



Context, Setting & Cultural and Natural Landscapes

The theme for this year's Heritage Festival is 'Places in Context: Natural and Cultural Landscapes'. It will examine natural landscapes from the perspectives of environmental sustainability, planning and development, and our ways of occupying green space. It will also look at cultural landscapes, the community's interaction with places and their social histories. This theme was chosen to highlight the contexts in which the landscape, people, and the built environment come together, mutually shaping each other. The festival sends a key message – now more than ever, under the competing pressures of environmental degradation and development, heritage conservation must be rethought in broad, wholistic terms if we are to protect what we value for those who come after us.

The following article focuses first, and primarily, on one aspect of this overriding emphasis on context – the significance of the surrounding environment to the integrity of a heritage building or place. It also discusses urban planning in the wider context of natural and cultural landscapes

By Jacqui Goddard and Graham Quint

Curtilage and context

The emphasis on context as a theme is due to our recognition that it usually isn't just an 'item' that we are seeking to protect, unless it is perhaps a piece of moveable heritage or a work of art. We are also recognising that earlier attempts at saving places may not have given the desired result. For example, the fate of the historic house of *Grandview* in Pymble wasn't quite what was envisaged when the arguments were put forward to save it. It now has no grand view and is cheek by jowl with a series of apartment buildings. Its open side is to the busy highway and in every other direction it faces buildings.

This attitude of 'individual item in a vacuum' has a long history and perhaps comes from the 'objet d'art' approach. In November 1947 the then President of the National Trust was appointed to a short lived committee formed by the Minister of Local Government to consider buildings of historic

interest which might need to be demolished for planning purposes and preserved for relocation, and 'where to re-erect them' (*Ours in Trust* by Ivor Wyatt, page 20).

Richmond Villa was one well known building that was moved. Designed and built by Colonial Architect, Mortimer Lewis, in 1849 to face the Domain it was dismantled to make room for additions to Parliament House in 1976 and re-erected in Kent Street just below the National Trust Centre. It enjoys life now as the Headquarters for the Society of Australian Genealogists and, although it looks comfortable in its site, it can mislead the observer who is trying to understand the history of Millers Point and the city.

The location or context of these buildings of 'historic interest' was not considered of any importance whatsoever. It later became the preferred option to leave a place *in-situ* and debates over listing often involved how much 'curtilage' to include. Curtilage is taken to mean a measurable area considered the minimum space needed to maintain a building's significance; a protection zone if you like.

Loss of context is also a result of opposition to retention arguments. It is not uncommon to be asked 'which bit is important to keep' and 'how close can my development come'. *Tempe House*, Rockdale is an example of this approach.

It is a sensitive issue because of the arguments at the time of the proposed development of the site, and the obvious poor outcome in conservation terms.

Tempe House is a John Verge designed house built by Scottish immigrant Alexander Brodie Spark in 1836 and named after the 'Vale of Tempe', a valley in Greek legend set at the foot of Mt Olympus. Spark created his own Mt Olympus to set off the house, which was sketched and painted by noted colonial artists, including John Skinner Prout, John Glover, James Clark, Samuel Elyard and Conrad Martens.

Tempe has now joined other Verge houses, *Elizabeth Bay House*, *Lyndhurst*, *Tusculum*, *Rose Bay Lodge*, *Rockwall*, *Toxteth Park* and *Barham* in losing its setting. Its backdrop now is a series of high rise buildings dominating what is left of Mt Olympus and its trees, and compromising the scale of the original setting.

In the past, loss of context could also be simply a matter of neglect and failure to recognise the gems in our midst. Many places have been victim to this. The other Verge Houses mentioned above largely fall into this category. *Lyndhurst* in Glebe is orphaned from its original surroundings, with only a small garden at the front and sides. The rear is right on the street line, as a consequence of which the rear is the entrance. Surrounded by terrace houses, it suffered many uses, including as a pickle factory, before being restored as headquarters for the Historic Houses Trust. It is now again a private dwelling, as is *Rose Bay Lodge*, which has been lovingly restored by its owners who have also carefully looked after its remnant, and much reduced, garden.

The site of *Elizabeth Bay House* is not much bigger than the house itself, although a public park in front gives it some setting. *Tusculum*, now the Headquarters of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects, has fared a little better than nearby *Rockwall* and certainly better than *Toxteth Park* and *Barnham* which have been all but obliterated by additions and changes of use. The loss of the gardens of *Tempe* are all the more tragic when you look at the fate of these other Verge Houses.

A New Year's Eve discussion began when visiting English tourists revealed their shock at what they had seen in Australia. They could not believe that huge, unattractive constructions could be erected directly adjoining intact Victorian buildings. 'You simply would not be allowed to do this in England', they said. This could be debated, of course, and they too may not see the changes in their own place, but the words of the visitors provide food for thought.

'I despair of being able to convey to any reader my own idea of the beauty of Sydney Harbour', wrote Victorian era English novelist Anthony Trollope in the late 1870s.

Less than 20 years later, American author Mark Twain visited Australia as part of a world lecture tour and also commented on the view of Sydney Harbour: *'It would be beautiful without Sydney, but not above half as beautiful as it is now, with Sydney added. The city clothes a cluster of hills and a ruffle of neighbouring ridges with its undulating masses of masonry, and out of these masses spring towers and spires and other architectural dignities and grandeurs that break the flowing lines and give picturesqueness to the general effect.'*

Now, the grounds and gardens of historic properties are being relentlessly redeveloped for denser housing; and on a bigger, cumulative scale the architectural dignities, grandeurs and picturesqueness recognised by Mark Twain are being lost.

Perhaps we do need the perspective of the 'stranger'. It is often through the eyes of others that we see things anew, without the blindfold of our own prejudice or history.

Context, urban planning and development

On one level the issue is simply how much of the 'surroundings' need to be protected beyond the immediate curtilage; the concept of view corridors where development may need to be controlled and 'buffer zones' come into this category.

It now seems that curtilage alone may not be enough and that 'context' may be a much bigger concept.

Such a concept is difficult to explain to others but is fundamental to why we feel the way we do about a particular place.

In both Australia and the countries of the United Kingdom, community representation on local and borough councils seeks to protect the essence that gives townscapes and countryside a distinctive sense of place, and communities a sense of 'belonging.' This takes us to the broader theme of conservation of the cultural and natural landscapes that comprise local identity.

On this level, context has to do with the collection of cultural and natural aspects that make a place 'feel' a particular way. Those things can include a predominant culture expressed perhaps through food and language, a sense of openness or perhaps cosiness. It could be the presence of sea air if not a view. It could be the scale of a development or a predominant garden or plant type. It is the tangible and intangible, built, environmental and human features that make up a distinctive precinct, spanning kilometres. How do we conserve this context for future generations?

When it comes to how something 'feels' it is very hard to give protection through legislation. Sydney's Chinatown is an urban conservation area, but it would be very different without its inhabitants and without the bustle and the smells of food cooking and herbs and spices for sale.

And cultural landscape can also be taken to mean evidence of landuse or remnant plantings on a broader scale than a building's curtilage. This is of particular importance in areas of land release when original roads, subdivision patterns, fencelines and plantings may be obliterated by development rather than being incorporated to respect and feature the history of earlier landscapes.

Our distinctively Australian natural and cultural landscape, this multilayered context, needs to be cherished. It appears, though, that this aim is better addressed elsewhere, with Australia tending towards growth and development often with the loss of that local identity. We have seen an inexorable shift from local council decision-making and community involvement to a situation where many major planning decisions are made at State level, the views of local communities are overruled and many people now feel disenfranchised.



Tempe House – *buried alive*

The latter half of the twentieth century saw communities working with the National Trust to save important historic and cultural precincts such as The Rocks, Glebe and Paddington. However, areas such as Redfern-Waterloo, Ku-ring-gai and large swathes of Sydney suburbs are now being massively redeveloped with less opportunity for those who know and love these areas to influence the process.

Redevelopment has become the standard approach, rather than conservation and perhaps adaptation, in total contradiction to the principles of ecological sustainability – if we understand ecology to incorporate social history. It is unusual, for example, in any discussion about a redundant building for anyone to suggest that it may have a future doing what its always done – a factory as a factory, a post office as a post office, a café as a café. The first question is always ‘what can we turn this into?’

Houses and commercial buildings less than 50, and in some cases, less than 30 years old are pulled down to address ‘population targets’. Whole suburbs of Sydney are being transformed, their character and distinctiveness, their context, being wiped away.

Paradoxically the emphasis on Sydney has deprived much of regional and country NSW of the resources needed to maintain their economies. While there is often a will and intent to protect and conserve their history and landscapes, dwindling populations mean there is little money for this work.

In Sydney, urbanisation is a vexed and complex issue with respect to local cultural context. Often, urban planning follows a too familiar formula, which does not respect local identity and history. It is too easy to just repeat the design layout used somewhere else rather than think about place.

On the other hand, environmental issues should now be at the very top of our consciousness when we conserve, plan and develop our cities. Urban density is necessary for resource sustainability, and urban sprawl

and greenfield development are, in general terms, ecologically unsustainable.

Balancing these imperatives – to protect our cultural and built heritage *and* our environment – is perhaps our key contemporary challenge.

Environmental heritage, after all, is the very foundation on which cultural heritage, including our historic buildings and precincts with their social histories, rests.

We need to set our sights high. We must test our conservation and planning policies against the triple criteria of their effect on the natural, cultural and built environment if we are to ensure our cities, towns and countryside are places we are proud to hand to future generations.

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