NEWS L&B

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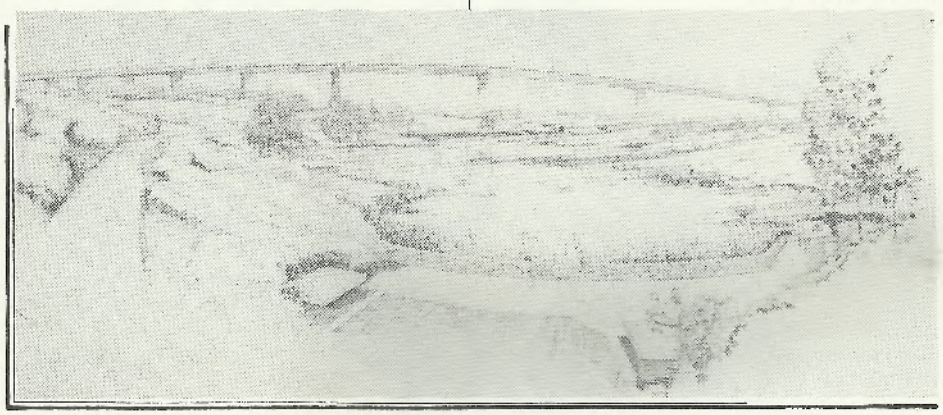
Earthmounding

Modern versions of an ancient art

For eons, mankind has had a fascination and an affinity with the source of his support and sustenance - the earth on which we stand. And, for perhaps nearly as long, we have seen fit to move the earth, to dig it and shape it, for functional, religious and artistic purposes.

Tectonic dynamics and volcanism continuously recreate a world which the elements then combine to conquer and level. The manipulation by man is, more often than not, aggressively at conflict with its earth context.

Artists impression: West Gate Park.



Most people who have travelled in Europe will have visited at least one of the ancient earth works. The region near Stonehenge is probably the most well known, but many examples have survived over the centuries and provide an historical context for a renewed interest in the art of earth mounding.

Functional Purposes

In modern times the examples of earth mounding which come most readily to mind are those constructed primarily for functional purposes. Earthfill dams are a grand scale version of the genre. Sound barriers alongside freeways are a smaller-scale example of earth mounding which can also make a substantial improvement to the aesthetic appearance of otherwise divisive major roads.

Artistic mounding

From history, and into the present time, earth mounding has been employed as an artistic expression. Drawing inspiration from nature and from the spiritual life, many examples still retain an element of mystery and symbolism which modern man can only guess at.

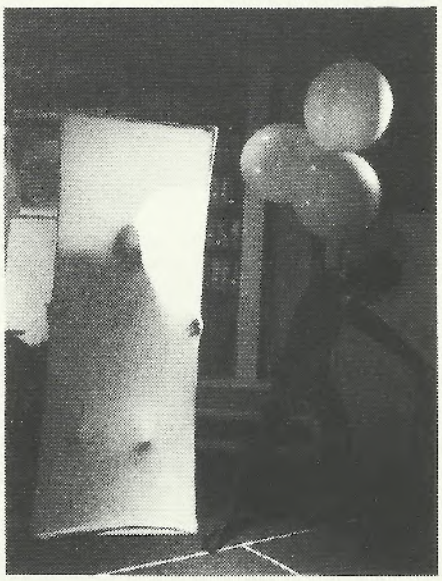
In this edition of "L & B News" we feature a number of recent projects where both the functional and artistic purposes of earth mounding have been employed. Barham Lakes is in a flat landscape near the Murray River at Swan Hill. Cape Schanck is a major new golf resort adjacent to the dramatic waters of Bass Strait. The Westgate/Lower Yarra Project is a series of sites adjacent to the West Gate Bridge.

On page two artist William Kelly makes a personal comment about earth mounding. He was very actively involved in the West Gate/Lower Yarra project. On page four the innovative ideas and work of Jim Sinatra, Head of the Landscape Architecture Department at RMIT, are illustrated.

One can't help but wonder - will the modern efforts of our society be sought out, mused over and studied in centuries to come? Or will they be discarded and changed as just one more part of a consumer age.

party night

Kate Bowman and Jamie: Living Sculpture.



On September 11, more than 200 people descended on 79 Power Street to celebrate 15 years of Loder & Bayly. Amidst the general good spirit there were moments ranging from the sublime to the ridiculous.

Early in the evening the tones of the Baroque Chamber Group provided a gentle background for pre-dinner drinks. A highlight of the evening from the stimulating and evocative movements of Kate Bowman and James in their performance of Living Sculpture.

In the special edition of Futures Game, a battle to the death, "Lewis Keeble", representing the forces of good planning everywhere, was victorious in overcoming "Milton Friedman" and all the forces of evil.

It was a fun night of chatting, eating and dancing. May there be many more.

West Gate Park

The idea for earth mounding at West Gate Park was originally conceived by Art Truter (ex Lands Department, now with Ministry for Planning and Environment). Loder & Bayly inherited his early work of shaping the earth adjacent to West Gate Bridge and, in a major project of the Victoria 150th Celebrations, prepared a comprehensive plan for the exciting development of this area. Stage I work has now been completed.

Together with Bruce Mackenzie, fresh from his "shaping" experience at Botany Bay, we continued and expanded Art Truter's brave, tectonic concept of building and financing the bones of a new landscape from the debris of society.

West Gate Park is a setting, a foreground and a place. It is conceived to harness the poetry and energy of the river, the bay and especially West Gate bridge. As a place it is designed to provide a variety of special experiences, linked to continuously unfold to the moving visitor. In its raw state today, the bones of the landscape are present and exciting in these forms. But the real delight will be in the dreams still to be realised.

Low Maintenance

The landcape is conceived as a mosiac of dense, self-maintaining coastal vegetation out of which grow the clean grass slopes of the mounds or carved niches of hard-edged urbanity. After an initial establishment period, during which careful maintenance is required, it is intended that the park cater for relatively large numbers of people with minimal maintenance. Together, a design team of landscape architects and artists have developed a series of exciting opportunities that will ensure that West Gate Park is a special place and not just green grass and trees revisited.

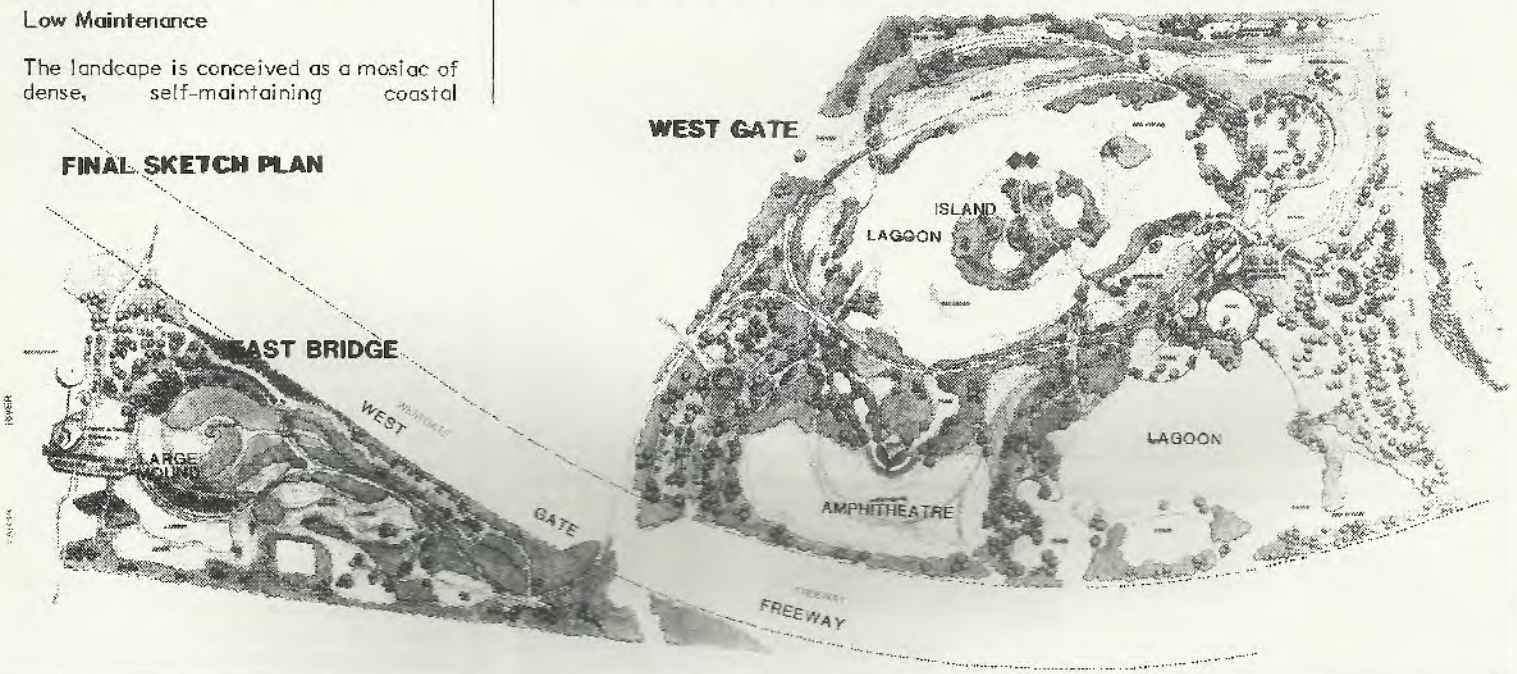
Exciting opportunities

These ideas documented in sketch plan and models include for example:

- A central arrival space at the crossing point of 6 major pathways and the proposed narrow-gauge railway, leading off through the park experiences. The spaces would be characterised by its own defining sculpture/object.
- A hidden garden designed as a sculptured version of a Central Australian canyon, carved out of the existing mounds. The garden would be accessed by a key-hole and by its own special works with walls of living colour. One wall has been designed to weep, the resulting water flowing, disppearing and re-appearing until it cascades into the main lake beside the Central Arrival Space.
- A sculpture walk, especially conceived for the visually handicapped, with each piece forming a part of it's setting and expressing particular textural characteristics.

Critically, the above and the other designed elements form part of a total concept; that concept being the strength and quality of the earth shaping linked with the vegetation mosaic.

Responsibility for the further development and maintenance of the West Gate Park has recently been taken over by the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works.



EARTHMOUNDS:
A Personal Attitude and a Case in Point - William Kelly

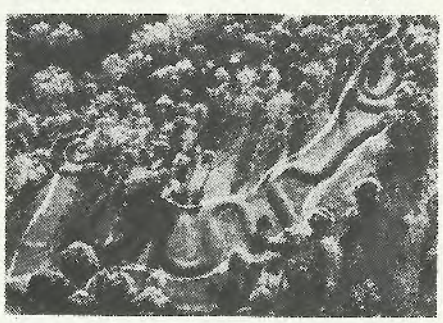
William Kelly is a painter. He was a member of the West Gate Park/Lower Yarra design team.

This earth shaping is a truly ancient activity. Using earth as a medium is a very old art form resulting in a view towards cultural expresion. Among the most moving examples for me are the effigy mounds (350 B.C. - 1300 A.D.) of pre-Whiteman North America.

To come across such a special place where things are not only designed well but also evoke a heartfelt experience - something deeply satisfying and emotive - is not common. A case in point for me was to occur when I came upon The Snake Mound in Ohio, USA, on a visit in 1980. On the top of a hill with steep sides it coils along the crest. Though not a high mound (only 1.2 metres in most areas), it is 425 metres long, following its curves from its head to its concentrically spiralled tail. It is fluid and lyrical, and on that winter day with no other visitors, quietly impressive.

There is poetry in this earth we walk. At times it is found; para-phrasing Michelangelo it can be discovered by a similar process to looking for the form that lay waiting in the stone. Some dream of moving and shaping 10 tonnes of earth with the same spirit of expression as Dylan Thomas might shape 10 stanzas of a poem. Both art and landscape design can become one, can become the stuff of dreams. Frequently, however, landscape design is to art as "The Sun News Pictorial" is to literature.

The limitations are not in the medium but in the concept to which it is applied.



The Snake Mound c.900-1300.
(Photo: "A History of American Art" D.M. Mendelowitz. 1970.)

CAPE SCHANCK - a unique resort

Final Sketch Plan

At Cape Schanck a unique resort development is rapidly taking shape. When complete it will include a prestigious residential development set amongst two of this country's best golf courses. It also includes a quality resort hotel. Loder & Bayly have been engaged on this project to provide the environmental planning, engineering, and landscape services.

There have been a great many requirements for earth mounding and shaping and many constraints imposed either by the topography, or through planning requirements. Much mounding and shaping has occurred to create platforms for the buildings on site - the houses and particularly the large prestigious Club House.

Structural requirements were of the utmost importance. It was interesting to see the major effect weather had on these operations. Keeping the sand moist helped maintain the stability of embankment slopes and to achieve adequate compaction. The rain was a marvellous aid to achieving these ends and, with the excellent drainage characteristics of the sandy soil, the rain was no impediment to the work.

Retention of Vegetation

The most stringent planning control was the limitation on the amount of clearing of vegetation. It was important, for soil stability reasons and from an aesthetic viewpoint, that as much vegetation as possible was retained. Retaining walls have been used to limit the extent of earthworks and clearing. This has been particularly important because of the gentle slopes required for stability of the sandy soils.

Brian Scantlebury, our Project Manager for the Cape Schanck project was Project Engineer for the Goonawarra Estate Golf Course, Sunbury, prior to joining Loder & Bayly. It is interesting to compare this earlier project with the Cape Schanck development.

The area at Goonawarra was a flat plain of basaltic clay and the first task was to create a natural shape with many small hills, rises and hollows. This requirement is difficult to document on plans, particularly the "natural" end result.

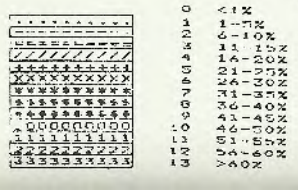
Our golf course architect determined his shaping and then built simple "play-dough" models using varying lengths of match to represent a metre of height.

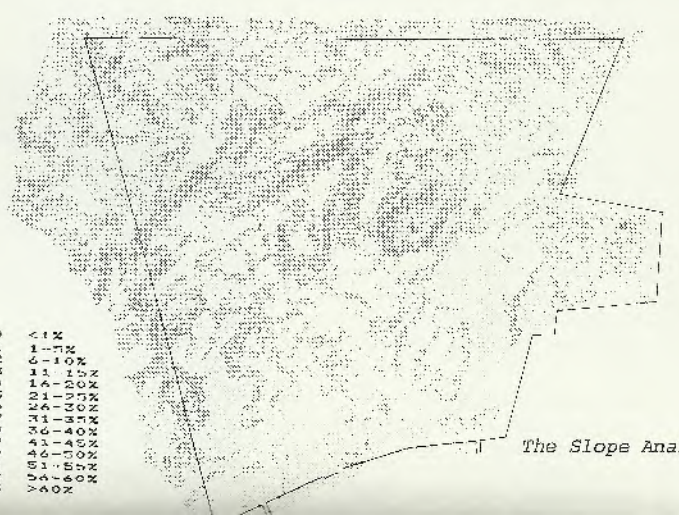
On-site crafting

The dozer operator was a craftsman, not merely a plant operator and where he could not visualise the verbal instructions he could take the model and recreate it perfectly on the ground. The end result was a landscape gently and naturally undulating, a great improvement to the uninspiring flat plain they started with.

Many of the basic requirements at Goonawarra found themselves repeated at Cape Schanck but there were many critical and fundamental differences. Where Goonawarra was a barren, flat basaltic clay plain Cape Schanck, on the edge of the Peninsula "Cups Country" is a heavily vegetated, convoluted tract of land based on sand many metres deep. The demand of this new medium demanded completely different techniques to achieve the same basic ends they had achieved at Goonawarra. It was also interesting to see how different level of expertise were utilised. At Goonawarra there was an expert designer and an expert operator and their skills did not overlap. At Cape Schanck the Golf Course architect Robert Trent-Jones provided a person who combined both skills. He was able to face a virgin track of land and, on a bulldozer, shape the land into a perfect golf fairway. It was an excellent example of earth sculpturing on a massive scale.

Projects such as Goonawarra and Cape Schanck provide excellent examples of a wide range of earth mounding operations. Their extent and requirement for structural, expedient and sculptured earthworks make them fascinating subjects for study.





The Slope Analysis Map

AN AUSTRALIAN EARTHMOUNDING AESTHETIC

Jim Sinatra, an American by birth, lives in Melbourne and is Head of the Landscape Architecture Department at RMIT. He is currently working on earth mounding in a very innovative and creative manner.

Having lived in an earth house in America and having explored projects which shaped dry landscape in order to create artistic winter snow patterns, Jim has become fascinated by the unique landscape of the Australian Continent and is now expressing this new experience in his work.

Suburban garden

At a suburban house in Balwyn, Jim has been designing and constructing a landscape for Chris and Steve Charmin. The house has recently been extended and renovated by architects Edmonds and Corrigan in an award-winning celebration of the 1950's.

After playing with a plain '50's garden, and a computer-produced post-modern proposal, the owners have been very supportive in encouraging Jim to design and build for them a quite unique garden which draws it's confidence from the Japanese tradition, but is very different. It is inspired by, and reflective of, the, "objects in space" in the Australian outback - termite mounds, Ayres Rock and others, set in a flat plain.

Jim, in his work, is trying to evoke the sense of symbolism and mystery that characterised earlier ages of land-forming. He sees it as being important to have created landscapes which give meaning to space, just as the Olgas give meaning back to the outback.

Capturing the essence

At the Charmin house Jim has created a mound in unwashed granitic sand. It is drying out, cracks appearing, and small plants are growing in the cracks. It will continue to change. Jim said "In America few landscape architects have managed to capture the essence of the country. In Australia people like Edna Wallings, Ellis Stones and Glen Wilson have made fine attempts to do so. The landscape profession here faces a challenge. They have the task to do what Fred Williams did for painting and what recent Australian films have done for that medium. Landscape architecture needs to be an expression of fine art, not just applied art, and needs to draw on an Australian aesthetic which goes beyond the cliche of tan bark and native plants".

Loder & Bayly has regular contact with the Landscape Architecture Department at RMIT. L & B staffers Peter Haack and Craig Eldridge are now completing their courses and Jacinta Bartlett and Sally Pittendrigh, who worked at L & B, are enrolled in the full-time course. Nick Safstrom, our Senior Landscape Architect, is Chairman of the Course Advisory Committee.

Earthmound at the Charmin Residence, Balwyn.

Barham Lakes

Barham Lakes is a 32 hectare flat site on which 300,000m^3 of soil has been manipulated to achieve a unique recreation complex of lakes, ponds and beaches set between continuously changing spaces of varying containment and skyline. The continuous lake intertwines between flowing hillocks, ridges and bowls.

The new landscape embraces the features of the adjacent Murray River, but presents them in deliberately contrived setting. Red gums, water holes, beaches and reed are used. The beaches, for instance are set against scalloped ridges and mounds. Water holes appear, with gentle sweeping shorelines behind interlocking peninsulas and spurs.

The project, being designed and constructed for the Barham Services Club, will provide a refuge and special focus for the Club's clients and the whole region. Loder & Bayly have designed and supervised the earthworks and services, including 20 hectares of irrigation and a 10 hectare lake. We have also designed the main structures and presented the client with vegetation themes. The Club itself is arranging planting and construction of the various structures.

Earthmounds and the Lake - Barham Lakes.

L & B NEWS

You are now reading the first edition of "L & B News". This newsletter will be published on a regular basis, every six weeks, and forwarded direct to you if you are on our mailing list. (If you are not on our mailing list please phone us.)

The newletters will include not only information about our current projects and personnel, but will also feature issues of wider community interest. Contributions from our readers will be welcomed.

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