

Landscape and Infrastructure – Defining and interpreting modernist landscapes of post war Australia

Dr Andrew Saniga, Senior Lecturer in Landscape Architecture and Urbanism
Faculty of Architecture Building and Planning, The University of Melbourne

The profession of landscape architecture can be difficult to define from a historical point of view. It is often found to be straddling various disciplinary boundaries and it assumes multiple occupational titles, interchanging one for the other seemingly at random. It has origins in the English landscape gardening movement and thus domestic garden design, yet much of its development in the nineteenth and twentieth century was pitched towards developments in civic art, architecture and town planning. Complexities in defining landscape architecture are essential to understanding its subsequent development in the mid-twentieth century and are historically rooted in the profession's birth. At the time that the professional title was coined, the founders of the profession, Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1903) and Calvert Vaux (1824-1895), each made prophetic claims concerning what it was that defined their professional pursuits. Olmsted wrote to Vaux:

I am all the time bothered with the miserable nomenclature of L.A. Landscape is not a good word, Architecture is not; the combination is not. Gardening is worse... The art is not gardening nor is it architecture. What I am doing here in Cal[ifornia] especially, is neither. It is sylvan art, fine-art in distinction from Horticulture, Agriculture or Sylvan useful art. We want a distinction

between a nurseryman and a market gardener & an orchardist, and an artist. And the planting of a street or road – the arrangement of villages streets – is neither Landscape Art, nor Architectural Art, nor is it both together, in my mind – of course it is not, & it will never be in the popular mind. (Olmsted, 1865) [*italics as in the original published version*].

The multidisciplinary nature of landscape architecture is both its strength and its Achilles heel. As well as having to acquire potentially vast fields of knowledge about land and environment, landscape architects find themselves constantly battling other professions for territory. Sociologist Andrew Abbott, in his *The System of Professions* (1988) explains that professions exist within a system and that movements within the system have repercussions elsewhere. Dimensions for professional competition include subjective and objective arguments that in the case of Olmsted and Vaux, included the objective foundations provided by the new bureaucracies controlling Central Park, New York, and the subjective foundations identified by Saniga (2004a) through Olmsted's writing in manuscripts such as *The Spoils of the Park* (1882). A theoretical argument such as Abbott's, in which interdependence is so intrinsic, seems particularly relevant for landscape

Paper 7

architecture, which has been born of other more established professions such as architecture, planning and forestry, among others. Some of the early landscape architects in Australia worked within government departments in which the internal bureaucratic structures required different professions to co-exist and thus to serve each other. Hierarchical structures and battles over professional jurisdiction were implicit in the division of labour within the bureaucracies, as individuals attempted to find a niche for their professional involvement in planning and design.

In my research, aspects of Abbott's sociological model have been used to structure the historical narratives I have chosen to explain (Saniga, 2004a). The most rapid development of the Australian profession of landscape architecture occurred post-World War II. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s a very wide range of occupational groups came together to form the new profession of landscape architecture. By 1966 that profession was sufficiently differentiated and confident to establish its own professional institute, the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects. But what work opportunities enabled people to move into the new profession? Large-scale projects in the 1950s and 1960s brought many new opportunities in the development of infrastructure and in the planning of sites associated with large new public institutions. A growing awareness of the ugliness of Australian cities, which was emphatically defined by writers such as Robin Boyd, especially in the book, *The Australian Ugliness* (1960), further advanced the role of

landscape architects in these projects. Six years later the RAlA commissioned a study titled *Australian Outrage* (1966) depicting the plight of Australia's rapidly developing cities. A growing expectation for more thoughtfully designed landscapes further stimulated professional activity but one significant precursor to these developments in the profession is the project of Serpentine Dam, Western Australia (1961), designed by Perth landscape architect, John Oldham (1907-1999).

John Oldham was single-handedly the instrument of the landscape architecture profession in Western Australia. As early as 1956, he had begun landscape architectural work related to infrastructure, working mainly within the Western Australian Public Works Department (PWD). Predating the formation of the AILA by ten years, Oldham created his own role as a landscape architect in government departments where none had previously existed. Oldham was a self-taught practitioner who had very diverse work and life experiences, as an architect, poster designer and producer, watercolourist, landscape architect and conservationist, consequently possessing a rare and essential combination of concerns and capacities, that Newton claimed to be the making of a 'well-rounded landscape architect' (Newton, 1971, p 391). Oldham knew how to manufacture institutional support for his profession but he was also artful in the way he worked with other professionals and in the way he communicated and advanced his causes. He was instrumental in forming conservation organisations in Western Australia and the fact that he did so while he

Paper 7

was professionally involved with engineers in developing infrastructure makes his work all the more challenging to critique.

Serpentine Dam is seventy kilometers southeast of Perth and, as well as being one of the main water supplies for the region, is a popular destination for day-trippers from Perth. The scale of this project was a 'first' for the State Government as was the early decision to comprehensively plan and design the dam and its environs. Oldham's role in landscaping was to fit the dam into the valley and he stated that his predominant concern was 'not to strive to subjugate nature; nor to try to keep the natural environment in its original state; but to harmoniously integrate man's works with nature's' (Oldham, 1966, p 201). But 'fitting in' was not solely an artless exercise in camouflage or of softening the scars of progress. His first significant intervention was strategic. He claimed that he persuaded the engineers to take construction material only from areas that would eventually be covered by the new reservoir. He also became heavily involved in cut and fill, ensuring that all earthworks and access roads in the dam's construction could be used later as design opportunities in a new tourist landscape (Hillman, 2003).

To reveal and enhance, and even to proclaim, the beauty and magnitude of engineered structures was typical of practitioners of this time. Sylvia Crowe wrote about infrastructure and landscape (1958 and 1960) and many practitioners including Brenda Colvin amongst others practiced under the inevitability of infrastructure in the post-war years. In Australia, infrastructure

was linked to the project of building a nation and as physical achievements infrastructure was linked to national pride. At Serpentine Dam, John Oldham developed movement systems around a series of viewing points from which the tourist could discover the beauty of infrastructure. These included a series of vantage points such as a newly designed restaurant and viewing points in close proximity to the wall itself and these were intended to generate an awe-inspiring response from the viewer. Oldham believed that the aesthetic translation of functionalist planning combined with the conscious use of Australian native plants and natural building materials would imbue a project with beauty and art. He believed the modern landscape held the potential for Australia to break away from English landscape gardening principles and concluded somewhat self-consciously, 'as we develop a garden aesthetic inspired by this "Australian Vision", we shall also create a characteristic and beautiful Landscape Architecture' (Oldham, 1959, p 30).

The sweeping curve, combined with local materials sourced from blasting the spillway through rock, was used in the construction of the car parks, picnic areas, fountains, seating and viewing platforms as a transitional element between built form and the surrounding landscape. The design intent was to unite man and nature. The economy of using on-site resources was in keeping with modernist thought and planting selection became an exercise in showcasing Australian native flora. At Serpentine Dam gangs of men, including the 'Balts' or new immigrants, who had been sent to work on such large public service

Paper 7

projects, collected pieces of nature from the surrounding landscape and moved them onto the site. Oldham also desired the use of Aboriginal colours and in doing so was making an early attempt to reflect Australian indigenous culture in landscape design (Saniga, 2004). In retrospect, he might now be criticized for tokenism, as he went so far as to design the layout of the car park planting beds to mimic emu tracks similar to those depicted in Aboriginal rock art. The most dramatic appropriation of indigenous culture, however, is the design he generated for the parterre garden below the restaurant. Here, Oldham's design came from a sacred ritual board relating to a Gamadju rock hole in the Western Desert south of Balgo, therefore not from the indigenous people of the Serpentine Valley. Concentric circles represent waterholes with the serpent weaving and coiled among the sources of water. The garden plan was a modern expression of an ancient hope: the hope of assured water supplies at Serpentine Dam. In 1964 there was enough rain to allow water to rise up against the spillway gates. When the spillway was first commissioned in that year, the partially opened gates released such a gush of water that large boulders were torn from the spillway floor and the gates were never fully operable again.

In the year 2000, I led a group of landscape architecture students from the University of Western Australia in a design studio. Their brief was to re-design parts of the Serpentine Dam landscape in response to Perth Water's plan to rectify the troubled spillway once and for all. The students and I struggled with the complexity of meanings

inherent in what we found left of Oldham's landscape design. Particularly difficult was the parterre garden, which for most of the students represented blatant tokenism in the context of contemporary Aboriginal rights but that conversely was an important historic marker of the times. This was made more salient considering that in the 1960s Aboriginal Australians had not even the right to take part in the Australian political election process yet Oldham was using Aboriginal symbolism within the Western Australian government's capital works. The results of the design studio were substantial and require more time and space to discuss but the best student projects realised that the interpretation the historic importance of Serpentine Dam had as much to do with understanding its landscape design as it had to do with understanding the more invisible or intrinsic significance of Oldham's professional achievements. Oldham used infrastructure and the bureaucracies of public service to promote landscape architecture and ensured that landscape design should be a part of all capital works. He applied a modern aesthetic underpinned by locality and Australian identity, including Aboriginal Australia and conservation debates of the time. His efforts were experimental and expressive and he explored his own artistic ideas at a massive scale. In this sense, he managed to combine three different and often contradictory worlds: the abstract world of artistic expression; the seemingly disconnected world of the professions; and the world of engineering and infrastructure.

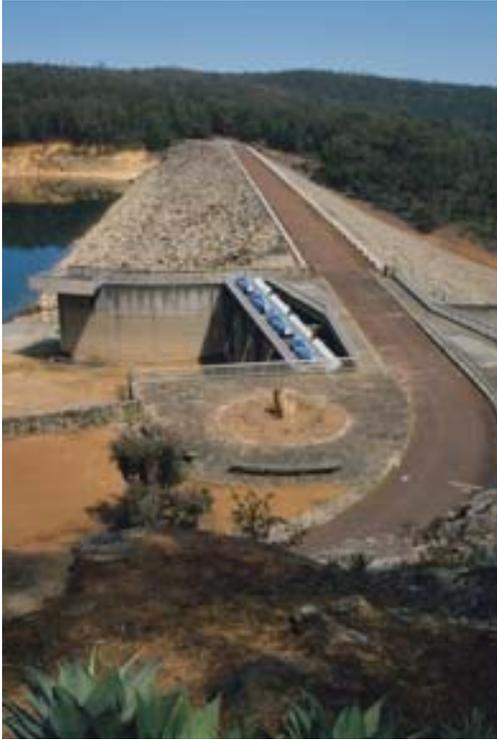


Fig. 1: Serpentine Dam Fountain Precinct and Reservoir Spillway and Wall. (Photo: Saniga, 2000)



Fig. 2: Serpentine Dam Reservoir Wall. (Photo: Saniga, 2000)



Fig. 3: The Parterre at Serpentine Dame. (Photo: Saniga, 2000)

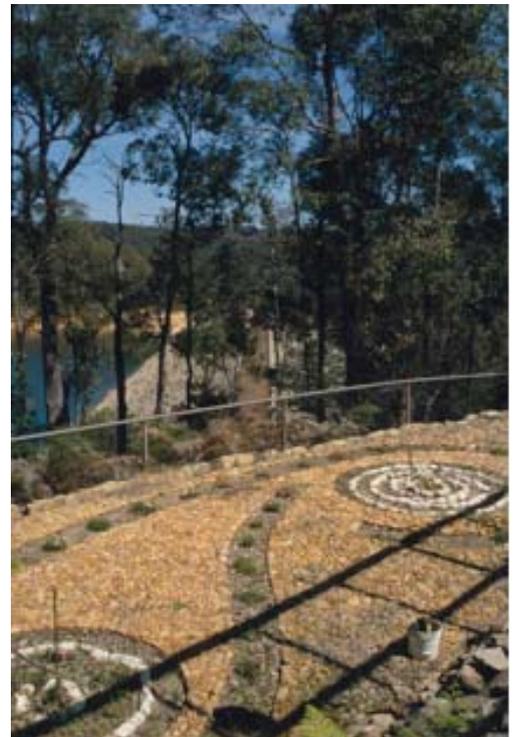


Fig. 4: Serpentine Dam Parterre and view to Reservoir Wall. (Photo: Saniga, 2000)

References

Abbott, Andrew, 1988, *The System of Professions: an essay on the division of expert labor*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Boyd, Robin, 1960, *The Australian Ugliness*, Melbourne: Cheshire.

Crowe, Sylvia, 1958, *The Landscape of Power*, London: Architectural Press.

Crowe, Sylvia, 1960, *The Landscape of Roads*, London: Architectural Press.

Hillman, Robert, 2003, Letter to Andrew Saniga.

Newton, Norman T, 1971, *Design on the Land: the development of landscape architecture*, Belknap Press: Cambridge.

Oldham, John, 1959, 'Home Landscaping', in *The Architect*, Perth.

Oldham, John, 1966. 'Engineering and environment: An address to the 1966 conference of the N.Z. Institution of Engineers', *New Zealand Engineering*, Vol 21, 1966, pp 207-214.

Olmsted, Frederick Law, 1865, Letter from F L Olmsted to Calvert Vaux, Bear Valley, 1 August 1865, in V P Ranney [Ed], *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted: Volume V The California Frontier 1863-1865*, 1990, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp 422-423.

Olmsted, Frederick Law, 1882, *The Spoils of the Park*, Detroit: F. L. Olmsted.

Royal Australian Institute of Architects and Gazzard, Donald [Ed], 1966, *Australian Outrage: The Decay of a Visual Environment*, Sydney: Ure Smith.

Saniga, Andrew, 2004a, 'An Uneasy Profession: defining the landscape architect in Australia 1912-1972', PhD Thesis, Faculty of Architecture Building and Planning, The University of Melbourne.

Saniga, Andrew, 2004b, 'Artless or Artful? John Oldham's profession of landscape architecture in 1960s Australia', in J Raxworthy and J Blood [Eds], *The MESH Book*, Melbourne: RMIT University Press.

NOTE: A more extensive description of Serpentine Dam complete with historic photographs and plans is provided in Saniga 2004b and is available online from Queensland University of Technology's Digital Repository.