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Under the Skin

Scratching beneath the surface on recent work by Lyons.

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Foreign Office Architects
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Contents.

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Lyons. Architects
John Gollings. Photography

Wild at Heart

International speakers ventured south to Tasmania to discuss wilderness and civilisation in the city today at the Wild Cities/Urbane Wilderness symposium.

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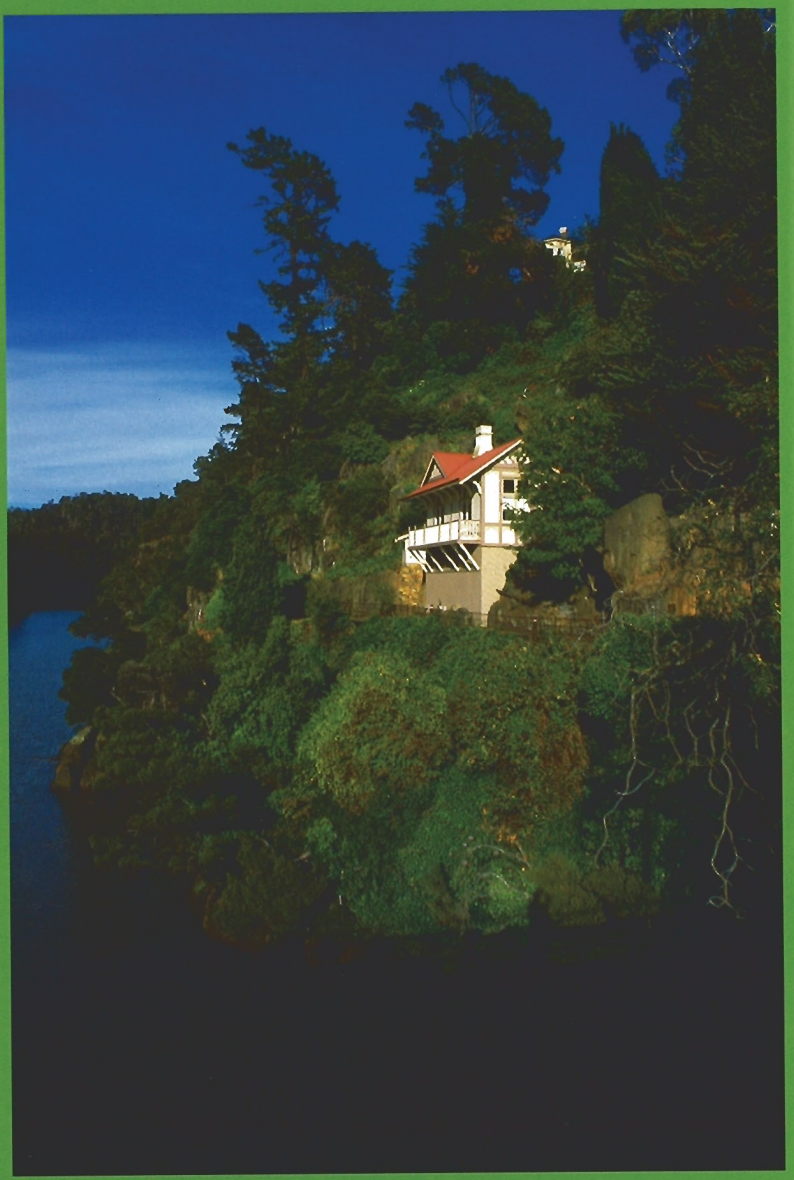

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Symposium Review.

Wild Cities/Urbane Wilderness symposium. Launceston 2002
Richard Blythe. Review
Leigh Woolley. Photography

The meaning of the term 'wilderness' is a rapidly evolving one. Nineteenth century park and garden designers employed the term in reference to constructed landscapes that were wild in character: evocatively wild, naturalistic sections of larger cultivated spaces. This is at odds with a contemporary and populist understanding of the term as referring to an uncultivated landscape far from mechanised forms of transport. In this popular view, wilderness is imagined as a people-less, unaffected place located a long way from urbanised centres. This shift in meaning calls into question the authenticity of designed wildernesses of the 19th century, such as the Rambles in Central Park, New York, and threatens to severely limit the possibility of the ongoing dialectic between the civilised and the wild that is an ontological (rather than ecological or environmental) pursuit. The limitation of narrow contemporary views is most apparent in attempts to define what an authentic wilderness is, a question that proves to be somewhat elusive when considered outside of the civilised/wild dialectic. What appears then to be a simple and logical contemporary dismissal of a category of 19th century landscape design as perhaps naïve or even irrelevant, reveals instead a significant contemporary uncertainty about the nature of nature and our relationship with it.

The focus of the Wild Cities/Urbane Wilderness symposium, held recently in Launceston, was an exploration of the cultural value of wilderness in terms of that most constructed and artificial of all places: the city. In doing so, an attempt was made to bring the idea of wilderness within the scope of the wild/civilised dialectic. Speakers from Belgium, Brazil, New Zealand, the US, and Australia presented papers exploring this question in contexts as diverse as Paris, London, Benedictine monasteries, Brazil, Vietnam, the US and Australia.

Michel Conan, director of landscape studies at Dumbarton Oaks, Washington DC, discussed the role of the urban park as an agent of social change. Conan drew upon the hapless fate of the mythical hunter Actaeon who, having transgressed the socially inscribed boundaries of the hunt, caught a glimpse of the goddess Artemis (Dianna) bathing naked. He paid dearly for this transgression (she had him torn apart by his own hounds). Conan calls on the myth to illustrate the role of the wild in establishing social mores that define the boundaries of desire and civility and to introduce the idea of the 'wilderness' as a place of possible transgression.

Conan used two case studies; one of the Tuileries in Paris and the other of St James Park in London to demonstrate the role of the urban garden as a stage for acting out social transgressions that would be unthinkable within other urban spaces. He described how these sanctioned transgressions changed social values in Paris.

Art critic John McDonald offered the symposium a less appealing glimpse, one of the Australian suburb, as a sort of second best, a less than ideal compromise between city and country quite unlike the condition envisioned by Ebenezer Howard in his treatise on the Garden city. The suburb is a compromise that has resulted not in a morally virtuous and Utopian state of the Garden city, but rather, in a kind of blandness, described by that other Howard (Australia's prime minister), as a sort of characteristic sameness (elite sportspersons or pop-stars excepted) that we should all be so proud of.

McDonald contrasts varying accounts of the relation of city and country throughout the colonised history of Australia reminding us of examples such as the Heidelberg School whose groundbreaking Australian landscape paintings were created within a convenient train ride of Melbourne. The country has become, McDonald argues, a kind of theme park for the urban tourist who emerges on the weekends, camera in hand, venturing forth from a suburban idyll that acts as 'a quarantine station between city and country, and a mental fortress that keeps anything that is disturbing and different at bay'.

McDonald, it seems, shares Robin Boyd's hatred of that great Australian dream, but holds the distinct advantage of being able to graphically illustrate his argument with the late Howard Arkley's alarmingly luminous images of Melbourne suburbia, aptly described by an Italian review of Australia's Biennale exhibit in 1999 as 'very pop, very artificial, very wallpaper' (I'm pretty sure they weren't drawing flattering parallels with the contemporary magazine of the same name). McDonald maintains that the significance of the relation between city and wilderness is in the strength of the contrast, a separation that is to be emphasised rather than settling for 'the slow intermingling that extracts the most anodyne features from both, and sees the result as a vision of happiness'.

Deborah Malor's paper illustrated the consequence of pursuing such discordant visions in light of the recent NSW bushfires. Architect, Leigh Woolley, suggested that the defining quality of what he described as 'edge cities' was this clarity of distinction between city and 'other', evident in the boundary conditions imposed by the extreme geography of cities such as Oslo, Vancouver, and Hobart. Woolley's point was that the wild/civilised dialectic achieves greater currency when it is ingrained in the fabric of our constructed environment and that, in this sense wilderness has everything to do with the way in which we should structure our urban centres.

Kelly Shannon presented her readings of the urban history of the Vietnamese city of Hue, an 'edge' city caught in a fold of the River of Perfumes in a valley of the rugged Truong Song Mountain range, a city of two halves – one emblematic, mandarin; and the other colonial, occidental. The two halves face each other across the river. Hue's political past and projected future as a tourist destination enshrine in built-form ongoing exchanges in the wild/civilised dialectic.

Stephen Loo discussed the idea of an artificially constructed wilderness in his reading of MDRDV's Dutch Pavilion at Expo 2000 and their making of a new 'artificial nature'. The idea of the accessibility of wilderness in the most urbane centre was given graphic form in a paper by Mary Knights quoting from the journal of artist Michael Schlitz: "In Tokyo I had the sense that I was in the middle of it (wilderness). I was crossing a road in the eclectic, smoky, neon flashing and chaotic shinjuku. Here I saw an image being projected onto a three-story video screen. An offshore surfer riding an unbreaking wave!!! He went for ages, delicately balancing on this amazing image in the middle of Tokyo, this control, that is almost out of control, an almost out of control sense of controlling nature when in fact we are it somehow."

Other papers looked at the history and values associated with urban parklands including Sydney's Centennial Park and Botanic Gardens, Cataract Gorge Park and Mt Wellington in Tasmania, the Adelaide Parklands and Mt Eliza in Perth. Catherine de Lorenzo illustrated Parisian photographic images of Australian 'wilderness' from the 19th century and Maria Angélica da Silva spoke about the way in which the memory of the wilderness has informed the creation of Brazilian urban space. Stephen Tanner spoke on Olmstead's design for the World's Columbian Exhibition of 1893, claiming it as an instructive landmark in the history of the urban/wild dialectic.

Collectively the papers revalue the idea of 'wilderness' and its role in the wild/civilised dialectic, providing a rich theoretical ground for those interested in the relationship between architecture and nature.

The published papers are available from the University of Tasmania, contact: r.j.blythe@utas.edu.au.

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01 Edge cities, such as Hobart, suffer a lack of rigour in defining their margins.
02 Vancouver, Canada, maintains a clear distinction between city and the 'other'.

03 Cataract Gorge, Launceston – the touchstone for the symposium.