn, White Cedars, Lemon-scented Gums, Ironbarks, 'light-coloured' Hackberries along the driveway, retention of Olives and the introduction of a *Pittosporum* hedge.<sup>13</sup>

#### REGIONALIST INTERPRETATION

Hill and Correy explored freely the principles of bush garden forms in their domestic garden



commissions. Strangely Hill and Correy never met although their work possesses similar principles. They abstracted these principles and wove them in a modernist interpretation using the writings of Church, Eckbo and Jensen as the philosophical exemplars. These principles and projects set the tone for subsequent bush garden style expressions in Adelaide. Accordingly, the Adelaide bush garden style is really a regionalist form; one that is a modernist interpretation of the style.

#### FOOTNOTES

- 11 Correspondence, Correy to Jones, February 6, 1998, p. 5; Chappel, JS 1966, "Art treasures adorn spacious house," *The Advertiser*, August 18, p.18.
- 12 Correspondence, Correy to Jones, February 6, 1998, pp. 6-7; George Clark, pers. comm., 1998.
- 13 Ian and Mary Wilson, pers. comm., 1998; Correspondence, Correy to Jones, February 6, 1998, p. 3.

**David Jones** is Senior Lecturer in Landscape Architecture at The University of Adelaide. He was the consultant for the Australian Heritage Commission's study of Designed Landscapes in South Australia (1997) now included in *A Theoretical Framework for Designed Landscapes in Australia* and has been active in researching and documenting the landscape design and forestry heritage in the state, has recently co-authored *Gardens in South Australia 1840-1940* (1998) for Heritage SA, and is presently involved in a conservation and management plan for the Mt Gambier Cave Garden. As a postscript to this article, Allan Correy has recently donated his drawings and reports from his South Australian practice to the University's Barr Smith Library.