

2015 Travel report: Melbourne garden landscapes

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During my tour around the Melbourne area (September 17 to October 9, 2015), I visited 10 botanic gardens, spent time in 18 display gardens, explored three national parks and went to some of Victoria's most visited attractions. I saw more gardens than originally planned and connected with more people than I could visit in person. The trip was a definite success and compressed what felt like years' worth of observations and experience into less than a month. I will be drawing on this rewarding experience long into the future.

My trip was a success due to the support of many people. My family allowed me to leave the country, the staff at Wellington Botanic Garden encouraged me to plan the trip and assisted me in organising it, and I have ongoing support of Wellington City Council. But none of it would have been possible without financial contributions from the Friends of the Wellington Botanic Garden, Botanic Gardens Australia and New Zealand – New Zealand Branch, and the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture.

When seeking the funding for the trip I mentioned several areas of interest that I would be investigating while in Melbourne. Firstly, how plants themselves are arranged and put together, and in particular how Australian plants are used in a garden and how they appear in their native landscapes.

Secondly, was the people, how are public gardens making connections with the people that visit and how do volunteers fit into the management of these spaces. In this context I wanted to examine the Ian Potter Foundation Children's Garden at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Melbourne, for inspiration for Wellington's Children's Garden due to open in 2016.

Prior to leaving New Zealand I made contact with people from some of

the key destinations I intended to visit and naturally this led to more contacts being developed and many suggestions of further places to see. Special thanks to Annette Zealley from Geelong Botanic Gardens and John Arnott from RBG Cranbourne who were instrumental in helping establish contacts and finding the most worthwhile places to visit. I also ended up attending a local BGANZ Victoria Regional meeting with Annette which was all about master planning with a follow up guided tour of Wilson Botanic Park. In one day I was able to make contact with staff from many of the destinations I was planning to visit and was convinced by others to come and visit their gardens. I'm continually humbled by the generosity and willingness of people in the industry to help each other out.

Attending the Australian Landscape Conference was one of the main reasons for the trip and I was not disappointed. It delivered at a more philosophical level than I anticipated and this gave me new perspectives on the ways in which I look at spaces and the materials and plants used to make those landscapes effective. One of the main themes I picked up on was the idea that the 'original is not always faithful to the translation', mostly from speaker Martin Rein-Cano who is based in Berlin. One example used was seeing a *Cedrus libani* outside a grand European mansion which might actually be more impressive, be more recognisable and fit the landscape better than where these cedars originally come from in the Mediterranean mountains. In the same way that what we call 'English gardens' are not always made entirely of English plants; it is all a form of hybridisation, of making new planting combinations and assemblages. Another way to describe it is "the native becomes foreign and the

foreign becomes native". This is definitely seen in New Zealand where we have had plants imported on a massive scale and some of our most recognisable species are not natives, but plants like *Pinus radiata* in our forests and camellias in our gardens. Some plants obviously look different when grown in our landscape and we should not fight this but make the most of the differences and enjoy the new identity they have created in New Zealand.

To complement this idea, Helen and James Basson told us at the conference that there was no point living in the south of France and surrounding yourself with an English garden. This husband and wife team left England in 2000 to establish their landscaping business in France. When starting a new garden we usually attempt to flatten the ground and improve the soil. Helen and James encourage the use of natural land formation to inspire the garden design. Scrape the top soil back in one area and build it up in another. This is still a form of landscape hybridisation, but seeks to create interest by making environments more complex. They argue that this is a more sustainable form of gardening and shows off the beauty of individual plants, rather than relying on masses of colour or large drift plantings. The challenge is to rethink what is beautiful – sometimes an accent plant struggling in the crevice of a rock is more beautiful than a bold display of colour.

There was a little serendipity along the way. On the first day after I arrived, I was on the pre-conference bus tour beginning in the Dandenong Ranges. We stopped for lunch at Burnham Beeches and ate our boxed meals in an Art Deco mansion, built by Alfred Nicholas, who started Aspro (a brand of aspirin) in Australia. The house is currently in disrepair,

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and so is the immediate garden, but from there you can catch glimpses of the garden below – maintained by Parks Victoria, and now separated from the house by a 2 m high fence. It wasn't until the day before I flew out that I managed to return to the Dandenongs and stumble back upon this lower garden, called the Alfred Nicholas Memorial Gardens. I descended slowly on a wide path underneath the *Eucalyptus regnans* – a very cathedral like feeling – with the undergrowth cleared of the original sclerophyll shrubs and filled with a common scene of rhododendrons and camellias. Nearing the bottom of the garden, where the eucalyptus have been cleared, I walk past a small boat shed, to reveal a space bathed in dappled light, with lawn covered islands linked by bridges settled in a dark pond (Fig. 1). A prunus leans over the edge of an island, and I saw a young couple sitting on a ledge beneath with feet dipped in the water. The serene scene was at once completely out of place and yet seemed like it had been there forever. It was the most striking landscape I saw and I can only wonder about its former glory when the garden was in its prime.



Fig. 1 The Alfred Nicholas Memorial Gardens in the Dandenong Ranges.

Earlier in my trip I visited the Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne and wondered how the same feeling you get entering a space like that could be achieved with plants as the medium. The Alfred Nicholas Memorial Gardens showed me that it can be achieved, by changing people's attitudes, putting them off balance or taking them out of the norm. Scale in this garden is important, the *Eucalyptus regnans* being one of the tallest flowering plants in the world certainly creates a very different feeling as you move through the trunks, but the unexpectedness of the scene below took me to a place far removed from Melbourne, Australia.

Working with volunteers has become a large part of my role as a Curator in Wellington, and I was interested to see how volunteers contributed to the places I visited around the wider Melbourne area. I was able to see gardens which had volunteers only running tours, and other gardens that have an entire workforce of volunteers. At Melton Botanic Garden, a short drive from the city of Melton, there are currently no paid staff. The community asked for land from the local council for the establishment of a botanic garden and it was amazing to not only see what they had achieved in transforming the landscape but also hearing about the work they had achieved with the community. The Friends of the Melton Botanic Garden have built a reputation in the community which has over time made the work they are doing easier as more and more individuals and local business contribute to the garden. Their ability to be extremely flexible and move quickly enables them to take advantage of opportunities that come their way. I was interested to see that although they have a working master plan, some of the projects were done out of order as labour became available or other resources made it appropriate to do so. A large portion of the workforce has come from job seekers who are part of the 'Work for the Dole' program.

Many times I heard people mention the benefits of bringing skilled people in from outside the workplace when current staff are not able to complete a certain task. Examples were wide ranging, from creating master plans, to consulting the public, studying plants, creating interpretation or setting up plant databases. This should also be the case for working with volunteers. It was obvious the gardens that had great connections with their volunteers and used them effectively achieved tasks that would otherwise simply not have been possible.

I also visited the Werribee Park estate and spent time there over a couple of days, as there were so many different parts to look at (Fig. 2A–B), including formal gardens, the Victoria State Rose Garden, and the historic mansion. They have a small team of Rangers who are responsible for the mansion and grounds as well as surrounding land and they are dwarfed

by a huge number of volunteers. More than 150 volunteers maintain the award winning Rose Garden, dozens of Karen refugees (from the Thailand-Burma border) work on the mansion grounds, and a Friends group and class of horticulture students based on the grounds assist throughout. Over ninety percent of the work is done by volunteers adding up to 1000 hours every month. The staff put time into getting the most out of these volunteers. The best example of this was giving internship positions to volunteer Karen refugees, which helps break down communication barriers and cultural differences between the Karen and the Australian staff. Staff also created a space for the Karen to grow their own vegetables and provided a classroom for the older generations to teach the children about their own culture, as many had grown up in refugee camps and never experienced life growing up in a traditional village. The success of their volunteer investment could also be seen with the rose garden volunteers who I talked to – some of them had been contributing one day a week for well over a decade and were still as enthusiastic as the day they started. The sites with the greatest volunteer engagement were very invested in both the volunteers and wider community. Both Melton Botanic Garden and Werribee Park provided more than just an opportunity to work.



Fig. 2 The 1870s grotto at Werribee Park. **A**, entrance within a built lake. **B**, back in the day, ladies would spend time in the cool inside to escape the hot afternoon sun. The wonderful decorations inside include children's teeth.

The Royal Botanic Gardens Cranbourne was a highlight of my trip, because it showed me how a garden can be more about the story than the plants themselves. The garden has very clear emphasis on design integrity and the plants are used as only one of many ways to tell the journey through the culture of Australia. Interestingly, it reinforced themes I picked up on from the Australian Landscape Conference, the idea of hybridisation is seen throughout as well as the creation of complex spaces. Plants are squeezed into rocky crevices, planted on high dunes of sand, exposed to desert like conditions, and planted to compete with each other as they might in a natural environment. Surprisingly, and in contrast to the many other botanic gardens I have visited, there is only a single lawn area in the entire space.

Cranbourne gave me a great insight into how Australian plants can be displayed, combinations that are successful and how to replicate natural conditions (Fig. 3). But most rewarding was hearing people talk about the plants, getting the inside stories on what makes these plants exciting and what stories connect well with people. I assisted in a school holiday program with a theme around fairies. It was great to see that Australian plants and stories could just as easily be made to fit a very European fairy theme. If you make a space complex, fantastical, add humour and the ridiculous, and drop convention, then you can change the attitude of the people visiting it.



Fig. 3 On the Eucalyptus Walk at the Royal Botanic Gardens Cranbourne, one of my favourite spots in the garden. The sign reads "Caution: snake sighted in this area today", a hazard absent from New Zealand gardens.

Of course my visit to the Ian Potter Foundation Children's Garden at the Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne was a must-see destination. It was a damp rainy day when I visited so there

were few children using the space, which made it easier for me to 'be the child' and thoroughly explore the areas. I could recall the conversations had with Andrew Laidlaw (from the RBG Melbourne) in June 2011 when we had one of the first workshops on the proposed children's garden at Wellington. We talked about the criticalness of plant choice, with many New Zealand native plants proposed, and many monocots that would bounce back after being sat on, run over or rolled through by children. It was great to see these principles enacted in Melbourne, and that it had in fact been successful. One of the things that took my interest was the surfaces; an example was the use of sand along paths and flowing under the plants. It could be walked on, easily spread, simple for clean up, and besides the practical benefits, the children could also play with it. It turns a path-come-mulch material into another play element (Fig. 4). A good amount of mobile elements were available too. Seats and tables were set up in corners and in the middle of paths, discarded by the users when they had to hurriedly leave. A childlike scale was achieved in many areas with low archways and narrow bamboo forest walks and small furniture. The space was a real blurring of the lines between paths, play spaces and gardens. There was an obvious acceptance of the fact that children also blur these lines. Quite a different space compared to the one proposed at Wellington, not just the topography but the intent of the space. The Ian Potter Foundation Children's Garden is a very natural space created for play, whereas Wellington's children's garden will be an urban space showcasing what is possible within its confines. Nonetheless, the RBG Melbourne garden showed the spaces that children naturally gravitated to and how these spaces were used, and provided some definite lessons to pick up on.

Melbourne is no doubt a fascinating place, but as a resident Wellingtonian I couldn't help missing the mountains and wondering why everything was so flat. In Melbourne, significant landmarks with 360 degree views were as low as 150 metres above sea level (Fig. 5).



Fig. 4 Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne, Children's Garden. Example of the sand use as a mulch around plants, acting as a path, as well as a play space.



Fig. 5 Guilfoyle's Volcano is in the south-east corner of the Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne. It was used to store water for the gardens and later restored to a landscape feature with views of the city. Pictured is the blending of steps into gardens.

Seeing plants in their natural habitat was great, the national parks were amazing to visit and I have increased my appreciation for rocks. I saw the beauty that Helen and James Basson talked about when I headed to the Pinnacles in the Grampians (Fig. 6), and saw eucalyptus growing in a crack in a rock reminiscent of a struggling conifer on the side of the Yellow Mountains in China. Is it more beautiful to have a large lush green plant with massive bright flowers or to have a struggling plant growing in the crack of a rock with flowers that most people never see? Beauty is something fragile, a moment, a connection between you and something else. We can't just grow beautiful plants, but must create opportunities and moments for people. Some of the most beautiful plants we have are never even looked at – like our rockeries – they are something most walk past, plants that are very small, trees you can walk under and never look up. It taught me to design the landscape to slow the audience and create moments to look at these special plants.



Fig. 6 Karl Noldan on top of Boronia Peak in the Grampians.

I also saw that it is often all too easy to over design. I often tell an apprentice when planting large scale floral bedding that they have to think about it less to ensure they end up with a random pattern rather than straight lines, a form of ordered chaos. Many times I heard of ways to create randomness. I love the story of Edna Walling (one of Australia's renowned landscape designers) throwing potatoes over her shoulder to create a planting plan, and one of the conference speakers told us he gets the least qualified person on site to lay out the plants – as they are least likely to conform to rules or conventions. At Karwarra Australian Plant Garden in the Dandenongs (Fig. 7), it was fascinating to see that the colours we would normally be afraid to put together were side by side, the pinks and yellows especially.



Fig. 7 Indoor Vireya Collection at National Rhododendron Garden in the Dandenong Ranges.

I have come back with some things I would like to achieve over time. Not specific projects but ideas that I want to permeate through the team at Wellington Botanic Garden. In art or our gardens, like music, a painting or a novel, each time you visit more should be revealed to you, the landscape needs to have a depth. I would love to put more of our own history on display, to create a connection centred on people, not just plants, by using sculpture, literature and poetry. Add in the 'who', not just the 'what'. I remember conversations, ideas and people and landscapes/ scenes from the gardens more than the individual plants I saw. I want to increase complexity by creating more dead-ends and secret places to increase the sense of wonder. Gardens are not spaces to be walked

past, the aim should be to alter paths and planting to slow the pace and make people interact with the landscape. In Wellington, we have no trouble with flatness.

As a result of this trip I have grown as a gardener, it has given me confidence to continue the work I am doing, as well as inspiring me to continue to push for new ways of doing things and shown me that everything we do is a hybridisation of ideas, landscape and plantings.

Horticulture is such an amazing industry to be in, and I remain fascinated at how much the plants and landscapes we see are able to change opinions, ideas of history and how we perceive the world. But I do owe the success of the trip to people. There were many who shared resources, time, stories, hints and tips, and their own experience and knowledge. In turn I am always happy to share my own experiences with others, and I will certainly be doing this with my colleagues at the Wellington Botanic Garden.

Thank you again to those who supported me on this trip; I believe it will help me to contribute back to the industry throughout my career.

