MOUNT PENANG GARDENS

Just over ten years after its completion, the Mount Penang Gardens by Anton James Design (now JMD Design) is considered an enduring and radical contribution to public garden design in Australia.

WORDS SIMON HOGSTEN PHOTOGRAPHY PRETT DODGE
IN 2001, JMD DESIGN (THEN ANTON JAMES DESIGN) WON AN INTERNATIONAL COMPETITION TO DESIGN MT PENSAG GARDENS, A EIGHT-TERTURE PARK IN HARRING, ON THE NEW SOUTH WALES CENTRAL COAST. AT THE TIME, THE PUBLIC LANDSCAPE COMMUNITIES WERE EXPECTED TO CREATE AND DUXE AUSTRALIANNESS AND, ESPECIALLY IN SYDNEY, THE LEGACY OF THE SYDNEY POND SCHOOL. AT MT PENSAG, HOWEVER, JMD DESIGN DIRECTOR ANTON JAMES WAS ABLE TO INVENT A NEW GARDEN CANON WITHOUT ACQUIRING TO LITERAL AND IDEOLOGIC LANDSCAPE APPROACHES. MT PENSAG GARDENS OPENED IN 2001 AND, IN RECOGNITION OF ITS RECENT TENTH ANNIVERSARY, THIS PIECE HIGHLIGHTS SOME OF JAMES' ENDURING AND QUITE RADICAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO PUBLIC LANDSCAPES.

THE DESIGN OF MT PENSAG GARDENS IS DECEPTIVELY SIMPLE – A RAISED PLATEAU COMPRISING TWELVE GARDEN ROOMS, SOME TERRANCED, SOME EMERGING, SET IN A SERIES OF HANGING SWAMP OR WATER GARDENS. THE PLATEAU IS BOTH AN ORGANIZING FRAMEWORK FOR THE WHOLE OF THE GARDEN AND A TEXTURAL, ABSTRACT EXPRESSION OF SPATIAL AND TEXTURAL ORGANIZATION.

In 2001, JMD Design (then Anton James Design) won an international competition to design Mt Pensag Gardens, a eight-tenture park in Harring, on the New South Wales Central Coast. At the time, public landscape communities were expected to celebrate and define Australianness and, especially in Sydney, the legacy of the Sydney Pond School. At Mt Pensag, however, JMD Design Director Anton James was able to invent a new garden canon without acquiescing to literal and ideologic landscape approaches. Mt Pensag Gardens opened in 2001 and, in recognition of its recent tenth anniversary, this piece highlights some of James' enduring and quite radical contributions to public landscapes.

The design of Mt Pensag Gardens is deceptively simple—a raised plateau comprising twelve garden rooms, some terraced, some emergent, set in a series of hanging swamp or water gardens. The plateau is both an organizing framework for the whole of the garden and a textural, abstract expression of spatial and textural organization. After winning the competition, James was informed that the City of Gosford's water supply pipeline bisects the middle of the garden and cannot be built upon. This forced an invention of the original scheme. The design transformed from a large, square plateau with an organic flow of cut into its sides, into an irregular plateau that avoids the easement while providing a large internal gathering space, with geometric structures incised into its sides. The laphazard and irregular overlay of the existing trees, which had previously created a scooped channel, evolved into a key element—the water garden. Since James's characteristic approach to most design interventions is to turn site challenges into opportunities, the result is a series of highly sculpted textural moves and a water garden that crafles a series of interior gardens. The water garden both reverberates and seamlessly integrates the interior gardens to its context.

As I entered the garden across a bridge inspired by a fallen log, I expected to feel as if I was entering an island. This experience, however, felt more solid, less precarious and much more sculptural than that. And because of the spatial sequencers, the flatness of the wet water and the robust scale of its dam, I found I was walking on and within the water garden. The experience was less a crossing over a watery surface and more a washing through. While the top of the plateau offers a series of "rooms", careful choreography and a cacophony of juxtapositions mean there is no clear or singular path. You wander and you explore, sometimes immersed in these rooms, sometimes in vantage points straddled between them. James's approach to the Australian garden—linear, sequential and interpretative—is radical. The form of the plateau's gardens is organic. Hosting a variety of plant settings and a series of designated spaces for curated temporary gardens, the plateau exterior is resolutely over-scaled and its level drops dramatically but the scale of its inner spaces is vivid, with the largely intimate and internalized an example of James's "garden-within-a-garden" tactic. While this can be seen as very much a part of the public garden tradition, there is yet another well-considered twist at play here.

Each of the garden rooms has distinct flora, materiality and spatiality; however, it is the physical microclimates that the rooms embody that are most striking. They inspire curiosity and evoke reaction to their species' collections, rather than to the spatial landscape. The planting design creates ethereal spaces and its composition avoids battling native against exotic. Rather, it allows colonization and shows how vegetation takes advantage of, and creates, various microclimatic conditions to develop resilience. This articulates and the careful crafting of spatial volumes contrast with the propensity of plant materials to thrive, survive or die. The regimes of care produce an understood landscape that is less manicured—so they tend to contain and, as it must be, in a constant state of becoming. Visitors must wander through and discover this for themselves, responding to the artful juxtaposition of geometries and connectives.

Such complexity is increased by large incisions into the plateau's edge where more intimate gardens provide opportunities for greater diversity of species. While the planting framework for the plateau's surface is primarily native Sydney sandstone species, these gardens embrace specialized plantings, both native and exotic. The plateau gardens are Minuetta Pathways turn back upon themselves, where and materials change, all to choreograph the visitors' meandering course and direct attention to physical and material differences such as rich textures, light and shade, rather than suggest a cohesive narrative. These are spectacular mansions of serendipity such as the glimpses through the bottle tree garden to the public >
fronts with a sculptural cloud beyond. A combination suggesting an abstract Yves Bruder collage. Conversely, the fissure gardens are a contemporary expression of traditional grotto landscapes, carved out, interspersed, and complete with floating terraces, ephebias and tree ferns. While vaguely reminiscent of Victorian collector gardens, these lack their typical self-consciousness. The fissure gardens are at once hidden yet exposed, closed to the public above yet open to their wider surroundings. So while the planter's niche garden overlaps and is sometimes inward-looking, the fissure gardens, despite being spatially woven, look outwards across the water garden to the surrounding landscape. And although the water garden suggests the site boundary, vibrant bloodwood and scirrhous gum bushland are encouraged to colonize its western parts.

Mt Penang Gardens captures the paradoxical nature of public gardens in Australia. By cleverly juxtaposing disparate identities it avoids the normally clear identity suggested by established typologies and nationalist narratives. Its engineered – almost infrastructural – landscape contrasts with its bushland content and wider topographies. In scale with that contrast, it is nonetheless foreign to it. Abstract gestures and eccentric volumes collide with specific spaces for and of particular plants. Garden traditions are strangely familiar yet subverted and made anew. Willingly, it accepts garden ideas as diverse as the populist festival, the rural exposition and those of the Sydney Bush School, yet here, space is conditioned to their usual conventions. It could even be said they are set free. The open choreography and uncoupling of the path system allows for serendipity and unexpected spatial juxtapositions. More than ten years on, Mt Penang defines and explores a more contemporary common to which Australian landscape identity is less about vested questions of native versus exotic, naturalist versus formalist, and more about accepting and celebrating otherwise. James's masterful public garden provides a much-needed design alternative that explores and exposes emergence, resilience and adaptation in landscape form.

Author’s Note: I am indebted to my close friend and colleague, Professor Gernett for acquainting me with notions of “strangely familiar.” While the strangely familiar often refers to ordinary and everyday landscapes or situations, in the context of this article I use it to apply about the garden typologies that JMD Design transforms and subverts.
“More than ten years on, Mt Penang defines and explores a more contemporary canon in which Australian landscape identity is less about vexed questions of native versus exotic, naturalist versus formalist, and more about accepting and celebrating otherness.”
As director of Sydney-based practice JMD Design, Anton James is an accomplished and highly regarded landscape architect and artist with more than twenty years experience in the profession.

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE AUSTRALIA: WHAT DO YOU SEE AS THE PARTICULAR VALUES OF "THE PUBLIC GARDENS"?

Anton James: The particular value of the public garden lies in its ability to bring to scrutiny the extent to which the "garden" and "nature" are concepts full of cultural expectations and preconceptions that define a set of relations (often binary) vis-a-vis identity, nature, culture, representation, abstraction, artificiality, naturalism, art, craft, exotic and native, for example. The absence of an agreed society-wide definition for these terms further expands the possibility for scrutiny, collision and paradox in the public garden. Interestingly, the gardens that take on the guise of "natural" also have the potential for the highest "art" value.

LAA: WHAT PARTICULAR CONTEMPORARY STORIES/IDEAS OF PLACE, LOCAL NATURE AND CULTURE DO YOU WANT TO TELL IN YOUR PUBLIC GARDENS AND HOW DO YOU APPROACH TELLING THESE?

AJ: The vexed question of Australianness and the repeated attempts to make an Australian Garden is an important aspect of the public garden. I believe that the question of identity is far too complex and dynamic to suppositional or distilled into an image. The idea of conclusively representing Australia in landscape holds no interest for me. Rather, I am drawn to approaches such as that of Ineke Kijlstra, in which a complex set of influences and identities is explored and juxtaposed to allow for a continuous formation and redefinition of identity.

My response to this approach is to enter into a dialogue with the particularities of the site and of the garden. I look for a particular mood or experience that disrupts the cohesion of site and garden, one that intrigues or surprises, and I look to enable and nourish that atmosphere, to give it a voice, save it from the attempts to tidy it up and neatly smother it with a single narrative. I find the breaks and ruptures in a site fascinating. I am suspicious of the next story, with its conclusive interpretation, that can trivialise a site and banish the illogical and contradictory.

LAA: DO YOU REFER TO THE CREATIVE OR SCIENTIFIC WORKS OF OTHERS IN YOUR DESIGN WORK AND IF SO, WHO, WHAT AND WHY?

AJ: My influences are eclectic and comprise many artists, films and a few architects and landscape architects. I am particularly taken by the quotidian, the seemingly illogical and the at times surprising and unplanned outcomes of simple pragmatic interventions into landscape. I look to others to trigger an idea, to test my own or for an approach rather than a formal characteristic.

LAA: DO YOU SEE THE PROCESS OF PUBLIC GARDEN-MAKING AS ARTISTIC (OR CREATIVE) PRACTICE AND WHY?

AJ: I don't particularly like the word "artistic," it too often comes with the idea that art has by its very nature a higher merit than other activities. I like approaches that work towards seeing a site slightly differently in order to tease out something other than the expected, irrespective of whether or not it is art.

LAA: DO YOU THINK THERE ARE MAJOR IDEAS OR APPROACHES THAT DISTINGUISH CONTEMPORARY PUBLIC GARDEN-MAKING FROM HISTORIC GARDEN-MAKING (PARTICULARLY BOTANIC GARDENS) AND IF SO, WHAT ARE THE DISTINGUISHING FACTORS?

AJ: Public gardens are increasingly seen as a form of entertainment - the current vogue about the proposed changes to the Royal Botanic Gardens, Sydney highlights the shifting approach to botanical gardens. Botanic gardens are increasingly required to generate an ever greater share of their operating costs, which is seeing them borrow the theme park design techniques of attraction and spectacle to bolster their commercialization. The measure of their success is increasingly seen through the metrics of visitation and revenue.

LAA: HOW MANY PUBLIC GARDEN PROJECTS HAVE YOU DESIGNED (OR CARRIED OUT MASTERPLANS FOR) AND WHAT, WHERE ARE THEY?

AJ: At Penang Gardens in Kertong and Etiva Fair Gardens in Ettina, both on the New South Wales Central Coast.

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