



# Birrarung Marr

Melbourne's new riverside park, Birrarung Marr is located on the north bank of the Yarra, meeting Federation Square at its western end. In design terms it is an important one for both Melbourne and its city centre. It is the first new park in the inner-ring of the city to be built in a hundred years, since Alexandria Gardens, and is also the first major park done by COM since the influential period of designed capital works under the leadership of Rob Adams, at City Projects.

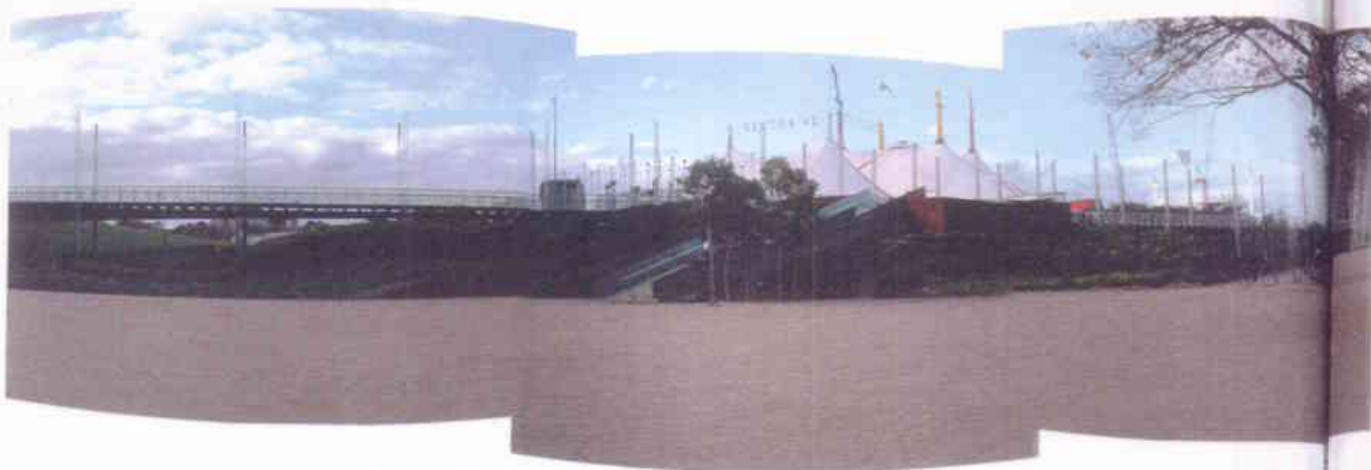


Considering Melbourne's legacy of strong but staid historic and strategic parks, in contrast with the hard edged and almost pretentiously 'contemporary' urban design flavour of recent COM projects, this park provides a typological challenge. If we also consider that the park has actually always been seen as part of the Federation Square brief, both by LAB as well as by the Council itself, then contention levels rise steeply. And this project has been a contentious one, with LAB and landscape architects Karres and Brands, and then their Australian counterparts Deep End, all putting in legitimate proposals for the site. As an important practitioner in Melbourne, with projects including Royal Park and the more contentious 'City Square' and also with an avowed interest in the garden history of Melbourne that he shares with his partner Georgina Whitehead (now in practice together), Ron Jones unquestionably also wanted the project for himself. Workshops with international participants and consultation followed and the scheme was arrived at by Ron Jones and Helena Piha of COM, then documented by Scott Adams of Taylor Cullity Lethlean, with planting design by Paul Thompson and Perry Lethlean. All of this means that in terms of Melbourne landscape architecture, it is an important contemporary project.

To say that the proposal is an agglomeration of strategic imperatives both for this site, as well as for Melbourne's inner-park system would be an understatement. Birrarung Marr is the closing portion of a 'necklace' of parks (to use a term from Olmsted, the father of landscape architecture and designer of Central Park in New York): from the Yarra in the west, with the proposed Docklands Park (by ARM & RWA, under construction at the moment), to Flagstaff Gardens, to Carlton Gardens, to Fitzroy Gardens and then returning to the Yarra at Birrarung Marr, in the east. While notional, this connection is fundamental to the 'logic' of Melbourne's park system, which is predicated on 19th century notions of 'the lungs of the city', as well as ideas about parks providing a fringe to the city centre. Additional strategic imperatives also involved linkages, notably between the sports precinct and Federation Square, as well as links from Fitzroy Gardens, via the Exhibition Street extension, not to mention possible future linkages to the Botanic Gardens over the river, as well as a continuation of the linearity of the existing riverside boulevard treatment.

If one diagrams these strategic linkages, and then inserts fields of force from the existing railway, one has effectively arrived at the parti of Birrarung Marr. An additional imperative of the project, like all projects in the landscape of any scale these days, included a commercial imperative. The Docklands is regarded as successful by Premier Bracks on the basis of a "one to forty return, from public infrastructure investment", and if one applies this logic to the notion of the 'park', which is actually a significant contribution in civic terms, but is ostensibly useless, then governments expect an 'accountable' form of recreation, which is at odds with the civilising, social and introspective spontaneity that hides in the conventions of the 19th century park. Correspondingly, this riverside park was expected to provide secure, leaseable space for use for large functions. That is, it was expected to pay for itself

Despite the rather overbearing presence of the bridge it helps pull together disparate parts of the program.



financially, which is at odds with the convention described above, about the right of the citizen to have useless space in which to think and relax. If we take this diagram of the linkages and add to it this commercial imperative, then it's clear to see that the leftover zones in the parti are filled in with 'flexible' programmatic areas for 'events'. While there is obviously a contemporaneity to this notion of 'events' in terms of architectural theory, more often than not this manifests itself in a voiceless void of possibility, exempt from trajectories of activity as it aspires to limitlessness. The rest of the design results from articulating this diagram, through level change systems, safety constraint and extrusion of landscape conventions along its axes. This diagrammatic approach is a common landscape one, developed from the site analysis diagram of Kevin Lynch in modernist landscape practice, and is differentiated here largely on the contemporary nature of material use and detail resolution, as well as insertion of 'thematic elements' that are almost paradigms in contemporary practice.

In contemporary landscape, as conventions have been destabilised by modernist architectural notions of program, architectonic objects of clear function counter pointed with the undifferentiated mass of useless 'green' have become popular. In this park, a large muscularly detailed bridging structure negotiates the grade change from Flinders Street to the river, crossing the circulatory axes from the sports precinct, which with the river, provides the main spine from which other areas are accessed, in a manner not dissimilar to that at Museum Park in Rotterdam, designed by Yves Brunier of OMA. This bridge seems over articulated and grandiose in comparison to the way that other spaces in the park are rendered, although views from it do pull together the other parts of the program. This is met at the top by a very large mound that grades down steeply from terraces and is turf, and if one looks north from the river, the city, skyscrapers seem to

emerge from it. In a city with little topographic relief, this mound is a significant gesture, and provides a sublime experience quite unlike any in a park I can think of, as well as providing a fantastic bank to roll down. The use of topography in this mega-structural, volumetric manner has been a preoccupation of landscape architects since the 'land artists' of the sixties, and reveals a move away from considering narrative space in the 19th century models of parks, to a modern volumetric reading of form. While still ostensibly an events space, and open as such, the mound occupies space, and is occupiable in a meaningful manner, in contrast with the great swathe of blank granitic sand below it. This blank 'space in waiting', when combined with the diagram of circulation, makes the park feel empty and self-evident, even if it is a more sustainable surface material than grass, which as least Australians know how to use.

Below the bridge, two axes are extruded into the park, from the sports precinct, which form cuts into the mound, as well as very specific micro-climates that have been colonised with very interesting and (so far) successful planting treatments. The north of these utilises perennial natives of different textural qualities that have been arranged in what seems to be a parody of the compositional systems of the herbaceous border from the arts and crafts garden, revealed as amorphous and snaking by the angle of the banks on which they are located. In terms of modern planting design, which favours the perennial mass-planting over 'gardenerly' beds, on the basis of the cost of maintenance, this treatment recalls the annual beds of municipal parks, in the days prior to privatised maintenance contractors. The south of the axes is at a lower level than the park, with River Red Gums set amongst pebbles and edged by scoria boulders, a traditional Melbourne bed edging. The south face of the cut is covered with Cycads, an ancient plant like a palm, which takes hundred of years to get above the ground. Considering this, and the

Along the southern border of the park a promenade lines the edge of the Yarra River, while a large flat expanse of granitic sand accommodates the large 'events' required of a contemporary urban park.



fact that this bank is completely covered in them, it's scary to think what the bush setting they came from now looks like, probably a private property on the south coast of Sydney, where they occur naturally below Spotted Gums. This dry river bed, scooting under the bridge, suggests an ephemeral corridor of the river's past alignment, and does have experiential qualities that summon up that spatial type convincingly. The use of indigenous material throughout is a bit of a catch cry of Australian landscape architecture, but its specificity and nuancing for the situation of the park suggest that this paradigm may finally have come of age, as it moves beyond simply 'good provision' to an appreciation of the plants for their design material qualities.

The most successful aspects of the park are the way in which it deals with its existing fragments, notably the river boulevard and Speakers Corner, both of which, however, have elements that end up potentially belittling the quality of these spaces. The standard of riverside recreation in a park setting are undoubtedly set by the north facing embankment on the south side of the river, below the Botanic Garden, which sees heavy use, particularly for barbecues, something to do with the aspect, the existing trees and the traffic situation and parking. In Birrarung Marr, existing figs have been retained, at the lower level by the river, separated by an existing retaining wall. By the circulation being at the upper level, off the blank granitic plain, these riverside spaces have an intimacy to them and relationship to the river that is quite reflective and immersive, however DCM'ish 'would-be-random' blade walls of sheets of steel somehow belittle the access to the river, even as they articulate and announce it, revealing the hit-and-miss nature of the resolution of the park in general. A simple treatment, like that used at the Spanish steps down the mound would have suited this situation. Speakers Corner, the heritage-listed Elms and circular scoria platforms at the western termination of the park, is the other existing fragment, and is by far the best space in

Birrarung Marr. This site was utilised early in the 20th century as an informal site for public discussion, and now, un-used, in a society that would rather send flame email than have an argument face to face, these circular platforms set amongst trees have a magical, surreal presence. Although reduced in size by the Exhibition Street extension, the linkage of this otherwise remote site into the park liberates its qualities for the public. Unfortunately, a hideous interpretive artwork, a reduced version of the platforms in granite with text interprets abstractly what is actually evident, nearby, emphasising the weirdly didactic role that parks seem to have. At a moment of frisson in the park, where the bridge meets the ground, the river boulevard scoops in close, and a wetland terminates, all below the trees of Speakers Corner; the juxtaposition of elements that the composition of the diagram seems to exalt in is reached in a moment of relatively pure landscape cadence. This is as it should be, because if landscape architects can't deal well with the existing (another paradigm), then who can.

This project builds on a range of important and interesting paradigms that people have been talking about for a while, and that have been built overseas, and as a test piece of these, this is an important project. In using the existing and in colonising the edges of the diagram, some experientially and horticulturally rich moments are achieved. This is a big park and no city can have enough of them (except Canberra). When photographing the project, one realises that this site is a very strange being indeed. While this is an interesting quality, when loosened from the logics of the 19th century park, Birrarung Marr seems strangely empty, but full of bits of stuff (even if it lacks basic public amenities such as enough barbecues and a public toilet), awaiting events that will activate it for a short time, but after which it will still seem to wait, interminably, for something to happen, with an empty heart.

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