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## CHAPTER 6

### **Museological Landscapes, Mythological Lands: The Garden of Australian Dreams**

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#### **Introduction**

Within the general controversy that has attended the early years of the National Museum of Australia, there has been a particular and strident attention to its internal landscape, the Garden of Australian Dreams. This heavily encoded 'garden', written and overwritten in a palimpsest of maps and markings, can be seen as an allegory of the larger Australian landscape, understood as a deeply encultured artefact, indeed as a museum object in itself. To read it in this way is also to conceive of 'landscape' as a construct of dreams and imagination, and equally to critique the myth of 'the land', the unspoiled natural wilderness, the outback. However, it is the general lack of trees and plants and growing things in the completed Garden, the barren and apparently hostile expanse of its painted concrete, which appears to have been most confronting to everyday museum visitors. Even as the intellectual content of the work was discussed and interpreted by critics, the apparent lack of pleasurable aesthetic affect challenged users' expectations of public outdoor space. Additionally, as time has passed, and the museum as a whole has come under increasing political scrutiny and pressure, the Garden of Australian Dreams has come to seem an endangered specimen, if not an actually feral one, in itself.

Perhaps it is an overly glib starting point, then, but the acronym for the Garden of Australian Dreams—GOAD—has always seemed oddly appropriate. The noun

‘goad’ is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as ‘a rod or stick, pointed at one end or fitted with a sharp spike and employed for driving cattle [...] something that pricks or wounds like a goad [...] a torment [...] a strong incitement or instigation.’<sup>i</sup> There is no doubt that this design is indeed a goad, a provocation, a statement that demands a response. It is a highly intellectual and communicative landscape design, one that insists on participating in discourse much more actively than many other comparable works in Australia. Its systematic challenge to many of the classic patterns and elements of landscape design means that it was always destined to shock and provoke those with a traditional attitude to what a ‘garden’ should contain. However, ‘goad’ is also a verb. The word, and by extension this landscape, might thus be seen as both the instrument that stings and the act of stinging, both the long sharp stick and the action of prodding with it. The question arises, then, of where and to what end the visitor to the GOAD is being prompted. If the dictionary defines the verb form as ‘to instigate or impel by some form of mental pain or annoyance; to drive by continued irritation into or to some desperate action or uncontrolled state of mind’,<sup>ii</sup> then to what desperate action, and in what uncontrolled state of mind, is the visitor to the GOAD being driven? More seriously, what are the implications of this for the Garden’s ambiguous status as both a museum artefact and an amenity for the museum visitor. It is not clear whether the GOAD comprises part of the museum’s form, or part of its contents, whether it is a subordinate part of the museum’s equipment or ‘furniture’, or whether it is an exhibit in itself. Each of these definitions carries very different implications for the role and function of the work. The parallel or overlap between them has been the cause of much of the confusion that has surrounded the Garden.

There can be no doubt that for some people, this garden is indeed an irritant, a belligerent gesture, an attempt to start a fight: and some of those people have been happy to oblige and retaliate.<sup>iii</sup> For a landscape design that has been in existence for barely five years, it has certainly seen its fair share of stoushes.<sup>iv</sup> This is because it is intelligent, discursive, argumentative, critical, witty, and because it has a particular importance in narrating and challenging Australian national identity. It also claims a greater role and more ambitious intellectual program for the practice and discipline of landscape design in Australia than it has previously had. These issues will be expanded upon later in this chapter, but first it is worthwhile to examine exactly why

this garden is so provocative, in the context of its specific site and program, and its relation to the equally garrulous and importune architecture of the National Museum of Australia.

### **The Layout of the Garden of Australian Dreams**

The GOAD forms part of the architectural and landscape complex around the National Museum of Australia (NMA), on Acton Peninsula in Canberra's Lake Burley Griffin. The complex also includes the buildings of the Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, and associated landscapes around the entry sequence and the lake's edge. However, the GOAD has a quite specific proximity and relationship with the architecture of the Museum, and with its museological program. The Garden was designed by Richard Weller and Vladimir Sitta of the Perth landscape designers Room 4.1.3, in collaboration with architects Ashton Raggatt Macdougall (ARM), designers of the NMA building itself and the masterplan for the whole site. This masterplan, which strongly informs the design of both architecture and landscape, ties Acton Peninsula into Walter Burley Griffin's monumental urban plan for the city of Canberra, but in a curiously inflected way. Where Griffin had designed a series of intersecting axes, linking natural landmarks and cultural institutions across the artificial lake, the architects of the NMA have taken these straight and unequivocal axes and tangled them. Thus, the museum's three thematic curatorial 'threads' of land, people, and nation are looped and intertwined into a 'knot' that both generates and circumscribes the architecture and the landscape. An additional 'axis' is also generated, a built red thread which heads off towards Uluru, in the mythic 'red heart' of the Australian desert, but which appears to snap and recoil as it leaves the immediate surrounds of the museum. As Richard Weller writes,

This manipulation of straight lines into wandering tangled forms also posits architecture as *knot* and landscape as *fabric*, which is to re-imagine architecture and landscape as coextensive rather than as emblems of culture and nature juxtaposed. Designed places, especially cultural clots like museums, can be understood as complex knots (built and semiotic), intensifications emerging from the material and immaterial fabric of the broader landscape.<sup>v</sup>

The GOAD, caught within the loop of the NMA building as it pushes outward to the perimeter of the peninsula, is just such a rich fabric. Indeed there is a remarkably close correspondence between the architectural and landscape schemes;

the architects and landscape designers clearly share a very coherent sensibility and ideological attitude. The position could be defined as a broadly postmodern one—concerned not with the primary ‘metanarrative’ discourses of History, Identity, and Art, but rather with the way these are framed, constructed, represented and critiqued through the secondary discourses of historiography, cultural studies and art criticism. This is not landscape as a setting for architecture, nor is it architecture as the frame and aperture through which landscape is to be abstractly viewed. The two are instead discrete and parallel discourses. The landscape and the building are mirrored back at one another, compounding and complexifying their mutual stories of multiplicity, heterogeneity, and doubtful affection for the idea of Australia.

### **A ‘Map’ that can be Experienced**

The Garden is primarily a surface (described by one critic as like ‘an upset game of snakes and ladders’<sup>vi</sup>), which is patterned and painted with a series of overlaid maps, texts, and marks, in just the same way that the land and landscape have been measured, mapped and made known through pre-and post-settlement techniques. The intention for these is perhaps best described by Weller;

[T]he two main maps used to form the ground pattern of this garden are a standard English language map of Australia (which reveals virtually no traditional Aboriginal presence) and Horton’s map of the linguistic boundaries of indigenous Australia (which reveals Australia as an extra complex mosaic of over three hundred aboriginal tribes or nations). The names and lines of these two world-views clash, interweave, erase and overlay one another implying a difficult but nonetheless a shared cartography. Well known as instruments of power inimical to the colonial project, maps are currently Australia’s most contested terrains.<sup>vii</sup>

This is a ‘map’ that can be experienced, phenomenally and aesthetically, that can be walked upon and examined, read and deciphered. A map always has a complex tense or temporality—it is a record of past journeys and explorations, just as it offers advice and instructions for future journeys. It also exists in the present tense; it is a thing in the now, in and of itself. While maps are always abstractions and objectifications, the document here is returned to the realm of lived experience, remade as a ‘garden’. In addition to the two primary maps, which overlay Aboriginal and settler histories in a straightforward manner, there is a rich cacophony of other information;

[V]egetation, soil and geology maps, electoral boundaries, maps of Australia’s history of exploration, road maps, a weather map taken from Australia Day 1998, a Japanese tourist map, and various cartographic

oddities such as the Dingo Fence and the Pope's Line [...] Laid over all this information are two grids; the Mercator, binding the Australian continent to the world, and a local survey grid, binding concept to construction.<sup>viii</sup>

A 'map' is both a process and an object, and for this reason it seems to be a particularly rich and appropriate shorthand both for the Australian landscape itself, and for the techniques and processes that have been used to explore, name, and document it. Between the actual land and the map that articulates it lies the whole process of exploring, measuring, and documenting, and the GOAD draws these together. In addition to this crumpled and inscribed map surface, the garden contains other elements, including various nods to the popular culture of the Australian backyard—a Canary Island palm tree, a kidney-shaped swimming pool, a patch of perfectly manicured lawn. The Northern edge of the map gives way to a water pool with recumbent dead tree and the word 'Australian' as a built element at its edge. There are also other more arcane devices, including a camera obscura, 'white cube', and a few carefully selected but somewhat isolated plants and trees. Detailed descriptions and explanations for these elements have already been made elsewhere,<sup>ix</sup> and rather than repeating them here it seems more productive to look to their wider meaning and implications. In this sense, the difficulties involved in such an explanation and description are significant in themselves. On the one hand, such a description tends to devolve into a list, an esoteric, even surreal miscellany. On the other hand, the temptation is to fall back on the words of the designers themselves—that is, on the intentions behind the work, and the authority of authorship. This is because the work simply does not make sense as a simply and solely functional design. Both the justification for and meaning of the highly disparate elements of the garden can not be explained as part of a rational decision-making process, but rather they must be framed through the quite different logic of art.

The disjunction and difficulty of this process, and of making such a complex design broadly accessible, become startlingly obvious in the museum's own promotional and interpretative literature. In a section on its website discussing 'the building', the GOAD is breezily described as 'a symbolic landscape—large sculptural forms within a body of water, a little grass and a few trees.'<sup>x</sup> The discomfort here is palpable—with discussing landscape on its own terms, and terms other than a broad

history of gardens. The text continues; '[e]ncircled by the Museum, [the Garden] provides an opportunity for visitors to stop and relax as they contemplate an artistic exploration of 'place' and 'home'.'<sup>xi</sup> Here again, the use of the words 'artistic' and 'exploration' are uneasy alibis for a project that fits no traditional or conventional understanding of garden. It is of course unfair to pick on the work of a copywriter untrained in the field, whose primary objective is to explain a multifaceted work to an uncomprehending public. However, this very discomfort and incomprehension is instructive. This is not a 'garden' as one might traditionally expect or imagine it, as a refuge, a vision of earthly paradise. It contains few growing things; and thus steps outside the tradition of the garden as arcadian ideal. It is closer to being a field of debate, indeed a *playing* field where questions of Australian national identity can be tossed back and forth. It abandons the picturesque tradition of landscape as 'vegetated picture', in Catherine Bull's words, and seeks to shift into a critical and discursive register.<sup>xii</sup>

In light of this, it is a useful exercise to imagine, for a moment, what a member of the public might expect when visiting a 'garden' located within a 'museum', especially a 'national' museum, with its responsibility to represent the identity of the nation. There are several possibilities. It might seem plausible that the garden would act as place of public amenity, of rest and recreation: in this conception the garden might be a foil or counterpart to the museum, providing 'break-out space' and working to ameliorate so-called 'museum fatigue'. Such a garden would be a servant space, a kind of temporary refuge from the toils and challenges of the museum. It might also have a role in its own right as a destination and site for picnics—a place for partaking of the aesthetic pleasure of growing things. Alternatively, one might expect the garden to have a practical role in orientation and circulation—allowing people to emerge from the museum, orientate themselves in time and space, and move between different parts of the museum building. In each of these possibilities, the principal role of the garden would be as part of the amenity of the overall museum complex—fulfilling a specific practical role as part of the furniture, one might say. However, there is also a parallel possibility: that the garden might itself be a museum exhibit. Continuing our projection into what a member of the public might anticipate when planning a visit to such a thing, it could conceivably be a kind of botanical survey or representative sample of the plant life of the country. In another mode, it

could be a kind of theme park of national landscapes. In another mode again, it could be an example of contemporary landscape design in Australia. Alternatively, it could be a work of art. Now these diverse possibilities and roles are not mutually exclusive, or at least not necessarily. Nevertheless, overlapping or doubling them does involve considerable complications, and abandoning some altogether is confronting to public expectation.

Both the NMA and its garden are highly detailed, figurative, and allegorical. They could not say the things that they do, could not engage in such contentious discourses and make such bold assertions, if they were not identified and framed as distinct artworks in themselves. If they were literally ‘official’ parts of the museum, sanctioned as the accepted and acceptable narrative of Australian history and national identity, then they would be severely restrained. However by retaining a level of separation, vouchsafed by artistic authorship, both the landscape designers and architects have been able to frame their works as interpretations more than facts, as questions more than definitive answers, as speculations rather than universal truths. By calling upon the parallel but different logic of art, they simultaneously duck the need to be authoritative, and grasp the ability to be experimental. A key signal of this is the works’ clear expression of artifice, of their own constructedness. These are not seamless aesthetic works—they refuse the conventions and traditions of sensual pleasure in landscape and architecture—in the one case by avoiding the tradition of the garden as verdant refuge, and on the other by refusing architectural monumentality. Both refuse to be straightforwardly aesthetically pleasing, retaining a level of awkwardness, even ugliness, in the interests of semantic content. Michael Keniger has argued that

The GOAD is urban not Arcadian, enclosed rather than limitless, complex and challenging rather than simplistic and sedate. The GOAD is more an active event than a space of repose. It reveals clues as to the structure and nature of the forces that seek to control and shape the land and its pre- and postcolonial occupation [...] Like any garden, it is a mirror and foil to the world beyond and, in this case, to the tangle of ideas and actions that concern and affect the discovery, occupation, making and remaking of place in Australia.<sup>xiii</sup>

A national museum will always bear a responsibility to represent identity, to wrestle with concepts of ‘nation’ and ‘character’, problematic as they may be. In

Australia, in particular, the vast size and diversity of the landmass is only doubled by the complexity and heterogeneity of the population, making a simple and coherent national identity impossible to locate. Nevertheless, as Richard Weller has noted, if there has historically been one thing that has been a source of national belonging, it is a relationship to the land. ‘In the fine arts and popular culture, Australians have drawn on landscape as the prime referent for their identity and mythologies.’<sup>xiv</sup> However this identity, these mythologies, are complex—Australia is an overwhelmingly urbanised country, despite the huge role that the untamed interior plays in the national psyche. The reality for the vast majority of the population is a sub-urban, encultured and domesticated realm, in an artificial or constructed landscape. In light of this, as Weller notes, notions of identity as derived from landscape need to be continuously re-evaluated.

If the landscape is to be an honest register of identity, then the ground needs to be constantly scrutinized and rewritten. Shifting cultural constructions of landscape need to be ongoing, for otherwise lies become truths. The design for the landscape and architecture of the National Museum of Australia has been concerned creatively to embody shifting cultural constructions of landscape and identity.<sup>xv</sup>

The GOAD can be seen as, quite literally, as the NMA’s ‘backyard’. This association was made particularly clearly in the early renderings of the project, when the garden was dominated by a giant image of Don Burke, widely known in Australia through the long-running lifestyle television program ‘Burke’s Backyard’. While this billboard sized image was never realised in the final project, the message that it sends is clear: if the NMA can be understood to ‘house’ the stories of the nation, then the GOAD is its semi-enclosed backyard. The backyard has an important role in the Australian domestic vernacular. As in many places the front yard, facing the street, is a semi-public place of representation, overlooked, if not actually accessed by the world, and therefore carefully groomed and presented. The backyard, however, is popularly considered to be the place where much of suburban life takes place—site of barbecues and informal sporting events, it is a semi-private outdoor living space accessible only to friends and initiates. It is less about presentation, and serves more of a role in reflecting the identity of the residents back to themselves.

## Conclusion

The story of the GOAD is far from complete, and it has not all been happy. The NMA project was always politically loaded, and the building itself made some startlingly bold allusions and strident contributions to existing controversies over Australian national history and identity.<sup>xvi</sup> Given its position as a publicly-funded national museum, it was perhaps only a matter of time before this attracted the attention of political opponents, and sure enough a comprehensive review of the museum's exhibits was commissioned by the then Arts Minister, Rod Kemp, in 2003. What was particularly interesting about this exercise was that the review panel, despite clear guidelines that it was to examine the museum's exhibits, chose also to review the GOAD. This opens several important debates in itself; not only around the idea of the garden as itself a museum 'exhibit', but also around the autonomy and authorship of the landscape designer. The panel clearly perceived the garden as one of the museum's exhibits, and therefore scrutinised it for the same balanced, truthful, and authoritative approach that one might expect from any museum exhibition. Finding that the GOAD was 'alienating', the panel made a series of conclusions, including the recommendation that the Garden 'could be made both inviting and educational', and that the theme of Tangled Destinies should be extended into the Garden. More contentiously, though, the Panel offered a number of 'conceptual suggestions', including adding 'a number of large rocks that trace the geological history of the continent', 'planting of vegetation typical of Australia's past and present', adding a sundial, including 'well-produced representations of Aboriginal rock art', and adding more lawn.<sup>xvii</sup> All of this would serve to realise the Garden's 'great potential'

[...] as an inviting and educational domain—one which draws people into an area where they can sit or stroll, enjoy a meal or drink, in both summer and winter. It needs to be a place where visitors can reflect quietly. More vegetation and shaded seating would make this space welcoming—a real garden. It should be a space that is self-explanatory.<sup>xviii</sup>

This naturally caused a flurry of argument and condemnation from academics, who argued that not only had the panel exceeded their mandate by examining the garden at all, but that as it was not constituted of design professionals, in the first place the Panel was hopelessly unqualified to evaluate an aesthetic work such as the GOAD. Notable within this debate was an essay by Michael Keniger, which noted 'a

complete mismatch between the qualities of the space as it exists and the image of a garden as held by the panel' and criticised the Panel's 'emaciated design vision'.<sup>xix</sup> Likewise, in an open letter dated the 4<sup>th</sup> of August 2003, Helen Armstrong 'was struck by the naivety and ignorance about meanings embedded in the cultural landscape of Australia' that she saw in the Panel's report. She continued;

Such 'scientific' approaches to the Australian landscape are firmly located in logicopositivist approaches to the interpretation of landscape, characteristic of a period between mid 19<sup>th</sup> century up to the 1960s. To remark that gardens should be spaces that are self-explanatory denies the tradition of great gardens which have always been designed with deep and often obscure meanings... Apart from the ignorance about gardens, it is of deep concern that a panel of assessors should be unfamiliar with the scholarly developments in understanding the Australian cultural landscape which go far beyond considering only biophysical factors such as geology and vegetation associations. Equally it is a major concern that the panel felt that they could presume to be critics of design by considering such a narrow approach to open space as merely providing amenity such as seating and shade. How it is that this team of assessors could presume to make design judgments and recommendations when they are clearly unfamiliar with the criteria used to assess landscape designs?<sup>xx</sup>

At the time of writing, the GOAD is still installed, safe and unchanged, in the courtyard of the National Museum. The garden continues to prick and to provoke visitors, by avoiding the easy pleasures of the conventional garden in favour of the more difficult discourses of the constructed landscape. Working in concert with what is an unusually figurative and allegorical work of architecture, the Garden offers its own narration of Australian nationhood as it relates and is drawn from the land. Far from reinforcing the easy myths of the pioneering frontier, it is a challenging, sometimes hostile, and fundamentally critical construction; rather than offering easy and coherent answers, it poses some prickly questions. Blurring traditional dichotomies between nature and culture, challenging conventional notions of what a 'garden' might be and might mean, incorporating visual jokes and mannered intellectual asides, this is a rich and complex work of landscape design. It is also an important work, in the Australian and international context, for its contribution to debates about landscape and representation, landscape and memory, and the layering of history in a site.

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- <sup>i</sup> “goad, *n.*1”, “goad, *v.*”, *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. OED Online, Oxford University Press. 17 January, 2006 <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50096258>.
- <sup>ii</sup> “goad, *v.*”, *The Oxford English Dictionary*.
- <sup>iii</sup> See for example Christopher Kremmer, ‘Discord – And Lots of Concrete – Fill Garden of Australian Dreams’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 December, 2003; Georgina Safe, ‘Museum Designs to Court’, *The Australian*, 19 July, 2003, p. 3.
- <sup>iv</sup> For a good overview of the controversies, see Matthew Rimmer, ‘The Garden of Australian Dreams: The Moral Rights of Landscape Architects’, The Arts and Humanities Research Council and Birkbeck School of Law AHRC Research Network to Consider New Directions in Copyright Law, Workshop on Network Theme 3 (Developments in Rights Neighbouring on Copyright), Fiona Macmillan ed., <http://www.copyright.bbk.ac.uk/contents/publications/workingpapers.shtml>,
- <sup>v</sup> Richard Weller, ‘The National Museum, Canberra, and its Garden of Australian Dreams’, *Studies in the History of Gardens and Designed Landscapes*, 21, 1, January-March 2001, p. 75.
- <sup>vi</sup> Barnett, ‘A Field of Signs’, in Dimity Reed ed., *Tangled Destinies: National Museum of Australia*, Mulgrave, Vic., Images Publishing, 2002, p. 141.
- <sup>vii</sup> Weller, ‘The National Museum, Canberra, and its Garden of Australian Dreams’, p. 78.
- <sup>viii</sup> Weller, ‘The National Museum, Canberra, and its Garden of Australian Dreams’, pp. 78-79.
- <sup>ix</sup> See for example Richard Weller, ‘Mapping the Nation’, in D. Reed ed., *Tangled Destinies: National Museum of Australia*, pp. 124-137.
- <sup>x</sup> [http://www.nma.gov.au/about\\_us/the\\_building/](http://www.nma.gov.au/about_us/the_building/)
- <sup>xi</sup> [http://www.nma.gov.au/about\\_us/the\\_building/](http://www.nma.gov.au/about_us/the_building/)
- <sup>xii</sup> Catherine Bull, ‘Hardly Polite’, in D. Reed ed., *Tangled Destinies: National Museum of Australia*, p.151.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Michael Keniger, ‘Radar-Review’, *Architecture Australia* 92, 5, September/October, 2003, pp.34-35.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Weller, ‘The National Museum, Canberra, and its Garden of Australian Dreams’, p.66.
- <sup>xv</sup> Weller, ‘The National Museum, Canberra, and its Garden of Australian Dreams’, p.68.
- <sup>xvi</sup> See Naomi Stead, ‘Popularise or Perish: Reading the National Museum of Australia’, in Kevin Green ed., *Architecture’s Past*, Proceedings of the Annual Conference of SAHANZ, Darwin, September 2001.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Excerpts of the panel’s report published on the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects website, <http://www.aila.org.au/gardenofaustraliandreams/INDEX.HTM>
- <sup>xviii</sup> website, <http://www.aila.org.au/gardenofaustraliandreams/INDEX.HTM>
- <sup>xix</sup> Keniger, ‘Radar-Review’.
- <sup>xx</sup> Helen Armstrong, ‘Response to July 2003 Review of the National Museum of Art, It’s exhibitions and public programs’, published on the website of the website of the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects, <http://www.aila.org.au/gardenofaustraliandreams/INDEX.HTM>