From Idealistic to Iconic Adelaide – an enduring nexus between urban plan and social identity

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Reformist ideals underpinned South Australia as a colonial endeavour and manifested from foundation in an enduring nexus between Adelaide’s urban plan and its social identity. During the first half of the nineteenth century Adelaide strove to stand out from a cohort of colonial cities established during a wave of Imperial expansion. It competed with cities in Australia, Canada, America and New Zealand for investment of population and capital from established powers looking to divest and expand.

From the outset two unique plans set Adelaide apart in the competitive colonial arena. Firstly Wakefield’s systematic colonisation theory, adopted by proponents of South Australia, promised a society with the perfect mix of social stability, financial opportunity and individual freedom. Secondly the City’s plan articulated over the appropriated landscape provided familiarity, order, public amenity and an egalitarian division of land. Although Adelaide’s structure echoed other colonial cities whose plans derived from common historical precedent, its carefully considered expression and signature ring of Park Lands immediately set it apart.

This paper will examine how this unique combination of a social and an urban plan transformed reformist ideals into what became an urban planning icon. An historical narrative will be presented based on the lived experience drawing on diverse archival sources and will include a discussion of how Adelaide’s city plan with its distinctive Park Land belt was incorporated into the ethos of a colonial community safeguarding this distinctive urban form beyond the foundation years of the colony.

Keywords Adelaide; Urban History; Park Lands; Wakefield
Adelaide’s plans

Fundamental to the history of South Australia and its capital Adelaide are two plans. A social plan for establishing a new colony and an urban plan from which the colony could grow. In a review of the 2007 National Heritage Listing of the ‘Adelaide Park Lands and City Layout’ David Jones wrote that “Adelaide and SA are iconographically identified by the symbol of the park lands and the plan” (Jones, 2010). Jones goes on to describe how civic activities and publicly expressed opinion continue to enhance perceptions of shared and ideal ‘ownership’ originating, he argues “in the very social democratic thesis that established the colony.” (Jones, 2010)

This paper will discuss concepts of social democracy and urban space in Adelaide and in particular the relationship between democratic thesis and urban plan that has enabled both to endure. Focussing on the early decades of Adelaide this research identifies how the city’s Park Lands sustained the lives early colonists while remaining an ideal of promised social democracy that was finally realised through conscious acts of preservation and protection. These observations focus on the years from proclamation in 1836 until the middle of the 1850s when the promises of public open space for recreation and ‘pleasure grounds’ were finally enacted in the Park Lands and town squares.

Appropriation and use of land in this discussion address a European Colonial perspective. Prior to colonisation, the Kaurna people, the original inhabitants of the Adelaide Plains, had established a complex relationship with this place. Stories of the Kaurna people, are bedded in the topography and urban landscape and the human understanding and relationship that they communicate are enduring. A discussion involving the sale of land in South Australia is contentious in the context of land ownership and the assumption of terra nullius. It is not within the scope of this paper to specifically address the indigenous story of South Australia, concepts of ‘owning’ or ‘belonging to’ country and how the land had previously been divided and understood by its indigenous people (Gara, 1998, Foster and Nettelbeck, 2012, Braithwaite et al., 2011, Edmonds, 2010). It is necessary to acknowledge this absurdly large enigma of appropriation and ownership before discussing the resultant urban landscape.

This paper draws on doctoral research examining the urban development of Adelaide, from the proclamation of South Australia as a British province in 1836, to the publication of a comprehensive survey of Adelaide known as the Smith Survey in 1881. By drawing on archival records of land sales and development, focussing on individual Town Acres and examining their role in the story of Adelaide, this larger project interrogates urban history through macro and micro lenses. By exposing the ‘unique and generic’ in the history of a modern city it is possible to discover the true nature of the urban subject as it engages with broader historical narratives (Murray and Mayne, 2001).

Plans for a new British Colony

In London, on the 15th August 1834 An Act to empower His Majesty to erect South Australia into a British Province or Provinces and to provide for the Colonisation and Government thereof (The South Australian Act) passed through both Houses of British Parliament allowing for the foundation of a new British Colony extending from the south coast of the continent of Australia to the Tropic of
Capricorn, between the 132nd and 141st degree of east longitude (Hodder, 1891). The plans and aspirations of many who had been agitating for the colony for over half a decade would finally be actioned (Pike, 1957, Price, 1924).

During the years leading up to the *South Australian Act*, Edward Gibbon Wakefield, social commentator and activist, proposed a system of colonisation that would enable the expansion of the British colonies in southern Australia providing population relief for an overcrowded metropolis, an expanded market for capital growth and access to primary resources, all it was surmised, without becoming a financial burden on Britain’s treasury (Lloyd Prichard, 1968, Pike, 1957). The theory for colonisation was based largely on achieving a balance between land, capital, development and labour. According to Wakefield, the revenue from fixed minimum price land sales could fund assisted emigration and ensure an ongoing supply of able-bodied workers. While the capitalist structure of owners and workers would transpose itself on the new colony it was predicted that the fluidity of a new colonial society would allow advancement and opportunity for all classes (Friends of the Turnbull Library, 1997, Mills, 1968, Pike, 1957).

Wakefield believed that self-funded colonies, should ultimately manage not only their land sales but “all matters pertaining to themselves” (Price, 1929). Unsurprisingly the initial proposal met with opposition from the Colonial Office where, as historian Grenfell Price wrote, the endeavour was objected to on the grounds that the colony was being proposed by “revolutionary dreamers” with motives of self-interest, would become a financial drain on Britain and would “erect within the British monarchy a government purely republican” (Price, 1929). In this spirit of ‘dreamy revolution’ the social character of Adelaide was born.

This colonisation plan fostered not only the idea of self-determination but also of a new beginning, a utopian ideal, a new identity and a new social order (Lloyd Prichard, 1968, Pike, 1957, Price, 1924). The plan appealed not only to the wealthy but to aspirational members of the middle and working classes. Many were drawn to the South Australian project by promotional meetings and publications, organised to garner public support and where collaborative associations were founded prior to 1836 ensuring collective ambition and expectations arrived intact in the new colony (Wakefield, 1838).

At the same time as plans for South Australia were being debated, recommendations for public open space, advocated by barrister and MP John Arthur Roebuck, were being debated in Britain’s Parliament bringing public awareness to new ideals of urban planning (Garnaut, 2008). While it is not apparent from his writing whether Wakefield considered the inclusion of public open space intrinsic to his social thesis, he did express views on the democratic provision of amenity in the form of parks.

Addressing the fear of universal suffrage, Wakefield described the provision of public parks and open space in poorer areas of London as a demonstration of concern for the good of all by what was an unrepresentative parliament (Wakefield, 1834). He saw this as a socially responsible and politically canny planning trend and this became the focus of Adelaide’s promised and realized urban form.
The physical plan

Transposing Adelaide from the numerous and varied imaginings of those invested in the project into a single urban expression on the landscape took imagination, resolve and judgment (Carter, 1996, Johnson and Langmead, 1986, Garnaut, 2006, Bunker, 1998). Wakefield wrote on the enormous task of bringing colonial ventures from social and economic plans into material urban and built forms stating:

….the leaders in planting a colony, not only have generally possessed, but always ought to possess, imagination to conceive, as well as judgement to execute (Wakefield, 1838).

Siting Adelaide was an important decision made by the surveying team and one for which Colonel Light was publicly scrutinized and critiqued but on which he stood firm. Positioned between the coast and the rising hills of the Mt Lofty Ranges, this central location with views in all directions played well into the rhetoric of equality and opportunity. Urban plans located alongside waterfronts or bounded by grand or advantageous topographical features are inevitably compromised between commercial interest and visual amenity (Hamer, 1990). Laid out on either side of the river Torrens and set back from the river to avoid flooding the site and layout all but prescribed a natural greenway reflecting immediately ideals of public space and free access to shared resources (Mugavin, 2004).

Surveyors led by Colonel William Light, tasked with bringing Adelaide into being, faced hardships and controversy with the necessary pragmatic resolve, imagination and foresight prescribed by Wakefield (Brand, 2004). The gridded layout including public squares and a belt of park land around its perimeter remains one of the few intact examples of an historical shift in urban planning ideas that would manifest in the Garden City Movement at the beginning of the 20th century (Garnaut and Round, 2006).

The plan of Adelaide as drawn combined familiar form with new planning ideas in a contained urban environment whose physical boundaries would guarantee capital investment. On paper the plan provided opportunity in every quadrant of the city for views, to parks or squares and the greenway along the river ensured an accessible water supply without the risk of curtailed access or amenity by private investors or government.

Plans and patterns of appropriation

Examining initial land selection shows where early investors and land agents perceived potential in the city’s plan. Prior to 1837 Preliminary Land Orders had been purchased from the Colonial Office in London. These orders entitled each investor to an eighty acre country selection plus one town acre and were purchased at a fixed price. Thus at the commencement of the selection process each acre was, on paper at least, of equal value.
The Ballot for preliminary land order selections and subsequent auctions for remaining town acres were held during March 1837. Over two days holders of Preliminary Land Orders or their agents selected town acres. The order of selection was democratically prescribed by ballot and acres chosen during this first process of land acquisition suggest how those present understood the plan and what they wanted from the future urban landscape (Oldham, 1944, Morphett, 1936).

Figure 1 illustrates the selection of 408 town acres indicating personal preference, intent, perception and desire (Morphett, 1936, Oldham, 1944). Land agents acting for absentee investors (in red) showed a clear preference for the city’s central axes, and for North Terrace as well as acres with park frontage. Resident investors (in yellow) influenced by first-hand knowledge of the landscape and the reality of living with their choices also preferred acres with Park Land or town square frontage. The South Australian Company (in green) consolidated its land holdings and selected con-joined acres which possibly suited its business agendas (Sutherland, 1898).
Evidenced in Figure 1 is the appeal of public open space and how this drew initial selections out across the entire city plan.

The utilitarian park

To imagine that the beautiful squares and Park Lands depicted in early plans of Adelaide actually existed immediately, would be incorrect but evidence suggests that their realisation was a commonly held aspiration, with its origins in the social plan.

In the decades before the Park Lands of Adelaide could be claimed as ‘pleasure grounds’ they went a long way to support the everyday needs of the city’s residents. Building materials, food and water, shelter as people arrived, transitioned, established or passed through the plan was all asked of and provided by the city’s Park Lands (Sumerling, 2011). Surveyors’ camped in the river valley close to the site selected for Adelaide while the survey was in progress. Emigrants, who had arrived too soon after the surveyors, built temporary shelters in the North and West Park Lands (Finlayson, 1903, Morphett, 1936). Colonists’ writings describe shelters of canvas or other fabric, and early paintings suggest the use of earth, reeds or grass thatching, bark and locally available materials.

After the selection and purchase of town acres in 1837, building in Adelaide began in earnest. Sourced from the Park Lands, materials such as mud, reeds and saplings were used to make huts of pisé and wattle and daub construction with thatched roofs. River stones from the Torrens were used for rubble walls, surface lime was burnt for mortar and bricks were also made from the clay found and dug around the Park Lands (Smith et al., 2006, Lewis, 2000, McDougall and Sumerling, 2006). Adelaide Limestone, quarried from the banks of the Torrens River by government run enterprises was used for early projects including Holy Trinity (1838), Adelaide Gaol (1841) and Old Parliament House (1854-55) (Smith et al., 2006).

As early as May 1838, just over twelve months after building began in the city calls to save the Park Lands appeared in local papers. In June 1839 a letter published in The South Australian Register expresses concerns regarding the cost of lime sourced in the Park Lands as well as the cost to the public of reparation illustrating an early perception of the Park Lands as a public resource which should not be used for private profit.

As well as providing shelter the Park Lands also became the settlement’s larder. Some exchange of knowledge regarding indigenous foods and use of native vegetation did occur in early Adelaide (Heuzenroeder, 2006, Hasenohr, 1977) however the introduction of European crops, stock and fences quickly tipped the balance in the favour of European agricultural practices. In 1852 the number of animals agisted on the Park Lands was considerable. Cattle, and in particularly dairy cows numbered at least 700 in the city area and flocks of sheep owned by city butchers were estimated at between 1000 and 2000 head. Butchers employed shepherds to tend their flocks and workers were employed to milk and tend the cows (“Park Lands”,1852). Without the modern convenience of refrigeration the parklands allowed residents of the city access to fresh produce. The South Australian Census of 1851 recorded 30 “shepherds”, 42 “gardeners/farm servants and persons employed in agriculture” and 11 “stockmen and others in the care of cattle” living in the council wards of north and south Adelaide. While some may have been employed in small rural
holdings close to the city others worked in the Park Lands as they continued to supply the city with fresh food and employment for residents (ABS, 1851).

Prior to reticulation much of Adelaide’s water was collected from a large pool behind Government House by water cart operators who delivered supplies to individual households. By 1850 up to 30 carters filled their barrels numerous times a day, entering the river and subsequently damaging the banks of the Torrens and fouling the water. In 1852, after public outcry, pumps were installed in the river to move water into storage tanks thus keeping carts out of the river. (Venus, 2009). Water carting began to diminish in 1860 as a reticulated water supply was established to parts of the city (Shanahan et al., 2010).

**Dreaming of pleasure grounds**

During its first two decades Adelaide’s ideal urban plan was a real and defensible expectation in the minds of residents and officials. In his 1878 then Town Clerk, Thomas Worsnop, describes a transaction enacted by Governor Gawler in 1839 to purchase Adelaide’s parklands on behalf of the Colony’s residents (Worsnop, 1878). In 1883 the Municipal Council of Adelaide instructed Worsnop to investigate the purchase and title of the Park Lands further. Lawyers, Wilkins, Blyth and Dutton, were engaged to conduct a search of Colonial records in London and instructed to put forward an opinion on the legality and implications of the transaction in question (Worsnop, 1885).

The subsequent report notes that Governor Gawler was advised via a dispatch in September 1838 that the Commissioners held grave concerns for the reserve of Park Lands surrounding Adelaide. To protect public open space the Commissioners recommended that the Colonial Government purchase all the land proposed as reserves. In summation Wilkins, Blyth and Dutton discuss a series of promissory notes and financial transactions aimed at safeguarding Park Lands and public squares from being purchased by individuals (Worsnop, 1885). That the Commissioners in London regarded the Park Lands of Adelaide worthy of protection as early as 1839 suggests their value both financially and symbolically to the colonial venture.

**Arguing over the square**

It is not only the Park Land belt but town squares that define Adelaide’s now iconic urban form. Central Victoria Square is a grand planning gesture, a jewel in the crown of the colonial city. Light was instructed to include public open spaces and wide boulevards and his plan echoed many of the colonial city forms from which it is speculated he drew inspiration (Home, 2013). As with the Park Lands the town squares remained neglected as urban parks while the population remained too small for its physical conception. In 1855 municipal authorities began the formal laying out and planting of city squares and some areas of the Park Lands (Jones, 2007). It was during this time that an ongoing dispute for an acre of Victoria Square which had begun in 1849 was eventually resolved.

Published diaries of John Morphett, early colonist and land agent, assert that at a meeting held in March 1837 regarding town land, a vote for a subscription to purchase an acre of the ‘great square’ for a ‘future colonial church’ was carried unanimously (Morphett, 1936). Morphett’s diaries do not allude to this subscription again but recollections of this meeting amongst early
colonists may have fuelled this debate. The dispute began when Governor Robe conveyed an acre of Victoria Square to the Church of England as a site for a cathedral at the request of Anglican Bishop Augustus Short. In 1851 the Corporation rejected the land grant and public discussion and debate around the issue remained heated with letters on the subject published in local newspapers throughout the early 1850s. In March 1855 just as the debate was about to reach its ultimate conclusion the following contribution was printed in the *South Australian Register* expressing again the ideals of equality and opportunity and their place in the urban landscape.

We trust that the result of this agitation will be to establish more fully and to define more accurately the great principles of religious freedom. Perfect religious equality will render this colony a welcome retreat for all who, in other lands, have groaned beneath the burden of spiritual despotism. Substantially, we possess that equality now ("Park Lands", 1855).

In June 1855 the Supreme Court presided over the case and found in favour of the Corporation of Adelaide, “finding specially that the land was set apart originally for the recreation of the inhabitants” ("The Cathedral Acre", 1855). Evidence produced by the Anglican Church included a map drawn by George Strickland Kingston who had been Deputy Surveyor-General in 1837. In court Kingston explained that many maps were in circulation, not all accurate, including the one he had authored for a private client that included a cross on Victoria Square ("Law and Criminal Courts", 1855). This mark may have represented aspirations of Kingston or his client but did not reflect public opinion or original planning intent.

Although the Church of England in South Australia remained dominant in the colony throughout the nineteenth century there has never been an Anglican church in the acres surrounding Victoria Square even though between 1837 and 1881 surveys and council documents record seven churches and a cathedral in this area. Whatever religious zeal drove the assumption of priority in the town’s centre, the ideal of freedom and equality in the urban plan remained paramount.

As Adelaide transitioned from foundation in 1836 to an established urban centre by the late 1850s improved financial standing and stability of the municipal authority and the colonial government, saw the ideal of Adelaide’s urban plan realized into an iconic urban landscape. While the public continued its commentary on the state of the Park Lands through newspapers and other forum, from this time their physical condition gradually improved. An article in the *South Australian Register* in 1887 describes Adelaide’s urban environment expressing a unifying attachment to its urban plan.

The Park Lands encircling Adelaide are the precious possessions of the people, and they properly are most jealously guarded. ("A Peep from the Dome", 1887)

**Conclusion**

This paper has examined the social plan on which the scheme to found the Colony of South Australia was based and the resultant expectations and aspirations of early colonists with particular regard to the Park Lands. It is remarkable that for almost two decades the Park Lands as ‘pleasure grounds’ for public health and recreation, existed more in theory than reality but remained paramount in the minds of the city’s residents. Adelaide’s urban plan and its iconic park lands
symbolised ideas of promise, opportunity and equality and were galvanized by the ideologies of its original social plan and the aspirations of its residents. The parks and people of Adelaide sustained each other at different periods in history and it is this relationship and the sense of communal ‘ownership’ (Jones, 2010) that has ensured the survival of an urban planning icon. The character and ethos of the people of Adelaide described by Peter Moreton as a “peculiar and unpredictable blend of the deeply conservative and the mildly radical” a seemingly duplicitous and bewildering public persona presenting now “as reactionary, now as progressive; now as puritan, now as liberal; now innovative, now stolidly conservative” (Morton, 1996) describes a community of people from varied backgrounds brought together by shared aspirations. Born from the pragmatic ranks nineteenth century reformists this character has enabled a remarkable and sustaining symbiotic relationship between a community and an iconic urban plan.

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