

The Public Park

The transition of Parramatta Park from Governors Domain to public park, occurred as the result of a popular movement by local citizens, who lobbied in 1847 for access to the domain for “exercise and recreation in open grounds and pure air”¹. In 1857, two hundred acres of the former Domain was dedicated for “a Park for promoting the health and recreation of the inhabitants of Parramatta”². The rhetoric of the British Public Parks movement is clearly reflected in the expectation that the Park created would be a means of improving the physical and moral character of the community. Yet it is significant that the Park was not created out of a government scheme for urban improvement, but arose out of a popular movement which resulted in the direct dedication of land to a local population.

By 1858, the boundaries of the Park were surveyed, a Trust established and public funds dedicated for its maintenance. The landscape slowly took shape as a public park, with the construction of the Rangers Cottage, c1870, and a series of gate houses³ to facilitate Park management objectives. Tree-lined avenues were introduced and the imposing grandeur of the Tudor gatehouse lent Victorian consequence to the Park, yet there were no attempts to create a didactic space containing horticultural displays. The emphasis was rather on recreation, which is reflected in the Park’s landscape of large open grassed areas used for organised sports, especially cricket, football and golf. The public use also impacted on the landscape of the Park with the provision of facilities such as the “Little Coogee” swimming beach and it’s associated construction; dressing sheds; a kiosk; play and picnic equipment; and a boat shed - all of which were demolished as swimmers deserted Little Coogee for the Council swimming pool built in the early 1960s.

The need to raise revenue for maintenance has led to many initiatives over the years which have left an impact on the landscape: agistment for stock; sale of sand dredged from the River; Formula One car racing; hiring areas for community events and the creation of an artificial amphitheatre. Neglect through lack of funds has also shaped the landscape, with the loss of trees and overgrown grasslands being a recognised characteristic of the Park.

The landscape of the public Park has also been shaped by alienations of parkland for a variety of sectional and private uses. Between 1952 and 1975 a total of forty three acres of the Park was leased for use by licensed clubs and sporting groups, as well as the lease of Old Government House and grounds, first to Kings School and then to the National Trust⁴. The most political and acrimonious excision occurred in the early 1980s with the building of the Football Stadium on the site of the Cumberland Oval.

Despite the history of neglect, excision and exploitation, the landscape of Parramatta Park has become an integral part of it’s community. The “people’s park” has deep meaning for the community of Parramatta and as a place of recreation and play it has engendered a strong emotional attachment and sense of place.

¹ Minute to Colonial Secretary cited in Kass et.al., Parramatta a Past revealed, Parramatta City Council, 1996, p.165.

² Parramatta Domain Act, Royal Assent 18 March 1857.

³ Queen St gatehouse, 1873; the imposing Tudor style gatehouse built in 1884 replaced Macquarie existing lodge at the George St entrance; a third gatehouse was commenced at the Macquarie St entrance in 1887; a fourth gatehouse was built at the Ross St entrance in 1935, financed by the Unemployment Relief Council.

⁴ Parramatta Park Plan of Management, PCC, 1975, p.31.