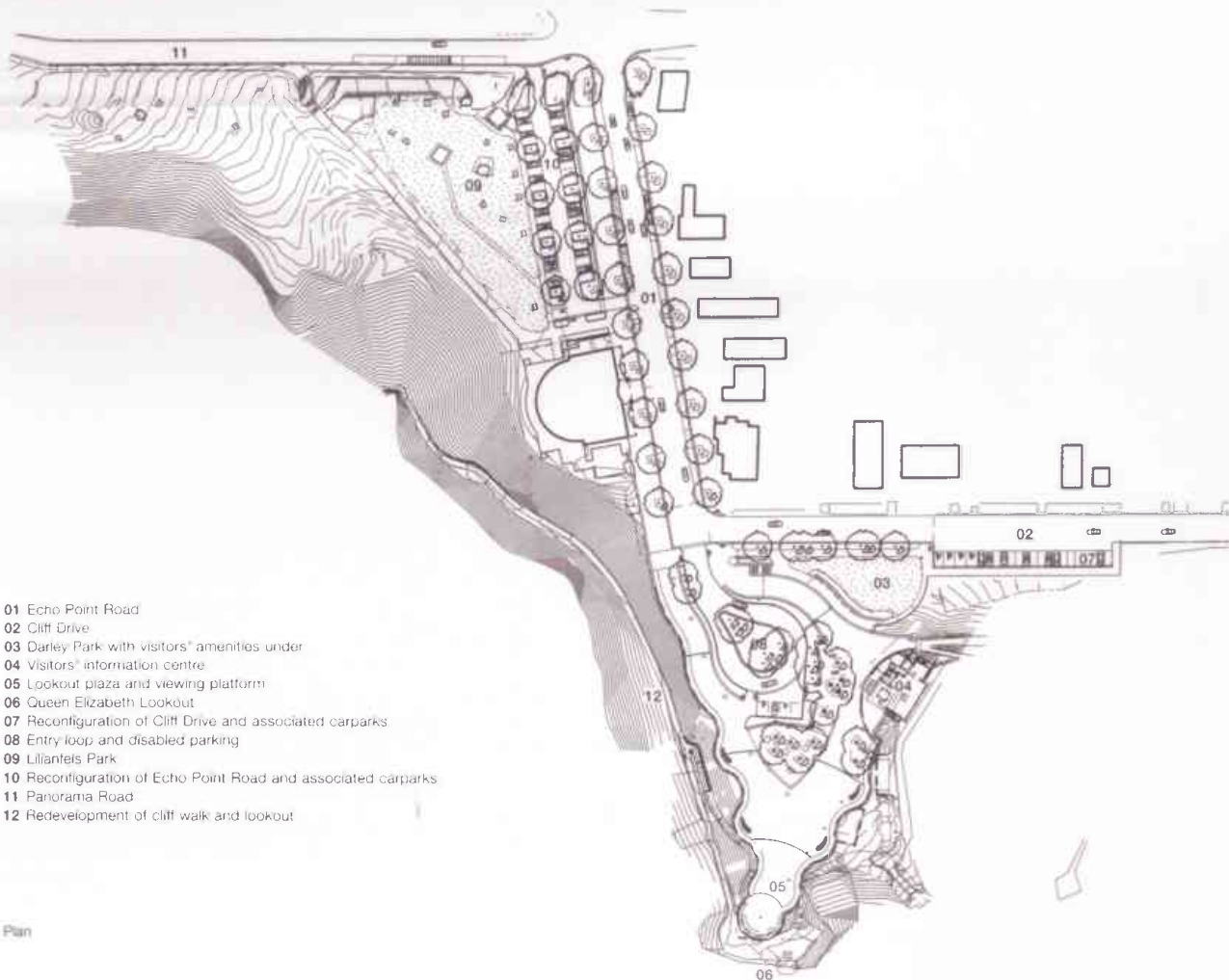


THE BIG BLUE

For the 1.5 million travellers who annually visit the Blue Mountains to experience the Australian Bush, it just got closer. The Echo Point redevelopment by Tract Consultants is a megastructure in the void.

Review **Julian Ruxworthy** Photography **Brett Cornish**





- 01 Echo Point Road
- 02 Cliff Drive
- 03 Darley Park with visitors' amenities under
- 04 Visitors' information centre
- 05 Lookout plaza and viewing platform
- 06 Queen Elizabeth Lookout
- 07 Reconfiguration of Cliff Drive and associated carparks
- 08 Entry loop and disabled parking
- 09 Lillanfels Park
- 10 Reconfiguration of Echo Point Road and associated carparks
- 11 Panorama Road
- 12 Redevelopment of cliff walk and lookout

Plan

ECHO POINT IN THE Blue Mountains an hour and a half west of Sydney represents a quintessentially Australian experience. The famous lookout from which one views the Three Sisters and Mount Solitary in the Blue Mountains National Park, and further across to the Wild Dog Mountains in Kanangra Boyd National Park, has become a pilgrimage site for the international traveller with a single day to see 'the Bush'. Each year over 1.5 million visitors arrive to take a snapshot and feel the weight of the eucalyptus-drenched blue air against them, the hard line of the sandstone escarpment demarcating an absolute boundary between a natural outside and a cultural 'inside'. Being exposed to this difference, feeling its mass against you, is what the traveller wants, and it is in these moments that a sense of indigenous 'Australianness' is most palpable. The intimacy of this edge, however, is lessened by the sheer volume of people seeking the same experience. This contradiction – between individualised experience, and the movement of the

mass logistics – is the line that Tract landscape architects had to tread recently in their project for Echo Point and its immediate environs, in so doing it provides an important case study for the implications of the environmental tourism boom.

But the sheer mass of infrastructure, combined with the spatial limits of the site, has forced Echo Point beyond the environmental sensitivity we would normally expect of such a project, into a necessarily monumental entity, and this is its most interesting quality. Well before contemplating the esoteric, Echo Point's concerns focus on pedestrian pragmatics: access, parking and amenities. After all, Echo Point is a tourist machine, an infrastructure in the landscape. Echo Point is a megastructure, poised above the void.

The central move of the project is a topographical one: the entire development seems to be one grade, from the adjacent streets where parking has been extended, straight down to the point proper. By opening the view to the whole





Project Echo Point Revitalisation Katoomba (The Three Sisters Lookout)
Client Blue Mountains City Council
Principal consultant Tract Consultants
Project team George Gallagher, Matthew Easton, Julie Lee, Mui Graham, Linda Cheong, Russ Kosko
Architecture Anchor Mortlock & Woolley; Nobis Architecture and Building
Heritage consultant NEBS & Partners
Structural and civil engineering Partridge Partners
Electrical, mechanical and lighting services E. Sheldermine
Cost planning Page Kirkland Partnership
Signage, art co-ordination, site interpretation Minnie Bryce Design Strategy
Statutory planning JBA Urban Planning
Traffic and transport Jameson Foley & Associates
Environmental assessment Gunniah Environmental Consultants
Access consultant Australian Quadraplegic Association
Risk assessment Corporate Risk Services
Bushfire assessment Bushfire & Environmental Services
Contractor Walter Construction Group
Landscape and stone walls Regal Landscapes

area, through removing trees and visually interrupting mounding, the project generously reveals the view to the area, as well as immediately bringing this view, and its attendant scale, into the project. The scale and breadth of the vista allows the project to be mega-structural, indeed it requires it to. This smart move also makes the entire infrastructural approach permissible. The new Echo Point Lookout is a paved plain of fine exposed aggregate in-situ concrete from the roundabout at its top, north edge, to the point, its two edges curve in and out in an exaggerated picturesque manner, with a simple stainless handrail all along. This single plain has occasional glossy bean-shaped seats, and pockets of space with small stone walls to lessen the grade through ramps, creating a couple of islands of seating and vegetation. This language of stone walls is set up like ha-has, the depressed fences in 18th-century English gardens, with the vertical elements of the program concealed below grade changes. At the north end along the back of the project, retaining walls to existing grades hold amenity, and attempt, unsuccessfully, to incorporate an old tourist centre. These walls are elegantly constructed throughout the project, none interfering too greatly with the huge stretched surface.

On the whole, the design succeeds in being both highly formalised, as well as invisible. The view is simply too magnificent for distractions on the ground. The skill in this project is that, with the exception of a couple of irrelevant details, the architects deal elegantly with huge logistical issues using large formal gestures, which they then render simply. In many respects it's a Modernist solution, placing design clearly in the foreground of the natural environment, in a manner of respectful autonomy. This is a strategy that succeeds in much of the great work of Harry Seidler, notably his apartments in Diamond Bay, Sydney, which propose form in the scale of the natural environment, and also recently with Donaldson + Wain's Tree Top Walk in the Walpole-Nornalup National Park, Western Australia. While there is much alleged 'touching the earth lightly', the approach taken at Echo Point represents a potential turning point for Australian design in the natural environment, one in which some form of meaningful dialogue can be had, rather than knee-jerk invisibility. Echo Point becomes another feature of the edge of the sandstone plateau. [26]

- 01 The paved plain of fine exposed aggregate in-situ concrete
- 02 Islands of vegetation and seating
- 03 Stone depressed fences are like English ha-has and lessen the grade
- 04 In-situ sandstone plaque
- 05 Bean-shaped benches parallel the lookout contours

