

# Australian Garden

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## HISTORY





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## What is a cultural landscape?

Lake Burley Griffin and its surrounding parklands, Canberra, arguably one of Australia's most important designed cultural landscapes. The lake and its surrounds still await official recognition and heritage protection.  
photo Juliet Ramsay

The Australian Garden History Society aims to promote awareness and conservation of significant gardens and cultural landscapes through engagement, research, advocacy and activities. But what exactly is a cultural landscape?

Most of us have gardens, or have had them in our own lives. But even the word 'landscape' is not understood in one single way by everyone. Are landscapes 'nature', like wilderness and nice views? Wilderness itself is a problematic term, as it implies land that is totally natural with no changes caused by humans. Bill Gammage (in *The greatest estate on earth*) and Bruce Pascoe (in *Dark emu*) have researched and written at length about how Australia's first inhabitants certainly did change the natural landscape and ecologies of this continent by land management practices tied to cultural beliefs. 'Natural landscape' is a better term to use when you don't mean cultural landscapes.

Which leads to the question of what a cultural landscape is – or is not. Landscapes are cultural when they are the result of interaction between people and the natural environment over many years. Such landscapes are nature overlain by people's actions, or imbued with beliefs held by particular societies.

Different human groups and cultural practices and beliefs have made certain natural landscapes distinctive in particular ways over time, or given them special meanings. In other words, they are natural landscapes that have become cultural landscapes by association. The description used in heritage is 'the combined works of nature and man'.

### Different kinds of cultural landscapes

We usually recognise three kinds or categories of cultural landscape: designed, evolved and associative.



**Designed landscapes** are intentionally created for a particular aesthetic effect. These include the most obvious examples like gardens, parks, ornamental lakes, suburbs and cities – even domestic gardens at the small scale.

The central area of Canberra and Lake Burley Griffin and its lakeshore parklands, which is on AGHS's list of landscapes at risk, is a designed cultural landscape. Melbourne's Domain parkland and memorial precinct, Sydney's harbourside parklands and Adelaide parklands are also cultural landscapes.

**Evolved landscapes** have been made layer by layer over time by particular land use that is shown in current form and features. We humans have been altering ecologies and landscapes since we first walked the Earth. These landscapes exist in and through time, may be highly modified and may be very complex. Once damaged they are expensive or difficult to recreate, so they are very precious.

Evolving landscapes can be areas with continuing land use, for example landscapes of cultivation such as old orchards or vineyards that are being sustainably used for the future. Another kind of evolved landscape is a relict landscape, such as one which has abandoned mine sites from former

gold rush days. These landscapes are valued because they tell us about human use of natural resources and longstanding land use in the past. Such landscapes can contain ruins and have layers of history which (with practice) can be read like a book to tell us about past exploitation, extraction of wealth and final abandonment due to a lack of sustainability.

**Associative landscapes** have features that embody the religious, sacred or other cultural associations of particular communities. They often lack obvious signs of human presence. These landscapes are special not only because of their physical form, but because of the spiritual and symbolic meanings about them held in people's beliefs. Uluru–Kata Tjuta National Park is a prime Australian example – owned by the Anangu, it has great spiritual meaning for the Indigenous people.

Cultural landscapes can also be of spiritual importance to non-Indigenous people, for example the Polish refugee community in Australia hold Mount Kosciuszko to have particular symbolic meaning through association with explorer Paul Strzelecki who named the mountain (as Mt *Kosciusko*) after his Polish countryman General Tadeusz Kosciuszko.

Wollongong harbour with breakwater and lighthouses. The complex cultural landscape here has many elements tied by proximity to the coast: the old Mount Pleasant Tramway route which transported coal to the harbour in the 1860s, gun emplacements against a perceived Russian threat in the 1890s, and four tidal ocean swimming pools dating from the 1870s to 1920s.

photo  
Anne Claoue-Long





## Blurred boundaries

Cultural landscapes are all around us and, confusingly, some cultural landscapes may represent more than one of these three main categories. For example, Australia's most recent landscape accepted for World Heritage listing is the Aboriginal landscape of Budj Bim which was created over millennia to specific design for Indigenous aquaculture and now highly valued by the Indigenous community whose ancestors started the process many years ago. Budj Bim is the first Australian World Heritage property to be listed entirely on the basis of its Indigenous cultural values. Another Aboriginal cultural landscape, but one that is linear in form, is the Bundian Way, an ancient pathway from the coast at Eden to Mount Kosciuszko.

Yet another example is the Sydney Harbour landscape, parts of which are obviously designed landscapes, but other parts are evolving landscapes, either remnant or regenerating bushland, apparently without the obvious hand of humans.

Cultural landscapes are straightforward but also complicated. And not all cultural landscapes are special and important enough to keep as heritage for future generations. The local golf course with its sculpted landform and tree plantings has a distinctive designed form from use over time. But it's hardly special enough to value for more than its amenity and is an everyday landscape and does not count as a significant cultural landscape.

Cultural landscapes are special and valued because they

- reflect the evolution of human society and settlement
- have spiritual and symbolic meanings
- are highly regarded for their beauty and aesthetic qualities, and
- display achievements in landscape design and technology.

The most special cultural landscapes are multidimensional in their qualities and evoke an emotional reaction for their local personality and atmosphere. They require protection. AGHS is one of the bodies committed to protecting these special cultural landscapes – as well, of course, as significant gardens.

Cultural landscapes can be threatened in various ways. Lack of widespread recognition and understanding of their values is the greatest threat. Recognising something and being able to

**A** Panorama of Sydney Harbour showing Balls Head Bay and Gore Cove from tower of Holtermann mansion.

In May 2019, the AILA (NSW) Landscape Heritage Conservation Listing project by Christine Hay, Colleen Morris and James Quoyle received the National Trust (NSW) Award for the Conservation Landscape category. Then in July 2019, this project also won the AILA NSW 2019 Cultural Heritage Award of Excellence, and in November, the authors received the 2019 AILA President's Award. The Australian Institute of Landscape Architects President's Award recognises outstanding individual contributions and is presented by the National President. It is awarded on merit, it is not an annual award.

photographer unspecified, NSW State Archives

**B** Wollongong Botanic Gardens, a designed paradise for pleasure.

photo Anne Claoue-Long

**C** Cambria estate farm, north of Swansea, Tasmania, January 2019.

photo Stuart Read

**D** Magenta Mine in Chiltern, Victoria, a relict of 1860s gold mining with open cut and shaft still visible in the landscape.

photo Anne Claoue-Long





name it imbues it with meaning and significance, hence the need for articles such as this. Better recognition and understanding will lead to better planning and management of cultural landscapes.

Other dangers to cultural landscapes include large-scale development such as mining, forestry plantations, corporate agribusiness, urban expansion and major new infrastructure insertions to serve all of these endeavours. In an increasingly populous world, we can expect that pressure for development will only increase.

### Other considerations

Immediate great change, or smaller incremental incursions over many years, can corrode the qualities of cultural landscapes as surely as physical erosion. Floods, cyclones, bushfires, drought, and the introduction of weed species through human activities, not only alter the environment but a landscape's cultural values. Climate change brings changing rain patterns and temperatures that affect ecological balance in cultural landscapes and their productive sustainability, especially rural agricultural ones, parks and gardens. A warmer, drier future means challenges.

Decorative and restful pleasure gardens, with or without historic aspects, will always be popular for their aesthetics and recreational amenity. They are more likely to be recognised by the public for their values and defended against threats. But educating people about larger-scale landscapes, the plants and the features (both physical and symbolic) in them goes beyond horticulture, design and history – it's a big picture story that tells of human interaction with the environment

over time. Cultural landscapes, once you can read them, are full of stories worth remembering, and warnings of what happens when profit is elevated above all and unsustainable land use finally results in abandoned relict landscapes.

We choose places like city parklands, vineyards, botanic gardens, and Uluru (think 'Field of Light') as venues of contemporary cultural expression because they are already important cultural landscapes. Unless we work towards protecting these, they may not survive to enrich future lives. Our understanding of the past, respect for intergenerational equity, and hopes for an improving future, all mean that we should work to ensure that special cultural landscapes are better recognised, not lost or spoilt.

### Acknowledgement

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The AGHS webpage on Landscapes at Risk gives plenty of examples where your support for the protection of cultural landscapes around Australia is needed. <https://www.gardenhistorysociety.org.au/2019/03/event-report/>. Your local AGHS branch will be pleased to hear from you.

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