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Realising new leisure opportunities for old urban parks: the internal reserve in Australia

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Abstract

The internal reserve-community space at the rear of residential lots with no street frontage was a conspicuously innovative feature of the ‘town-planned’ or ‘garden’ suburb in the first three decades of the 20th century in many countries. Often intended as a playground for children, designers also suggested the internal reserve as an ideal locus for community building through leisure-time activities such as sport, agriculture, and passive recreation. Within a decade they were increasingly viewed as nuisance, or even dangerous, spaces. Many retain this stigma, unhelped by community apathy and governmental disinterest amid the broader neglect of the public realm. Drawing on the Australian experience, this paper acknowledges some of the shortcomings of internal reserves but points toward a more positive set of leisure futures. Many of these small, semi-private spaces may yet prove to be valuable community assets in the new millennium.

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1. Introduction

Small open spaces are an integral component of the urban landscape but have frequently proved problematic despite their intrinsic contribution to the public realm. Open space was historically seen as providing a setting in which communal sharing of experiences could take place promoting social harmony (Banerjee, 2001). Yet from the 1970s in particular the leisure potential of many pocket parks was eroded through disuse and neglect (Armstrong, 1999; Westcott, 1992). A combination of changing social mores and demographic structures, public safety concerns, the rise

of new leisure opportunities, and shortages in funding for maintenance or improvements to facilities in urban parks (Hargett, 2001) saw many small parks become unattractive to local users. The renaissance has been slow, uneven, and often crucially driven by community action (Francis et al., 1984). While the big city parks grab most of the attention (Woudstra and Fieldhouse, 2000), there is growing awareness that small spaces can also ‘make a difference’ to the quality of urban life (Jasprizza, 1999).

Different types of open space can present their own peculiar mix of constraints and opportunities. The location, design, development and management of these spaces can usually be linked to broader fashions, cultural attitudes, and social ideals. Hidden deep in the planned early 20th century garden suburbs of cities around the world is a very distinctive form of

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urban open space: the ‘internal reserve’ or ‘interior park’. A feature of many suburbs planned on ‘town planning lines’, these parks embodied a concatenation of contemporary hopes and aspirations for a new form of socially engineered suburban living stressing health, productivity, morality and efficiency. Parks as neighbourhood lungs were both the symbolic and functional epicentres of the house-and-garden communities which would be the antithesis of the horrors of slum and tenement living (Miller, 2002). The internal reserve was conceived as the virtual cornerstone of community life, inconspicuously offering a democratic range of locally sensitive leisure options to complement home and work.

Our empirical material is drawn from Australian cities where suburban reformers of 80 years ago have left a legacy of these secret spaces which are not only interesting historically but raise a range of planning and management issues. In quantitative terms, the scale of the problem is not large. There are perhaps only about 100 of these small parks nationwide. What is significant, however, is how diffuse and similar the issues raised are for a category of parkland that slips below the radar of most urban open space classifications (Daly, 2000). Most could perhaps be classed as the ‘small undeveloped open spaces’ recognised by Richards (1994). Through its exclusive nature, the internal reserve often confounds the distinction between public and private space. A handful of reserves have matured well and remain a focal point for community activity. The majority are under-utilised and unattractive. Still others have been erased entirely by inclusion in surrounding residential allotments or comprehensively redeveloped for non-leisure uses, a growing threat with the current urban policy preoccupation with suburban densification through infill development. Elimination remains a preferred option for some local authorities who prefer not to have responsibility for these lands.

What should we do about these open spaces? The paper draws on an ongoing research project aimed at informing analysis of general issues of conservation, resource and landscape management, and urban planning through an intensive investigation of a micro-scale urban feature (introduced in Freestone and Nichols, 2002a). It has proceeded through the triangulating of historic planning texts, subdivision plans, street directories, interviews with park man-

agers, and detailed field inventory in every Australian state. Our survey integrates past, present and future, but the primary focus here is looking ahead. This paper reviews the phenomenon of internal reserves with particular reference to their potential as re-invigorated community assets. It describes a range of reserve types, sketches their historical pedigree, discusses some of the management problems presented, and identifies a number of revitalisation scenarios stressing community and environmental themes. Our view is that internal reserves—better understood—represent a hidden activity resource for local communities.

2. Types of internal reserves

The particular type of open space under investigation requires definition. There are various forms of urban open space from all eras which might be categorised under the label of ‘internal reserve’. There are similarities in modern-day cluster housing estates (sacrificing private yards for shared greens often held in community title) and Radburn layouts (where small culs-de-sac pierce superblocks structured around pedestrian-only reserves, walkways and bikeways). Our focus is the relatively cohesive and identifiable subset created as part of the first wave of mass planned garden suburb development in Australia between the First and Second World Wars. They were a national phenomenon, surviving today in the middle-ring suburbs of major metropolitan centres and some regional centres. Fig. 1 depicts an archetypal house-locked internal reserve with two narrow rights-of-way from perimeter streets; it is unnamed and described only by the surveyors’ annotation—‘for public recreation’. Fig. 2 illustrates a reserve in a 1920s garden suburb subdivision in a southern Sydney suburb. Although mowed regularly by the local council, it remains a typically underused space with dimension, aspect and access problems making it unsuitable for organised recreation despite its expanse. Spaces like these are now at risk from developers as locations for medium density infill development.

Internal reserves are not homogeneous but there are some recurring characteristics (Table 1). They are rarely named and often remain unrecorded by commercially-produced street directories. No signage or other street landmarks may exist to guide the casual

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