

TOWN PARKS OF NEW SOUTH WALES – PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

by Warwick Mayne-Wilson

This book reflects my 20 years' experience as a conservation landscape architect in undertaking heritage studies of major parks in New South Wales (see brief resume, overleaf), as well as intensive library research and field visits to the over 40 parks which Councils nominated, at my request, as their best local park. Through this research, I wanted to fill a perceived gap in historical knowledge of how and why town parks evolved in New South Wales after British settlement, the design and maintenance issues that concern park managers, the needs and wishes of local communities - and how well these were being served.

AustICOMOS readers may be particularly interested in Chapter 1 and its Appendix, which traces the establishment of town parks in NSW from the governors' domains, market squares and public commons, through the 1850s to the mania for town park creation as a means of celebrating the centenary of settlement in 1888. In the five year period alone, between 1885 and 1890, over two hundred town parks were created. Crucially, however, while a little State 'seed money' was provided to get them going, councils have had to fund, develop and manage them from their own local resources ever since. Given the many competing demands for infrastructure development within every local government area, town parks received very little. It was largely due to the Unemployment Relief Funding of the early 1930s that at least some 'hard works' – and some plantings – were installed, many of which still form the backbone of town parks in NSW today.

Other chapters in the book provide

- a description of how these parks evolved between the 1880s – 1980s;
- an outline of the development of town park design in NSW;
- a discussion of what parks mean to people, and especially their users;
- the principal issues confronting park managers in Councils;
- examples of contemporary, prize-winning parks and refurbished old ones in Sydney; and
- thoughts on new directions and innovations for town parks, inspired by debates in the USA.

The final chapter provides a representative selection of 40 town parks, each with a brief history and several illustrations. Most are those nominated by their Councils, but some by myself, as I intend to add more parks to this collection as my research continues.

More generally, the book seeks to stimulate a broader debate on the future possibilities of town parks – not only in New South Wales but more widely in Australia. My hope is to encourage more people to make more informed, caring, and imaginative decisions to satisfy people's increasing needs for outdoor recreation in the 21st century. With the trend toward high-rise apartment living and the shrinking of the Australian backyard, parks are also becoming increasingly in demand as venues for social interaction and broader family get-togethers.

It is desirable today to increase links between councils' park managers, the local communities and stakeholders, private companies, and organisations with an interest in outdoor recreation activities. The principal need, however, is to increase funding from not only State and even federal agencies – as in the United States – but also, hopefully, philanthropic donations by affluent Australians.

Brief Resume

Warwick Mayne-Wilson, Principal of Mayne-Wilson & Associates, is a conservation landscape architect with Honours Degrees in Arts and in Landscape Architecture, and a Masters Degree in Heritage Conservation. Over the last 20 years he has been a Registered Landscape Architect of the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects, and a member of Australia ICOMOS, the Australian Garden History Society and the National Trust (NSW). He has also lectured on curtilages, cultural landscapes and the conservation of historic gardens, parks and streetscapes to Masters Students at the University of Sydney. He is a former chairman of the National Trust's Parks and Gardens Conservation Committee (NSW) and a Trustee of Centennial Park, Sydney in 1993-95. Most of his projects today involve the assessment of the impacts of development proposals on the heritage and visual values of a wide range of heritage-listed landscapes.