Urban Parks, Urban Icons?
The case of Bicentennial Park in Sydney

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This paper explores the question of how urban parks function as urban icons. It examines Bicentennial Park in Homebush Bay, 12 km west of the Sydney Central Business District (CBD) as a case study. Bicentennial Park was planned and designed between 1983 and 1988, a time when Australia, and its cities in particular, grappled with tensions between celebrating achievements of two hundred years of European settlement and redressing the cultural and ecological harm wrought by those achievements. The research focuses on a review of material related to the design and promotion of the park, and early reviews of the park. The discussion explores the influence of specific ideas about the city and ecology on the transformations of use, materiality, and physical form of the land that became Bicentennial Park. Findings reveal that Bicentennial Park at Homebush Bay was conceived as an awkwardly scripted design, which in turn reflects a convergence of urban planning initiatives, intensifying environmental awareness and ideological tensions within the then nascent Australian-based profession of landscape architecture. The findings also reveal that, in this case, aesthetic innovation is not the basis of iconicity; more significant are the ways in which the form and materiality of a park design conveys shifts in ideas about the city and its relationship to ‘nature,’ and for landscape architecture, ways of practicing design.

Key Words: urban parks; urban icons; Bicentennial Park; Australian landscape architecture

Introduction

“Linear parks are urban icons!” A clear enough pronouncement by a delegate at the 2015 Australian Institute of Landscape Architects conference, but on reflection, I realised that it was more problematic than it seemed. While it is true that the particular linear parks this delegate referred to, the High Line in New York City and the Goods Line in Sydney, quickly have gained iconic status, not all parks become icons, or iconic. Why not? How does any park become iconic, and why? Why does it matter that parks become iconic at all? In part, it matters because parks are more than design projects: they are cultural expressions, specific to time and place. Great urban parks—think Central Park, think High Line—can be considered iconic because their designs capture a social and
political need for public space not yet known or articulated by the general public, and in doing so resonate and project social values in powerful spatial and visual terms. Iconic parks are places where new social values are on display, through their materiality and spatial form as well as the modes of social activity these parks encourage and/or allow. This nexus of spatial form and social activity can elevate both the park and its host city to inclusion in a broader “global urban narrative” (Ethington and Schwartz, 2006), and it is in this context that parks may become iconic.

Urban parks are influenced by myriad factors: social values and practices; political will and ideology; economic regimes; environmental attributes; and the technological capacity to fix environmental, social, economic and structural problems. Urban parks thus play important roles as cities reconceptualise and reorder their physical and social fabric, a role they undertake primarily in spatial and visual terms. This primacy of the visual and spatiality of parks renders them ideal candidates for iconic roles in their cities, particularly during periods of significant urban transitions. The form and fabric of parks can inflect and project shifting cultural values and meaning in ways that are readily accessible to the public, and accelerate changes in social practice. Careful reading of the visual culture, that is the form and fabric of parks, as well as representations of these parks, can extend our appreciation of urban parks as agents of spatial and social change within the broad texture of urban fabric and culture.

This paper explores the iconic role of urban parks, with particular attention to the question of why and how parks or aspects/elements of parks come to represent a city at large and its culture, and how, in the process, parks become iconic (or not). The research presented here focuses on a case study of Bicentennial Park in Homebush Bay, 12 km west of the Sydney Central Business District (CBD). Since the 1980s, park making in Sydney has played a critical role as the state of New South Wales has jostled to elevate and sustain Sydney’s status as a global city. One particular catalyst for this was the lead-up to the 1988 Bicentennial Celebrations in Australia, which provided incentive for a range of public domain projects. Many Bicentennial projects, including parks, were implemented across Australian cities and towns, supported by special Bicentennial funds provided by the Australian state and commonwealth governments. A few Bicentennial projects in NSW, notably Darling Harbour in Sydney and Bicentennial Park at Homebush Bay, have become iconic reminders of this era—for different reasons. Both received funding from state and federal governments, and although quite distinct in program, both were intended as urban revitalisation projects. While Darling Harbour is now in the midst of an extensive overhaul, Bicentennial Park has endured, for the most part retaining, if not in fact amplifying, the initial intentions for its role in the city.

The research focuses on a review of material related to the early design and promotion of the park, and early reviews of the park. The discussion explores the influence of specific ideas about the city and nature on the outcomes at the park, specifically the transformations of use, materiality, and form. Findings reveal that Bicentennial Park at Homebush Bay was conceived as a tightly scripted design, which in turn reflects a convergence of urban planning initiatives, intensifying environmental awareness and ideological tensions within the then nascent Australian-based profession of landscape architecture, all specific to both time and place. The paper concludes with observations on the park as an icon which mobilised particular ideas about the city and nature, at a specific point in the history of both Sydney and the profession of landscape architecture in Australia.
Historical Background

Bicentennial Park is located in Homebush Bay, a large estuary on the south edge of the Parramatta River, which is fed by Haslam’s Creek and Powell’s Creek. In the late 18th and 19th centuries Homebush Bay was settled by Europeans who farmed the area. From the late 19th to the mid-20th century, several state industrial and defense operations occupied the area, including a naval armaments depot, the NSW Abattoir, and the NSW State Brick Works. From the mid-20th century, much of Homebush Bay was reclaimed to accommodate expanding industrial and manufacturing businesses. (Sydney Olympic Park Authority, 2015) By the 1970s, as Sydney expanded more densely and westward from the central business district towards Parramatta, Homebush Bay was highly a degraded landscape, polluted with toxic soils and water.

Bicentennial Park emerged from a series of NSW government initiatives focused on transforming Homebush Bay from a degraded industrial area into an economic hub. The first of these was a 1978 decision to construct a sports stadium and recreational facility at Homebush Bay. A 1980 review of this proposal had two major outcomes: the conversion of the stadium to an indoor sports centre and the excision of 50 hectares of wetlands and a 30 hectare rubbish tip from the proposed sports facility. The NSW State Sport Centre was completed in 1984, and was followed by the development of the Australian Business Centre. The 80 hectares of excised lands — wetlands and tip—was designated Bicentennial Park in 1983, and in 2001 the three projects were integrated into the broader mosaic of Sydney Olympic Park, which today comprises 440 hectares, and includes the Olympic urban core and surrounding parklands. Collectively, the three 1980s urban projects reflect distinct shifts in the understanding of Sydney as a city: firstly, Homebush and Parramatta as both the geographic and demographic centre of the Sydney metropolitan region; secondly, a growing recognition of the importance of ecology and ‘nature’ to the city; and thirdly, the expanding role of government in urban rejuvenation projects.

Beyond these broad factors, Bicentennial Park also had a specific motivating force—a 1978 study undertaken by students at the newly established Environmental Studies Centre at Macquarie University, titled ‘A Bicentennial Park for Sydney, Homebush Bay: a report.’ Under guidance from the NSW Planning and Environment Commission, the study focused on remnant wetlands and bird habitat. (Crosweller et al, p. 173) The study concluded that the potential of the site lay in its ecological significance, specifically the extent and rarity of the mangrove wetland and its potential to provide recreational facilities for the region. (Eskell et al, 1978) Supported by the local councils adjacent to the proposed park, Auburn, Strathfield and Concord, the park was approved and funded jointly by Commonwealth and State governments in 1983 as a Bicentennial project. The main direction of the 1978 report—that redevelopment of the Homebush Bay area presented an opportunity to conserve ecologically significant habitats and species—was a cornerstone of the Homebush Bay Regional Environmental Plan (SREP 24) which was gazetted in September 1993, in tandem with the processing of the bid to host the 2000 Olympics. This is significant in that SREP 24 established a framework for coordinated development across the area, and thus was an instrument for integrating ecological, social and economic concerns.

The intended significance of the park was reflected in a number of ways in its early years of planning and development. The opening of the park was designated as the site of the first ceremonial event on 1 January 1988, opening the Bicentennial year celebrations, with the Prime Minister Bob Hawke...
presiding. (Haskell, 1988) The construction process, which started in 1983, involved myriad state level agencies: it was led by the Landscape Section of the NSW Public Works Department in junction with an Interim Management Committee, which included the NSW Premier’s Department; the Royal Botanic Gardens; Centennial Park; the NSW Department of Environment and Planning; a geographic ecologist from Macquarie University; and representatives from the three adjacent local councils: Auburn; Strathfield and Concord. (Anon, 1985) Cost was another indicator of significance: initially estimated at $8 million, costs finished at approximately $12.5 million. Finally, the Bicentennial Park Act, gazetted in 1988, led to the formation of the Bicentennial Park Trust, whose first strategic plan for the park spelled out the international significance of the park, stating that, “...the worldwide significance of estuarine and wetlands means the Trust’s responsibility goes beyond the park boundaries,” and went on to focus on global outcomes of decisions, and the opportunity to contribute research to a global network. (Bicentennial Park Trust 1992, p. 2)

In addition to the specific historical context of the park itself and its role in the Bicentennial Celebrations, broader social and political developments had a significant influence on the park. A full discussion of these factors is beyond the scope of this paper, but noteworthy are the contemporaneous formation of the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects (1966), the establish of a bachelor’s landscape architecture program at UNSW in 1974, and associated early efforts to establish professional practice. Other significant factors include the rise of tourism as a significant pillar for the Australian economy, the expanded environmental legislation and the rise of ecology in Australia, especially urban ecology, and its role in mapping and communicating urban environmental conditions.

Placing Urban Icons in Urban History

In their introduction to the Urban Icon Atlas project, Philip Ethington and Vanessa Swchartz refer to urban icons as a “conceptual grid for studying the intersection of visual culture and urban history.” (Ethington and Schwartz, 2006 p.1) Central to their atlas project is the role of icons in the history of cities, particularly the ways in which urban icons have the capacity to project their cities into a global urban discourse. (Ethington and Schwartz, 2006, p. 6) Thus scholarship focused on urban icons explores questions about the formation and role of urban identity through the study of specific visual elements—that is, icons-- especially those which have played a critical role in urban history. This approach opens opportunities for developing a more visually oriented urban history (Ethington and Schwartz, 2006, p. 8), and parallels the growing importance of a spatial orientation within urban history. It has great relevance to the scholarship of urban parks, in as far as it helps to contextualise parks within their specific urban location and culture. (Ethington and Schwartz, 2006, p.11)

Bicentennial Park as a Spatial Fix

Proponents described the park as a “unique project,” which would “enhance the urban environment, providing much needed parkland in this region of Sydney as well as conserving an ecologically important natural environment and educational resource.” (Anon, 1985) Three distinct aims are embedded here: first, an overarching intent to provide a significant urban park in Sydney’s west; second the intention to re-form degraded land, and thirdly, the need to conserve significant wetlands for both intrinsic and extrinsic values. Each of these related to broader campaigns then
current in Sydney. The first, provision of parkland, was a response to the increasingly evident need
to alleviate the chronic political and socio-economic tension between the Sydney CBD and the
western suburbs, with the Sydney CBD consistently viewed as attracting more than its fair share of
resources. The second was recognition of the obligation to remediate the physical and ecological
degradation caused by urban industrial activity, activated in large part by the NSW Environmental
Planning and Assessment Act, passed in 1979. The third was related to the growing awareness of
the both need and opportunity to protect biodiversity and ecosystems, within and beyond the urban
area. That the park embodies these three concerns in concept, form and materiality demonstrates
that the creation of Bicentennial Park was much more than a stage for celebrations and recreation,
but rather a complex device of socio-spatial, economic and environmental urban transformation.

Looked at this way, Bicentennial Park was in effect a spatial fix, (Harvey 2006), in that it emerged out
of a suite of considered and related state government initiatives, to result in changes to the spatial
form, fabric, ecological functioning and social use of the land at Homebush Bay. Spatial fixes have
several dimensions, economic being foremost, (Harvey, 2006) but realising the economic benefits of
a spatial fix relies on a matrix of closely related social, visual, physical changes. A key role for
Bicentennial Park was the recalibration of the allocation of resources across the metropolitan region,
to tip the balance westward and in doing so mark the true centre of Sydney. This theme of social
justice —interpreted here as the equitable distribution and access of park land—recurred throughout
promotions and reviews of the park. For example, Lorna Harrison, the landscape architect for
Bicentennial Park, wrote in 1986 that the Bicentennial Park project was intended “to give to
that region of Sydney, indeed to all of Sydney, a grand Bicentennial Park ....” (author’s emphasis,
Harrison, 1986, p. 17). The journey to achieving this role was reviewed by and advocated for in
various media. As the park took shape, alongside other Bicentennial Projects, reviews in the Sydney
Morning Herald highlighted persistent regional inequities, with titles such as “An instant garden in
the city, a long wait in the west,” and “Darling Harbour the Government’s pet gets $200m” (Aubin,
1987 a; Aubin 1987b). Aubin portrayed the imbalance in visual and quantitative language:
Bicentennial Park received 55,000 small and 90 percent native trees in 1987; while Darling Harbour
received 850 large trees (one large enough to be personified as Fred the Fig), painting an image of a
garden of mature trees, ready-made for instant enjoyment, and the garden of neglect in the west, an
icon of inequity.

After the opening of the park, the discourse took a positive stance as it shifted to film as a medium
to promote the Homebush Bay area as Sydney’s urban centre. Again, visual language was a key to
advocating for the new iconic role of the new park. Video productions commissioned by the
Bicentennial Park Trust in 1993—the year Sydney won the bid for the 2000 Olympics, and the year
SREP 24 was gazetted, described the park as a “Fitting choice ...In the heart of metropolitan Sydney.
. . . Bicentennial Park has become a magnificent sanctuary in our city,” with the term ‘city’ open
ended enough to be interpreted as Sydney urban region. (Pearman, 1993) Indeed, eight years later,
when Bicentennial Park had been incorporated into Sydney Olympic Park, Bicentennial Park was
described as the “Heartland of Sydney,” “Golden West,” and “a meeting place for all people of
Australia.” (Bisset et al, 2001)

If Bicentennial Park was to be a central sanctuary for a more mature, 200 year old Sydney, it was do
so in established, artistic terms, and the re-formation of degraded land at Bicentennial Park had a
distinct focus on visual and spatial culture. Lorna Harrison, the lead landscape architect, was
emphatic about the need to create “a grand Bicentennial Park … in the grand urban tradition of Centennial Park.” (Harrison, 1986, p. 17) This ideological intent was echoed in a 1984 review of the park in *Australian Natural History* which made specific comparisons to Centennial Park, noting that Centennial Park was conceived in part to provide a place for the people of Sydney to recreate—to promenade and to play. (O’Brien and Thorman, 1984, p. 295) This statement acknowledged that Centennial Park was a landscape sculpted in specific ways, to encourage desirable spatial practices and appropriate behaviours, and implied that Bicentennial Park—as Sydney’s second grand urban park—would play the same role in the city. Both Harrison and Ron Powell, the project manager, highlighted design principles employed in the park which linked it to the ‘grand tradition,’ namely, geometry, focal points and axes, (Harrison, 1986; Crosweller, 1990, p174) but neither emphasised the more specific design devices employed to articulate the role of the new park in relation to the city. At Centennial Park, which was designed as a respite from the city, and a distinct contrast to the experience of the surrounding city, design devices included a grand drive with stately avenues of trees, a landscape cleared to open expanses of sky, lawn and water, and a grand all-encompassing fence, punctuated with imposing gates. The main design device of Bicentennial Park was the *internal* contrast, specifically between the 50 ha of ‘natural’ wetlands and the developed park, constructed over 30 hectares of land fill; second in importance to this were two axes. An east/west axis, featured a canal of 200 jets of water, and culminated at its high point in a treillage. Both the treillage and the fountain became important visual registers for this portion of the park, centring and connecting the park in relation to its surrounds, especially the new Sports Centre just to the southwest and Concord station to the southeast. A north/south axis, planted with an avenue of trees, served the ‘mangrove vista,’ a means of focusing attention from afar on the wetlands. (Harrison, 1986)

Ideological tensions also underpinned and motivated the design aims and devices of the park. The aspiration to emulate grand urban traditions was more than a design statement; Harrison was taking aim at what she referred to as “Bib and Bub and the Bad Banksia Man”:

…the Bicentennial Park does seek to re-establish the great landscape traditions established in history and in the early years of Australia. Traditions which have been rejected emphatically by the Sydney School of Landscape Design and which have resulted in poor representations of Australian bushland located inappropriately within the urban fabric; a lack of reference to an historical continuum which has led to design solutions which pay little heed to the articulation of external space and the planning and design of landscape for artistic effect. (Harrison, 1986, p. 14)

Harrison turned to visual and spatial terms to project and to establish the new park both in defiance of the then emergent Sydney School of Landscape Design (sometimes referred to as the “Nuts and Berries School,”) and within the established—and global—artistic canon of park-making. Harrison was not alone in this campaign for insuring the artistic reputation of landscape design: the day Bicentennial Park opened, 1 January, 1988, John Haskell echoed this theme in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. He noted the distinction between this park and recent parks, and emphasised the fact that Bicentennial Park referenced great traditions of park making. Haskell also explained that “All buildings have a deliberately inflated monumental quality, adopting post-modern design features, a no less legitimate device today than the classical conceits…” (Haskell, 1988) Two years later, the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects extended this campaign in volume 12 of their journal,
Landscape Australia; featuring the fountain of Bicentennial Park on the cover, and placing the article about the new park alongside articles about India, with a photograph of the Taj Mahal offering an explicit visual link between old and new canal and fountains as key design devices. The same issue also featured articles about remediation of brownfields in Hong Kong, and Parc de la Villette, which had just opened on the outskirts of Paris.

Ecology, Identity and a New Type of Park

In her explanation of the park design, Harrison pointed to the opportunity “to create an exciting and unique contrast between man-made [sic] and natural landscape within the framework of an urban park.” (Harrison, 1986, p. 14) The contrast that emerged, between the 50ha of dense mangrove wetland and a more traditional park constructed on landfill, has become one the park’s key distinctive qualities—so much so that reviewers identified it as a new type of park in Sydney. This fact was foreshadowed by O’Brien and Thorman, who in their 1984 article in Australian Natural History, explained: “Bicentennial Park will differ from the old in that much of it will be managed for conservation rather than the sole purpose of providing public recreation.” (1984, p. 291) After opening, a review in Australian Society described the park as “a different type,” and the park elements as whimsical. (McConville, 1988, 49) This acknowledged, if lightly, changes to cultural value and social needs over the 100 years between two celebrations of European settlement in Australia, but omitted any reference to the value of this area to Aboriginal culture. Nonetheless, it marked an important shift, a shift influenced greatly by the direction set by the 1987 report by Eskell, which stated,

It cannot be emphasised too strongly that the Homebush Bay Area is, in many ways, unique in the variety and combination of natural resources it contains. If such resources are to be fully utilized without their continued survival being endangered, then human use—whether of an educational or recreational nature—needs to be balanced very carefully against ecological considerations, with the latter being the overriding factor. (Eskell et al, 1978, p. 10)

As a result, the focus on ecological habitat dominated portrayals of the value and importance of the new park. For example, the 1993 promotional video produced by the Bicentennial Trust spelled out the ways in which Bicentennial Park was more than a recreation area: with 60% ‘natural’ areas, it was hailed as an oasis, a sanctuary; with the role of the wetlands in the economy and global research highlighted. This “mangrove mania” became the mantra for the park: in 2001, the second video produced by the Trust, described the park as a locus dedication and expertise of conservation, and stating that “world survival depends” on this “natural wonderland.” (Bisset, 2001) Other park promotional material also focused on the wetlands, using bold and engaging woodcut images of the mangrove fauna the primary images used on the website. This imagery, repeated across print and digital, assisted with the cultural construction of the mangroves—and by association, Bicentennial Park—as an icon of conservation in an urban context.

Conclusion

Bicentennial Park is a complex urban icon, which took shape in a web of political, economic and cultural shifts underway in the 1980s in Sydney. The Park is an icon of a specific urban moment: the
expanding environmental movement; of specific (and contested) national commemorations, and a specific intention to catalyse a broader spatial fix. The struggle for recognition of Sydney’s new westward centre, expressed through repeated references to underfunding for the park at Homebush, and demonstrated in the favouritism displayed for Darling Harbour through more money and more mature trees, makes it somewhat ironic, that in the end, Darling Harbour has been the difficult child, and requiring rehabilitation, while Bicentennial Park remained a seed for what is now Sydney Olympic Park.

It has been shown elsewhere that environmental studies and ecologists who prepare them can promote new framing of cities, and in doing so convert ecological conservation projects to political projects. (Lachmund 2011, p. 206) At Bicentennial Park, the form and design devices in the park were material expressions of the argument for an artistic and historically grounded approach to urban landscape design, in effect attempts to articulate and reassert traditional cultural values in visual and artistic terms. More importantly, nature was framed in specific ways to achieve specific aims. The pairing of rarity and uniqueness with the role of the park as an international habitat asserted a global role for the park, as well as its makers and its managers. Thus Bicentennial Park is iconic in as far as it symbolises the integration of the ecological fix with the spatial fix, at a specific moment in history and in a specific place.

Finally, Bicentennial park played a specific and significant role in demonstrating how this integration of wetland conservation could be achieved as a ‘grand urban tradition’, a role made image-able by both the extent of mangroves in the park and the wetland based imagery used in promotional films and on the park’s website and brochures. Characterised by bold and simple contrast between ‘natural’ and ‘constructed’ landscapes, with axes connecting the park to its surrounds, the form of the park suggested, if crudely, changing ideas of the city—specifically that urban and the natural could co-exist, and that an urban park could be a place of ecological conservation and in doing so, contribute to global survival. This aligns with what Ethington and Schwartz refer to as the role of “distinctive cultures of destruction or preservation on a city’s visual history.” (Ethington and Schwartz, 2006, p.11) In as far as Bicentennial Park helped to establish ecological conservation as a cultural driver for urban park-making in Australia, a permanent legacy of the Bicentennial Park at Homebush Bay is the expanded value placed on ecological conservation as the basis of urban parks in Australia. This dimension of iconicity for Bicentennial Park has particular resonance for the Australian profession of landscape architecture: as Andrew Saniga notes in his survey of the landscape projects undertaken by government departments in the 1970s and 1980s –like Bicentennial Park—established foundations for both the role of landscape architects and approaches to sustainable design. (Saniga 2012, 201-214)

At the same however, the park presented limited inventiveness in terms of design; rather, it relied on an awkward and unresolved relationship between environmental problem solving, ecological conservation and landscape design. Frustration with this instrumental approach, typical of landscape architecture of the time, became the basis of calls for more creative, alternate approaches to landscape, approaches which would integrate ecology and creativity in more meaningful and innovative ways. (Corner, J. 1997. 40)

Is Bicentennial Park iconic? Yes, in as far as its form and materiality endure as temporally specific and awkward expression of an attempt to resolve in design terms the tension between nature and
city. It is also iconic as a reminder of specific urban challenges of the 1980s, and specific political and cultural responses—responses which were not aesthetically innovative, but which initiated and registered significant shifts in ideas about the city.

References

Anon, 1985, Bicentennial Park Homebush Bay Newsletter, February. (Author’s collection)


