The Brief

The project was procured by competition. The brief called for a regional garden attraction that had to be an iconic landmark, a legacy for future generations and compliment the existing heritage character and landscape setting. It contained the challenge to create a contemporary garden that would prove to be popular and attract substantial visitation. The garden should provide a kiosk and amenities for visitors. Access to the garden would be by admission fee.
The site
The 5-hectare site is located 65 kilometres north of Sydney on the high sandstone plateau that rises to the west of Brisbane Waters and to the north of the Hawkesbury River.

The site is located in the centre of a shallow valley of poor drainage downstream from an existing dam. Along the eastern edge of the site is a formal avenue of mixed exotic and native tree plantings. Further upslope and to the east, are the former correctional buildings and the newly refurbished grounds of the annual Flora Festival. The buildings that formed part of the boys home and later the low-security detention facility comprise of a number of long rectangular buildings of mass concrete built by the early occupants. The formalisation of the Festival site has created a terraced landscape of lawn and low concrete walls. To the west, the site is flanked by remnant bushland and pasture.

Originally a hanging swamp, the site was cleared and canalised during its use as a farm for homeless boys in the 1930’s. Despite the canalisation and eventual construction of the dam in the 1980’s the site remained very wet and largely under utilised.

Impressions
On a south facing slope with a dam wall above, the site always felt on the back foot, pressed downhill by the static mass of the dam and the push of light. The incursion of the dam seemed to distort the scale of the site, blocking the valley upslope with the dam wall, giving a sense of discontinuity. The dam rejects occupation and creates a void in the valley by bringing sky to earth with little relief.

The mood of the void upslope was compounded by the phlegmatic institutional aura that still pervades the former buildings. Yet the view to the south with its distant landscape was captivating, hinting at what the site once was a part of.

There was no turning back for the site, no redemption in a native bushland garden. The garden had to engage with the scale of the former incursions into the site and provide a strong character to answer the absence so present.
Minamata Memorial competition
This early competition entry explored the haptic possibilities of earthworks and combined this with an entropic process to deny access to a complete narrative. See Appendix B. (1)

Richard Serra
His critique of narrative conclusions and gestalt readings through an insistence on the importance of the elevation and the peripatetic resonate with me in my attempts to prescribe a conclusion for the garden and to seek the possibility of unexpected outcomes in moving through a fragmented landscape. see Yves-Alain Bois.


Richard Deacon
The cloud structures at Mt Penang resonate with his discussions of making the void and his lyrical drawing in space and on paper that confound line and volume.

Imants Tillers
His approach to the question concerning identity and the refusal to define it by bringing many possibilities together influenced the thinking about this project. (s)

Jardin de l’imaginaire, Terrason, France
The idea that fragments of design styles and garden traditions brought together in contrast and contradiction to one another could engender a new meaning was explored in Terrason and later taken up in Mt Penang. This correlates with my interest in Tillers work. See Part 3.

Jules de Balard
The artificiality is expressed through material choice that places it in the realm of engineering infrastructure.

Gilles Clément
His competition winning proposal for a new park in Lilla proposed a large inaccessible, raised forest. This captured my imagination as a fantastic place full of potential. I have not been there, I am told the reality is less special. (a)

Michael Heizer
Double negative, 1976. The creation of space by subtraction was a technique used in Mt Penang to undermine the exteriority and object-ness of the Plateau. (s)

Horticultural
The horticultural position is clearly expressed in the collection of rare species and their display.

Alois / His matter of fact approach to solving problems and his use of colour influenced the design for the bridge and the clouds onlegs. (s)

Alamat Looping diagram
of unexpected outcomes in moving through a fragmented landscape. see Yves-Alain Bois.

Legibility / A clear and hierarchical plan was undones by the form and path sequence introduced to the project.

Hudson Residential
The use of oversized pots at the Hudson and their obvious artificiality translated itself very effortlessly to Mt Penang where similarly a largeraised pot, the entire block was used to overcome the high water table. see page 46. (s)

Naturalistic
The naturalistic position is expressed in the way in which the clearly designed areas of the garden encounter replanted areas of endemic woodland along the western edge. It is also expressed in the use of native Sydney sandstone species as the armature for the other gardens.

Exteriority is introduced by the plateau and the wide lawns that deny occupation. The inversion of exteriority was played with.

Walled garden
Rejected as lacking engagement with the site and as being absolute.

Miralles & Pinos
The Igualada Cemetery, 1991. I was taken by the combination of earthwork and architecture, by the raw nature of certain elements and the refinement of others. This led me to imagine the space as powerfully immersive, one that required movement through to fully appreciate changing spatial relationships and scale. (s)

Jardin de L’imaginaire, Terrason, France
It is both landscape and object.

Floral Display
Accommodated within an abstract language. With the knowledge that the garden may one day be converted to a rose garden or some other more literal idea. However the structure put in place would be capable of maintaining the open ended question regarding the Australian garden.

Object
The reading of the object in the landscape is made ambiguous by scaling it to the size of the adjacent dam and having it heavily planted. It is both landscape and object.

Mt Penang
The inversion of exteriority is introduced by

Russell Drysdale
The Rabbits, 1947, oil on canvas. This painting made at Hill End where I had been artist in residence brings together the strong sense of immersion in the landscape with the idea of both the bridge as a dumb log left behind wedged between the two banks (p 111) and the rocks left in the fissure gardens, (p 122) (10)

Miralles & Pinos
The Igualada Cemetery, 1991.

Globale Foresphere / Ballast Point Masterplan
Both these projects drew on the sense of the peripatetic that was worked with. The idea that meaning could be imparted through the way one moves across over and through the site. See Page 160 and Appendix B.

Imants Tillers
His approach to the question concerning identity and the refusal to define it by bringing many possibilities together influenced the thinking about this project. (s)

Horticultural
The horticultural position is clearly expressed in the collection of rare species and their display.

Rachael Whiteread
Her cloud structures at Mt Penang. (7)

Mt Penang
The cloud structures at Mt Penang resonate with his discussions of making the void and his lyrical drawing in space and on paper that confound line and volume.

Anton James
Untitled charcoal drawing on paper, 1994 Hill End Study sculpture, plywood, 1994. My earlier interest in the play between 2D and 3D as expressed in drawings and sculptures found its way into the cloud structures at Mt Penang. (7)

Anton James

Richard Deacon
The cloud structures at Mt Penang resonate with his discussions of making the void and his lyrical drawing in space and on paper that confound line and volume.

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His approach to the question concerning identity and the refusal to define it by bringing many possibilities together influenced the thinking about this project. (s)

Anton James
Untitled charcoal drawing on paper, 1994 Hill End Study sculpture, plywood, 1994. My earlier interest in the play between 2D and 3D as expressed in drawings and sculptures found its way into the cloud structures at Mt Penang. (7)
The garden in my mind had to create a rich emotional encounter by making a great variety of spaces, strong forms, rich circulation and interesting vegetation.

Equally, it needed to achieve the following:

- Turn its greatest impediment namely, a poorly draining site split by the overflow channel from the existing dam, into an opportunity.

- Differentiate itself from the romantic, disturbed site; reject the bush school ethos of naturalism. Prevalent in Sydney during the 1970’s and 80’s, the bush school was an approach to design that sought to recreate a naturalistic bush setting using native vegetation and natural materials.

- Demonstrate the slippery relationship between artifice and “natural” of both the landscape and the garden.

- Be both in scale with the larger landscape but yet foreign to it.

- Address the question of the garden in Australia with the vexed questions around identity and the role of native versus exotic.

- Be a place of horticultural interest.

  I also felt that it needed to address its own potential failure and understand that it may one day be the very thing it sought to deny; a naturalistic Australian garden or a populist exotic flower garden.
Untitled painting (Thinking about Mt Penang and Howard Hodgkin), taken from sketchbook
The project developed to become an artificial landscape suspended above the site’s hanging swamp. A large block, a Plateau, forms the centerpiece of the garden in response to the need to provide free draining soils to establish a varied garden. It holds the garden like a giant pot, free draining and clear of the water table.

The garden is purposefully placed away, across the water from the arrival zone. The journey to the garden begins by crossing a blue bridge. The twisted blue steel box beam is the “log across the creek”, it spans from one shore to the other and supports a timber walkway to one side. The walkway gradually narrows as it approaches the Plateau. At the entry the beam is at balustrade height, whilst at the arrival point it has risen in relation to the walkway, to totally obscure views of the garden to the left with the exception of two conical peep holes that focus the view onto an existing tree and make evident the thickness of the box beam.

Once upon the Plateau, the garden paths do little to suggest a correct sequence of visitation, rather they branch and fork taking the visitor to a number of vantage points from which to observe where they have been, where they may go or where they cannot go without affording a rational diagram for arriving at any of these places. The exploration through the garden takes the visitor down into Fissure Gardens, between sheer walls, down suspended stairs clear of walls, through densely vegetated gentle ramps, or along gradual inclines in more open ground. The visitor moves within, over and through a volume made up of concrete, stone, water and vegetation to walk connections between ideas.

The Plateau is organic in form and supports a variety of plant groups and a series of designated spaces for curated temporary gardens. Whilst the exterior of the Plateau is purposefully made to overbear, the interior contains spaces of varying scale – mostly intimate and internalised – with plant groupings of mixed height, colour and texture, and water in various forms. The physical complexity is further added to by large incisions into the edge of the Plateau, these fissures provide opportunities to accommodate the more specialised horticultural requirements of distinct flora types.
The horticultural overlay reflects the idea of gardens within a garden. The armature planting is comprised of native Sydney sandstone species, whilst the Fissure Gardens display a variety of specialised plantings both native and exotic. The Fissure Gardens are oriented to create controlled microclimates in order to grow particular species, many of which had to be procured as seed or as cuttings from the Royal Botanic Garden’s collection in Sydney and from specialist growers. To the west of the garden, adjacent to the remnant bushland autochthonous (original) vegetation species, such as the Bloodwood and the Scribbly Gum, are encouraged to colonize various parts of the site.

Garden fragments from other traditions, contemporary and old, are placed against one another as a suggestion of the possibility of an identity yet to come or at least one on the move. The garden is conceived as a reservoir of ideas and traditions that holds the potential of an as yet unimagined re-assembly rather than as a didactic attempt at defining identity. It is somehow caught between the impossibility of creating a truly original identity and the impossibility of faithfully recreating the mimicked. The choice of a convoluted non-hierarchical path system further reinforces the refusal to figuration and linear narrative with a clear conclusion and by implication a definable identity.
The transformed watercourse that flows from the dam separates and connects the garden from its site. A series of cascading Water Gardens flow between the existing dam wall and the new Plateau acting to unify the new project with the existing dam whilst dislodging the Plateau from the eastern edge of the site and the entry.

The water begins out of sight at the top dam, cascades down along the northern edge of the Plateau, under the entry bridge to terminate in a new dam that wraps around the southern edge of the Plateau. Formed weirs wrap around the Plateau releasing water through fountain, sluice, steps, furrows and ripples. The body of water contained by each weir is in itself a garden planted with reeds, sedges lilies and lotus.

The Water Gardens provide a counterpoint to the Plateau within the overall landscape by offering a contrast in spatial scale, texture and character. As well as providing part of the setting and outlook for the kiosk, the Water Gardens mirror the sky and link the large existing dam and the lower irrigation dam below the Plateau.
Whilst drawing to find an appropriate scale and formal language with which to clearly differentiate the project from its context, a scale relationship with the dam is discovered.

Early alternate versions of the garden taken from sketchbook. As signaled in “how to use this book,” the red text and sketch brings together a key decision in the process.

Construction photos. Earthworks against existing dam wall. Establishing scale.
The engagement with the scale of the dam is further tested with more organic composition options and the introduction of linear elements. The simplicity and strength of a single element below the dam remains the more compelling option for the relationship it sets up with the existing dam and the space that is suggested between it and the dam.
The total lack of engagement with context and site resulting from an entirely walled garden is too extreme and lacks any nuance or ambiguity. This position is pulled back from and inverted to arrive at a solution with a solid volume, Plateau, that one can be on rather than in. This is then again transformed by insertions that create “fissures” to be occupied around the perimeter.
To attack and undo the strong legibility of the Plateau a layer of geometric complexity was introduced. An organic attack upon the square was carried out that resulted in fluid spatial arrangements, organic weirs and the realisation that a peripatetic engagement with spatial complexity can be the primary means of undermining a single meaning.
Having been informed after the competition that a major easement, that cannot be built upon, runs under the Plateau, it became clear that the square block could not accommodate the change without a substantial compromise to the scale relationship with the existing dam.
The attempts to maintain an orthogonal Plateau and accommodate the easement broke the scaling relationship set up with the existing dam. The search for a solution resulted in a flip point where the easement was wholly absorbed into the scheme, the geometric Plateau and organic weirs were inverted to give an organic Plateau with geometric weirs. This heightened the spatial complexity and the role of movement as a voice by which to undermine a clear identity. This discovery was further validated in the painting (right). It was then tested again in the working model.

Construction photo.
Breaking the dominance of the Plateau with the fissures.
The complexity of reading between natural and artificial is played with in the entry. The default position of the bridge as engineering is pushed back from. A simple beam was settled on as a gesture toward the rustic. Like a giant log that has become wedged above the precipice in the last flood, it provides access across the water. It is engineering dumbed down, it suggest an accident of nature and yet it declares its artificiality through colour.
Looping through bridge alternatives from engineered to ‘fallen log’ “Whilst exploring the potential for the bridge to be structurally expressive a moment of inversion occurs, where the ‘dumb log solution’ becomes self-evident and reverses expectation.”
The bridge beam in blue being lifted into place. Fortuitously the cranes ordered were orange and bright green.
The bridge gradually closes down the spatial sequence, obscures the view and narrows the path to foreshadow the spatial distortion and complexity of the garden.

Opposite: view through bridge peep hole.
Pathways turn back upon themselves, change both width and materiality to choreograph the visitors’ trajectory and bring attention to the physical and material differences of the site rather than to suggest any narrative cohesion.
This page: To heighten the three dimensional experience of the Plateau, paths plunge over edges in a variety of ways. Free floating stairs, walled stairs, and grounded stairs move through slots, down boulder slopes and between walls. Compression, verticality and release are heightened.

Facing page: Epiphyte Fissure

The stairs minimal structure contrasts with the mass of the Plateau. Its appearance is intended to feel almost as though it were simply propped there, as need demanded it, as a retrofit.
Sketchbook study for a grounded stair and a walled stair.

Stair against the concrete Plateau wall and a grounded stair leading to the Bottle Tree Garden (bottom right).
Rectilinear fissures counter the organic form of the Plateau and harness micro-climatic conditions to grow specific vegetation associations such as; rainforest species, wind pruned heath species, epiphytic species. The log option was explored to eventually be translated into the upright stainless mesh and coco fibre logs that support epiphytes shown on pages 123.

Facing page: The inaccessibility suggested in the sketches translated to the Wind Fissure
These sketches represent an important step in the sequence of reversals and inversions aimed at making physical the void. The first step being the insertion of the Plateau into the space of the valley. This is then carved to recreate voids as Fissures. The space of the Fissure is then animated with large boulders whose materiality and forms disrupt the space to bring it into contrast. A sense of volume so strongly suggested by both Drysdale’s painting *The Rabbiters* and Heizer’s displaced/replaced Mass (see Looping Diagram page 82).
Mt Penang

Rainforest Fissure
Concrete wall along the Water Gardens between the existing dam and the Plateau.

The material choice of precast panels, associated with railway and highway construction, establishes a dialogue with the engineered dam and a more generalised language of infrastructure that locates the garden in the artificial. The horizontal striations are used to suggest a water datum.
The solidity and uniformity of the facade is inverted in the internal walls where stone filled wire baskets present an alliance of disparate objects forced into standing up by their wire prison. Behind the unified systematised facade is a jumble pressing to get out.
The Water Gardens act to break and isolate the garden from its surrounds, whilst connecting it to the existing dam. What was a hanging swamp is now a part of the Water Garden.
The Cloud. Sculptural fragments animate the garden and playfully transform more traditional garden elements. Here the arbor becomes a cloud above a mist garden, momentarily frozen on legs about to run off but gradually being anchored by climbing plants.

Facing page, development of the Cloud through concept sketches, and computer models. Photos as completed.
Cloud Garden with the Bottle Tree Garden and column in the background on the left.
Study sketches for the Cloud with the Puddle Fountain and Meadow Garden at the centre of the sketch and the Bottle Garden at the top of the sketch.

Details of the Cloud and completed Cloud at the Puddle Fountain.
The fountain as a leaking book set above the now transformed swamp. Water escapes like upside down rain bursting through its containment whilst the Cloud watches on, providing shade. As completed on the facing page.
Plug? Or spike? The column used to mark a source of water grows wider the taller it gets, against the logic of gravity as expressed in the surrounding bottle trees. Facing page: As completed. The column’s horizontal texture opposes the bottle trees’ vertical texture.
View over Puddle Fountain
Cloud to the Bottle Tree
Garden and column in the
distance.
The design explores the possibility of a paradoxical reading of the garden in Australia, not one with a clear identity nor one made up of clearly defined typologies, but rather one that forms its identity through the juxtaposition of disparate identities. Geomorphology is referenced for the particular movement it forces, one that requires backtracking, dead ends and vertical movement. The engineering language seeks to undo any naturalistic reading. Whilst the oscillation between abstraction and realism creates a space that allows for the unexpected whilst acknowledging a material specificity to garden making.

(A specific description in reference to a critique in Landscape Australia. Volume 26 May 2006)
Sequence of plans

Mt Pening Site Plan

Development Application plan

Competition plan
Detail design site plan.
Construction detail sequence

Planting plan, Rainforest Fissure and Pandanus Fissure

Top: column to Puddle Fountain section
Middle: Cloud Garden section
Bottom: entry deck and bridge section
Concrete column with sawn pine formwork boards lined form (100mm wide) 10mm gap in boards to allow concrete to flow through.

NB. Refer to detail LDW.05 for location of column.

See engineers drawings for concrete thickness + steel location.

Refer structural drawings.

Concrete column with sawn pine formwork boards lined form (100mm wide) 10mm gap in boards to allow concrete to flow through.

Refer structural drawings.

Wall Panel Detail
Scale: 1:75

Wall Panel Detail
Scale: 1:35

Project
Mt Penang Gardens

Client
Festival Development Corporation, NSW Government

Completion Date
2004

Lead Consultant
Anton James Design

Engineering
Acor Consulting

Structural Engineer
Prof Max Irvine

Quantity Surveyor
Page Kirkland

Architecture (kiosk and toilets)
Lacoste and Stevenson

Construction
Haslin

Project Team
Anton James
Ingrid Mather
Geoffrey Britton
Craig Burton
David Duncan
Diana Pringle
Romily Davies
Jenny Clarsen
Matthew O’Connor

Obelisk Detail
Scale: 1:50

Column Elevation
1:50

Column Plan
1:50