Cranks, Caves and Campfires
Ellis Stones’ utopian vision for a suburban landscape architecture

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The profession of landscape architecture in Australia started to take shape from 1966 under the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects (AILA). Its emergence during a period of heightened environmental concern saw a range of disciplines unite with a mood of euphoria that was coupled with utopian visions. The profession’s battle for territory invariably hinged on the mantra that decades of landscape abuse post-World War II could be reversed. Appreciation for the visual qualities of the Australian indigenous landscape was a major theme and underpinned practically every mode of practice including; landscape reclamation, site planning and design, landscape assessment, landscape planning and urban design. Experimentation with indigenous plants was common, as were attempts to create facsimiles of the Australian landscape. Today, many of these early attempts are symptomatic of a design approach that essentially experimented with a domestic ‘bush garden’ design language ‘gone public’.

One of the more outspoken founders of the AILA was Ellis Stones and this paper will analyse his contribution to landscape architecture via two sources; first, the ideas and attitudes as expressed in his writing on landscape and conservation, and second, his design ideas as identified in a small selection of his work dating from the early 1970s. The discussion will focus on the broader tensions that exist between idealism, the pragmatics of designing landscapes inspired by the experience of the Australian bush, and the contemporary situation including conservation, management and the historiography of landscape architecture.

**Keywords:** Landscape architecture profession, Ellis Stones, conservation, Australian bush gardens.

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Introduction

The emergence of landscape architecture in Australia in the post-World War II years is often gauged by way of its institutionalisation under the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects (AILA). In August 1966 a group of individuals, some of whom were outspoken in opposition to environmentally destructive development activities that occurred during Australia’s development boom of the 1950s and 1960s, mobilised to form an organisation that would represent, and give power to, a profession they believed would be able to compete with those professions that had held sway. Sociologist Andrew Abbott in *The System of Professions* (1988) explained that professions operate in a system, each attempting to claim territory from another and using a variety of techniques ranging from the objective to the subjective in order to achieve control (pp35-40). He explains that objective techniques are more easily established and include such things as new technologies or new organisations (like local or state government departments) that, once introduced, provide the need for individuals in a particular professional field. Public authorities afforded power to landscape architects decades prior to institutionalisation, with practitioners such as Hugh Linaker (1872-1938) in Australia and Fred Tschopp (1905-1980) in New Zealand, both taking up design and management roles in local and state government in the first half of the twentieth century. In the 1960s, unprecedented public organisations such as the National Capital Development Commission (NCDC) in the Australian Capital Territory, which was formed in 1958, played a key role in delivering landscape architects standing among other built environment professions.

Subjective techniques, Abbott (1988) explains, include three important processes; to classify, to reason (or infer), and to take action on the problems that society deems important (p40). In the case of landscape architecture in Australia, it is these subjective means, including the use of highly abstract and emotive ideas, which were pivotal in arguing the profession’s territorial control. A significant factor in defining the profession was the expression of somewhat utopian visions. These filtered through debates about what landscape architecture was, and why the profession had some relevance amidst its competitors that in the main included horticulture (and landscape management), planning and architecture. The aim of this paper is to analyse and discuss the literary and design contribution of Ellis Stones to determine tangible evidence of activism and utopianism in his writing and in the landscapes he designed.

Priority: Landscaping

Ellis (Rocky) Stones (1895-1975) was a doyen of the profession in Australia, with a career that was influenced by an unconventional mix of experiences. He had grown up in the Melbourne suburb of Essendon and spent much time exploring semi-rural lands just beyond the northern edge of metropolitan Melbourne where the landscape consisted of basalt field stones strewn amidst open eucalypt forests and pasture. Land and country, its materials and processes, thus marked him indelibly and gave rise to his unshakable design ethos and conviction that the Australian landscape was at once the nation’s most precious resource and also its’ most squandered opportunity. So crucial was his personal experience of two world wars that in his assessment of conservation in Australia he referred to war metaphorically, stating: “...we are engaged in a World War on Pollution, which may prove more serious than any previous wars (Stones c1970, p11).” His assessment of the contemporary suburban condition included lifestyles that were; “...an erosion of community living, with families going their own way and pursuing their own interests, out in their cars at the
weekends, making their friends other than in their own street” (Stones 1976, pp13-14). For Stones, Australian suburbia, in the state that it was in, represented a form of vandalism, the one antidote for which he believed to be the somewhat utopian aim of reconnecting people to natural landscapes, or, the ‘bush’, within their neighbourhoods in the city. A complicit objective was the related project of campaigning for the conservation of semi-natural areas within metropolitan Melbourne.

Stones’ life and work as documented by Anne Latreille (1990) is characterised by an unerring will to engage in conservation battles particularly in the face of the status quo of architecture and engineering of that time. The post-World War II years saw a period of rapid and expansive development in Australia. Stones viewed the introduction of the bulldozer as “man’s new weapon of destruction” (Stones c1970, p5). Stones brought up his family in the suburb of Ivanhoe, a short distance from the centre of Melbourne and close by that city’s main tributary, the Yarra River. It was the fight for the Yarra’s protection against the engineers and planners who believed that concrete barreling was the best form of flood mitigation that played a crucial role in Stones’ career trajectory. In 1959, the Save the Yarra League, of which Stones was a key member, produced a plan (via Stones’ office) titled ‘Paradise Lost’ showing the areas of land once rural but that were being lost to residential or other development (Latreille 1990, p118). In the shadow of the dominant government bureaucracies of the time, the title of this plan is a clear suggestion of the sense of idealism that prevailed in the League’s propositions. Within a couple of decades large portions of the Yarra Valley were indeed preserved within a system of metropolitan parks extending to the outer suburbs of Melbourne, however, the initial setbacks the League experienced were reputedly deflating for Stones.

To Stones, and others he inspired, the most important way forward in conservation was to develop a degree of professional clout that could stand in opposition to those who held power, largely the engineers and planners and others entrenched in bureaucracies (Saniga 2012, p179). The most direct evidence of his bid to achieve this is to be found within a thirty-one page unpublished manuscript written by Stones titled ‘Priority: Landscaping’ (c1970) which both Latreille (1990) and Saniga (2012) briefly explore and that will be further described and analysed here. The manuscript is structured under the sub-headings of ‘My Country’, ‘Air and Water’, and ‘Trees’ and it is laden with an array of personal anecdotes that stem from a self-professed ‘crank’ (Stones c1970, p3). The term ‘crank’, was one which Stones often referred to because it at once suggested those who criticised his standpoint as being eccentric, oddball and nonconformist whilst at the same time communicating his own act of rebellion. At its core, ‘Priority: Landscaping’ heralded Australian identity. It commenced with the claim for Australia’s distinctive landscape and the uninspiring way in which planning and design up until that point in history in Stones’ mind had not responded to the Australian landscape. For Stones, landscape was the great desideratum, a missed opportunity for the city to the extent that “…a city without a landscape is dead” (Stones c1970, p2). A careful reading of this manuscript provides evidence of the utopian dimensions that underpinned his plea for conservation and how these utopian visions were reflective of the social and political condition of 1960s Australia in the years when the conservation movement was undergoing a radical transformation in relation to the key professions of the time (Robin 1998, p146; Hutton and Connors 1999, p108). The historical significance of Stones’ utopianism was that it helped form an important part of the motivation to establish a profession of landscape architecture.
In ‘Priority: Landscaping’ Stones wrote: “It is amazing how many people will be silenced by that magic word ‘expert’ when common sense suggests that the expert is wrong.” (Stones c1970, p10). He stated that in order to achieve landscape preservation, the condition required would need “…one authority responsible for our environment [that] has the power to pursue a ruthless policy of controlling our landscape. That is why I stress Priority Landscape. [edited hand-written note] The Landscape Authority must have power to act against official vandalism.” (Stones c1970, p4). Here Stones is decrying a lack of representation of landscape values and inferring corruption of power (vandals) and a parallel attack on the conservationist by way of the pejorative, ‘crank’. Although he does not cite exactly the names of his critics at that time, one gets a sense from reading his accounts that his critics were pervasive and that perhaps they were the public servants or consultants responsible for civic infrastructure, its engineering and planning. In a later publication he wrote: “The people who fight the more philistine decisions of their local councils and who speak up in the effort to preserve or improve the environment are not all cranks, by any means.” (Stones 1976, p16). The action to be taken was to challenge those in power, and importantly for landscape architecture, Stones believed that a new form of expert was needed who could infiltrate public decision-making bodies and influence the outcomes of decisions that impacted on landscape values.
The notion of seeding an individual or a profession within public bureaucracies was not necessarily new for the time. Architect and landscape architect John Oldham in Western Australia was from the late 1950s operating in the Public Works Department (WA) whilst at the same time being engaged in conservation groups in that state. In some senses this was a somewhat contradictory position because the PWD WA was involved in some of the largest infrastructure projects of the time and the corresponding destruction of landscape that this entailed was significant. Contemporaries who were also highly influential included Bruce Mackenzie (NSW), Marion Blackwell (WA), Allan Correy (SA and NSW) to name a few. All these practitioners found justifications for a role for landscape architecture in association with infrastructure whilst juggling the often competing interests of conservation and development. But less frequently were such practitioners involved in activism per se, because activism often operates outside formal structures of professions and institutions, instead favoring the anti-establishment and subversive activities. It was Stones’ activist role that cast him in the realm of utopia and his vision was that the profession of landscape architecture could be inclusive of activism when required. This would be optimistic in any situation, but it was particularly so given that landscape architecture was in its nascent years and invariably practitioners had to compromise if commissions were to be scored and if territory was to be won.

**Stones and landscapes for housing in Australia**

Activism aside, Ellis Stones also expressed his utopian ideas within the designed landscapes he advocated and had built. The landscapes he designed were underpinned by attempts to evoke a particular image of the Australian natural environment within an urban context. He stated that as a result of being injured during World War I and thus not being able to venture into natural environments as readily as he would have liked, it was necessary to try and bring nature into the city so that he could fulfill such contact (Stones c1970, p4). Ellis Stones attempted to express the sensorial qualities of the Australian bush via the materiality of such places. For example, in his designs he directed contractors to bury underground a considerable portion of natural stone boulders so as to aid the perception that the boulder had always been situated in that location. Of his abilities to craft in stone famed garden designer Edna Walling (1895-1973) in 1938 was moved to write: “It is a rare thing, this gift for placing stones, and strange that a man possessing it should bear the name Stones – it should be easy to memorise” (Walling 2000, p76).

Stones was emphatic about appropriateness of design and the sometimes ‘understated’ character of his work as exemplified in his writing in his book *Australian Garden Design* (Stones 1971). The design documentation for many of his landscape projects was not always extensively completed, instead favoring the personal direction of works on site. However, due to a short partnership with architect and landscape architect Ronald Rayment that lasted about 18 months around 1970-71, there exists a small collection of landscape projects, the plans for which contain relatively extensive documentation. Drawn by landscape architects employed within the office of Stones and Rayment Landscape Architects such as Nell Rickard, these plans are worthy of examination for determining evidence of the firm’s utopian thinking.

Some of the most important work by Ellis Stones came in association with the expansion of the project housing market in the 1960s. Project housing, as a concept, had emerged earlier in the 1950s with established architecture firms such as Grounds, Romberg & Boyd’s work for Contemporary Homes Pty Ltd but as the boom years rolled into the 1960s firms like A V Jennings and Lend Lease
Homes saw a more rapid expansion (O’Callaghan and Pickett 2012, p72&85). As competition in project housing intensified firms like Pettit and Sevitt in New South Wales entered the market and sensitivity to ‘landscape’ formed a part of the sales pitch. They used landscape architect Bruce Mackenzie to ensure the protection of existing vegetation and the sympathetic introduction of new plant materials. In Victoria, it was the project-house builders Merchant Builders who took a lead role in the alternative housing market and they proved to be a crucial influence on Ellis Stones as he became their landscape architect. Their cluster housing schemes, Winter Park (1970-1974), Elliston (from 1970) and Vermont Park (from 1977 with TRACT Consultants) revolutionised planning and design in the housing industry in the state of Victoria (Latreille 1990, p213-221; Saniga 2012, pp109-114 & pp243-246; O’Callaghan and Pickett 2012, pp130-145) and it was the corresponding landscape ethos of Ellis Stones that helped give shape and form to a new ideology.

In 1976, a book co-authored by John Paterson, David Yencken and Graeme Gunn titled A Mansion, or no house (1976) made a significant contribution to discussion and debate about the state of the art in residential subdivision. Yencken and Gunn were associated by way of Merchant Builders – Yencken was co-owner of the firm with John Ridge, and Gunn was one of the company’s most important architects. It is in the discussion of open space that we see a serious attempt to think through the impact of planning regulations on the quantity and quality in the provision of open space particularly in regard to cluster subdivisions; ideas for multi-use, community spaces, new models for walkways, landscape buffers and play spaces (Paterson, Yencken and Gunn 1976, pp69-79). Ultimately, it is the propositions that this book provides that indicate how seamlessly the stand point of Ellis Stones was in responding to this new approach to suburban housing. A key argument put forward was that it was not the quantity of open space, but the quality that was important, hence the concerted attempts by Merchant Builders to have their open spaces carefully and thoughtfully designed (by Stones). The basis of the new approach was that the provision of open space should be “viewed more broadly and flexibly” (Paterson, Yencken and Gunn 1976, p74). In parks and new subdivision and their related open spaces, landscape was to become the unifying element heralding a new appreciation for its importance (Stones 1971, p192). Stones emphasised the usefulness of trees and how in working around existing trees in residential subdivisions a minimal amount of expenditure was thus required to landscape the development (Stones 1971, p147).

Ellis Stones was community-spirited and his designs were often low key and contained a sense of honesty and appreciation for usefulness and design simplicity. The incorporation of a ‘ride’ at the back of the first houses at Elliston saw the creation of a narrow linear open space at the rear boundary of groups of approximately ten houses, effectively eliminating rear property boundary fences in the process. The ride provided pedestrian access to a larger open space connected to an adjacent creek, but it also provided the opportunity to engender a sense of community in the subdivision. The ride is long since gone, but an existing plan of the ride by ‘Stones and Rayment, Landscape Architects’ for client Merchant Builders Pty Ltd bears essential information on its detailing which is correspondingly substantiated in photographic evidence (plan Stones and Rayment 19.10.1970; see photograph Latreille 1990, p201). It consisted of a garden easement of variable width ranging from approximately 3 to 10 metres. The ride was largely defined by a narrow course of pebbles under a metre in width and these pebbles were intended to imitate a dry creek bed. Across the ‘Pebbled Dry Creek Bed’ were three slabs of timber at various positions which appear to have
been intended as mock river crossing points. Most of the surface treatment was proposed as wood chip or tan bark, with two patches of lawn in total occupying only a quarter of the site. A barbeque and seating area at the lowest point, adjacent the point at which the ride spilled out onto the larger adjacent park, functioned as a place for informal congregation and picnicking. Throughout the ride provision was made for childrens’ play in an informal manner; timber climbing piles, log stiles, a see saw, and a grassed mound, all low-key interventions but nonetheless firmly communal in their intended effect.

Stones believed that children should play in spaces that were disorganised and thus able to be shaped by people. Failure to provide such flexible, informal and open-ended play opportunities he believed would deprive youth of an essential need and ultimately produce the next generation of the city’s vandals (Ford 1999 interview). His proposals for high rise housing commission flats in Melbourne challenged the State Housing Commission of Victoria when he proposed the ‘cave’, a space that was a communal pseudo-shed, enabling young people the space to build or fix bikes (Dexter in Latreille 1990, p198). His ‘bush playgrounds’ around Melbourne, especially Wilson Reserve, Ivanhoe (1968), were progressive in the context of the 1960s and 1970s preference for steel swings and steel slides for it included timber climbing structures and extensive timber climbing stumps throughout (Stones [no date] “Proposed Landscaping For Wilson Reserve ‘Detail of Children’s (sic) Playground’”). By way of family circumstances Stones found himself designing and building playgrounds within the grounds of the Waihopai School, Invercargill, in 1969, along with a small ornamental pool and other playgrounds such as the Gladstone Scout Den also 1969 (Latreille 1990,
pp195-196). Within the space of two decades his approach to designing play areas that were aimed at a closer union of people and Australian landscape, of malleable and flexible play spaces, and importantly, of empowering the public to use public space in a manner that was somewhat utopian for the time, became state of the art in landscape management (Jeavons and Hitchmough 1994, p525) and a model to which others, such as Sydney landscape architecture Bruce Mackenzie, aspired (Mackenzie 2011, pp39-53; Mackenzie 2012 pers com). Ultimately, the expanding landscape architecture profession of the 1970s was championed by the likes of Mackenzie who argued for ‘alternative parkland’ (Mackenzie 1979, pp19-27) as recompense for over a century of landscape design that had been European inspired.

Beyond these ideas for public and semi-public open space, Stones attempted to design many private gardens (and particularly those within Merchant Builder projects) with similar intent of tactility, immersion, and contact with natural elements. The initial set of houses at Elliston were designed by various architects including Graeme Gunn, Charles Duncan, Jackson and Walker and McGlashan and Everist and of the 250 houses planned for the subdivision an initial 70 were constructed. The landscape design for many of these houses was completed by Stones and Rayment, Landscape Architects and a small number of plans provide evidence of the design approach (plan Stones and Rayment 26.08.1970). The planting palette consisted almost entirely of Australian native plant species often placed within generous garden beds but also providing for eucalypts and pittosporum set within lawn. In courtyard spaces there was the occasional use of non-Australian plants such as pear species and these provided deciduous plants close to the house presumably to admit winter sunlight to internal spaces while also providing contrast. Paving was a mix of consolidated aggregate and concrete or brick pavers. Timber steps and retaining walls were often hinged to outcrops of fieldstone. Importantly, there was provision for timber seats constructed of railway sleepers and arranged around courtyards or alongside paths extending into the garden. The relatively simple device of providing a seat was perhaps a self-conscious device imploring the future residents to take time to sit in and to enjoy the garden.

Commercial and institutional work

In the early 1970s the Stones and Rayment partnership resulted in commissions at commercial and institutional levels. The fact that Stones had become associated with Rayment was a significant factor in Stones’ career, allowing him to expand into more complex designs involving drainage, level changes, and constructed and engineered elements in general. Prior to this association, Ellis Stones had predominantly directed contractors on site and had figured-out construction detailing as work progressed. In addition to Elliston, Stones and Rayment, were landscape architects for significantly larger commissions such as the Zoological Gardens, Melbourne including the Refreshments Area (November 1971), Gibbon Island (January 1972), and the Kangaroo and Wallaby Enclosure (April 1973). They also completed various private and semi-private housing and commercial projects including a private hospital in Camberwell (1970) and a new warehouse and office laboratory in Preston (1970). Three projects, of varying type and scale, warrant particular attention for the tangible evidence of Stones’ ideas and methods for attempting to bring people in direct contact with natural materials.

In June 1970 Stones and Rayment Landscape Architects prepared plans for a roof-top garden at 81 Collins Street Melbourne for a ‘B Adler’. It is not clear the extent to which this project was
constructed as it does not exist in 2013 but the design as drawn (plan Stones and Rayment 02.06.1970) consisted of large stone boulders (volcanic or quartz field stone was the office’s preferred choice) rising to approximately a metre in height above the floor level of the roof. Masonry walls retained soil in places and the plants included *Juniperus sabina*, and bamboo among ground cover plants. The intended effect is not unlike that of a garden constructed firmly on ground level, yet as a garden proposed atop the roof of a 6-story brick building, one ponders the fate of such a scheme had it indeed been built given issues of loading and drainage. Setting practicalities aside, the design as a hypothetical case in point demonstrates a kind of belligerent approach to naturalism which in a sense reflects what Goad coined as ‘artless naturalism’ (Goad 2002, p239) denoting practitioners from this era who went to great lengths to attempt designs that were facsimiles of nature in pursuit of the ideal of putting people ‘back in touch’ with nature.

Figure 4: Ellis Stones on site photographing the constructed garden that attempted to bury the South Lawn underground car park at the University of Melbourne, circa 1972. Source: image courtesy Liz Anderson (nee Stones) and Steve Junghenn, photographer unknown.

At the South Lawn landscape at the University of Melbourne, which is documented extensively in *Making Landscape Architecture in Australia* (2012, pp262-267) Stones designed an even larger scaled version of the proposed landscape for 81 Collins Street. It was constructed in 1972-73 in an attempt to conceal a 3 metre concrete wall of an underground car park. An image of Stones photographing this project is not only telling in terms of the scale and quality of the design, but an important
photographic record of him in contact with his own creative output (Saniga 2012, pp265). The design incorporates massive quartz boulders, bedded into the earth and interlaced with Australian native plants. Timber slab seating was perched on the sloped surface with aromatic plants alongside, an approach Stones roundly promoted in both public and private gardens alike (Stones 1976, pp67-73). The rawness in Stones’ approach in effectively burying a massive concrete structure in soil, rock and plants suggests an aesthetic approach that was unerringly combative in response to the onset of infrastructure and what is often a corresponding net loss of natural environments.

In April 1970, Stones and Rayment, Landscape Architects were commissioned to prepare a master plan and landscape design for the Croydon Town Park at the Shire of Croydon Municipal Offices in the outer eastern suburbs of Melbourne. The design includes extensive planting, paths, car park, seating and lawn, but they also designed a ‘Campfire Circle Clearing’ (Stones and Rayment 20.04.1970) in the southern-most part of the scheme adjacent to the boundary of an industrial estate. This location was perhaps the furthest from the official municipal buildings and was on the periphery of the parklands and adjacent a football oval. As drawn in plan, the campfire site was a
circular area of approximately 15 metres in diameter and was tucked into a sizeable earth mound thus forming a kind of nature-inspired amphitheater along the northern side of the space. Adjacent the site of the campfire area and directly opposite the amphitheater was a ‘Wilderness Nature Area’ consisting of a mown clearing surrounded by clumps of Australian native plant material and pedestrian paths still in existence today. A likely scenario might have included adults and children, perhaps even footballers, sitting around a fire and being surrounded by native plantings and a bush-like setting.

Inspection of the site today reveals the campfire may never have eventuated. Regardless, the design as drawn demonstrates Rayment and Stones Landscape Architects’ community-inspired landscape architecture in the civic context. Stones’ belief that youth needed to be able to have access to public spaces and landscapes in a manner that the individual could interact with nature was beyond more traditional forms of passive recreation. It was reflective of an attempt to design particular kinds of social spaces in typical suburban settings. This kind of space was one based on another time and place, linked to Stones’ own experiences of war, camaraderie, camping and direct experience with the Australian rural. In the suburban context of Croydon, the notion of sitting around an open fire is indicative of aspirations for a space within which people can share ideas and develop bonds. This is suggestive of a raw expression of the utopian ideals that underpinned Stones’ aspirations to alter the trajectories common to civic life at that time.

**Conclusion**

Ellis Stones died in 1975 having inspired a generation of landscape architects and helped forge a profession upon grounds which included highly experimental and ideologically driven design philosophies. Landscapes designed as Australian ‘bush gardens’ have not always stood up well from the point of view of change over time largely due to the lack of rigorous management regimes in the public realm. However, the groundswell in environmental design thinking that can be linked to the founding of a profession of landscape architecture has precipitated a fundamental acceptance that the designed landscape has a key role to play in planning and designing environment for Australian suburbia. For example, the contemporary ‘master-planned estate’ is inclusive of the ‘master-planned community’, an important precedent for which was the cluster subdivisions of the firm Merchant Builders. Their ideas for public open space played a key role in advancing social and community engineering. In a contemporary sense, the rawness in approach and the utopian visions for community open spaces that Stones and other key founders of the AILA brought to landscape design may seem timid or naïve in the context of contemporary design and the evolving styles associated with new subdivisions. However it is also worth considering that much of the infrastructure that underpins contemporary design is constructed from materials that have previously not been put to the test. One ponders the likelihood that a humble basalt boulder or remnant native planting, mauled and depleted as it may be over time, may actually still offer a landscape experience in the decades to come when more elaborate devices may have been replaced, removed or simply deteriorated.
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