Editorial

This issue of Historic Environment is our first to focus on historic gardens and landscapes. Subjects as diverse as rhododendrons and shade houses provide a backdrop to more analytical articles. However it is research into such topics that provides the basis for garden restorations and archaeological investigation like that done by the Historic Houses Trust in Sydney, described here by Peter Watts and James Broadbent.

The work at Sydney, and the interpretative study by Paul Fox, indicate a growing interest in the field of historic gardens and landscapes in Australia. Until recently (and seemingly a view still held in Victoria and some other states) many significant gardens were looked upon as a mere backdrop to prominent historic buildings while landscapers sought to ameliorate the effect of many years' growth and development in such gardens.

With the acquisition of Rippon Lea by the National Trust of Australia (Victoria) in the 1970s a shift of emphasis was signalled. Here a property whose major significance related to its garden was 'preserved for the nation' by a body primarily interested in the built environment.

It is now a decade since that acquisition and considerable sophistication has been developed, particularly by the work of Australia ICOMOS, in the analysis of significance and the implications this has for the conservation and public interpretation of a place. This sophistication is well demonstrated by the work of the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales. Much loved but incongruous sections of gardens (particularly at Vaucluse House) have been removed and replaced by appropriate landscaping to enhance public appreciation of the primary significance of the building or garden.

Why has this sophistication been so slow to reach Melbourne? Major properties, open one would assume for public education, are still treated as if they were the private property of an eccentric dilettante. Worse still, many such gardens are managed with no overall philosophy or policy, and occasionally as if they were municipal parks.

With the advent and subsequent growth of the Australian Garden History Society, garden committees within National Trusts and government heritage organisations, why is more pressure not being placed on the custodians of our historic gardens, particularly those open to the public, for a more scholarly approach to their conservation and interpretation? The need for such pressure is demonstrated in the two reviews in this issue of the controversial report on conservation and management of the superb 19th century public gardens controlled by the Melbourne City Council. That awareness is growing is shown by the decision of the Australian Garden History Society to offer, next year, a $500 prize for the best survey and report on an historic or significant garden or landscape anywhere in Australia, carried out by a student at a recognised tertiary establishment.