Respecting the layers: Newington Armaments Depot and the Olympic Village

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I would like to discuss the difference between two approaches to urban design and their respective capacities for the incorporation and interpretation of traces of the past - not just capital H heritage. One approach could be termed 'open and contextual' the other 'closed and utopian'.

'Utopia', we know literally means 'no place'. Usually we think of this simply meaning an unachievable ideal which does not and cannot exist - and therefore is 'nowhere' even though we continue to strive for it. But it can also be thought of as a denial of place. That is, the ideal that is contained in a 'utopian' design is not interested in the particular characteristics of a specific site or relating to a broader context. Most urban design for larger sites follows this utopian approach. Simply, the larger the site, the more tempting it is to attempt to create an ideal microcosm of utopian perfection and the less interest there is in recognising and extending surrounding patterns. Many architects feel comfortable with this heroic hermeticism because it is only a small step from 'building as beautiful object' to 'master plan as utopian ideal'. This striving for an urban ideal is manifested by gated communities, and 'new urbanist' suburban designs. Examples are Rosecorp's Breakfast Point on the old Mortlake Gasworks site and also the Delfin Mirvac Lend Lease scheme for the Olympic village.

The alternative approach has more in common with small-scale urban design interventions that must, of necessity pay more attention to context. However the approach need not be confined to small-scale interventions, rather it is an approach that considers how existing patterns might be used, what balancing and compensatory actions might be taken and what is already on the site that might be able to be incorporated into the design because the past and its traces, its temporal and evolutionary context are as significant as its geographic and spatial context. The main and most common objection to a detailed contextual response and the retention of physical traces in master planning is that they are 'too difficult to plan around', increase costs, cause delays - read increased costs again - and would somehow compromise the purity of the utopian vision, though this is not made explicit.

There are two aspects of urban design I would like to tease out. Firstly my contention is that these concerns about cost delays and impediments to design are overstated. The competitive design process for the Olympic village can be seen as an exhaustive thorough investigation and testing of alternative urban design propositions subject to detailed commercial scrutiny with absolute deadlines. The Aurora scheme shows that retention and incorporation of fabric is possible. Secondly, I will suggest that interpretation of a site which is to be redeveloped is perhaps better served by the retention of as much fabric as possible, no matter how humble, allowing awkward but curious and stimulating juxtapositions rather than a 'museological' approach to the retention of exemplary elements which I believe is embodied in Heritage legislation.

Historical and geographic context: why is there an armaments depot at Newington?

The context for Newington is the overlay of military operations on the geography of Sydney, where military establishments started off around Circular Quay; there was a gradual and quite adventurous move outwards. When I say adventurous, the 1801 Battery on Middle Head was abandoned very early because it was too difficult to maintain. There was a sequential outward-looking and outward-moving defensive system and an inward moving supportive logistic, industrial and storage infrastructure. Security and safety were achieved by simple spatial separation to the extent that in the 1940s, St Mary's munitions were way out west. So from the beginning you had the defence to the east, you had industry and the munitions cut to the west.

The Parramatta River was a major conduit for industrial transport and it was also more secure and safe and easier for heavy and bulky freight than road or rail. Newington was part of this military use of the water which connected isolated sites and the islands in Sydney harbour. It allowed for the transport of heavy munitions in a secure way from ships and, until quite recently, when ships came in to Garden Island, munitions were unloaded and taken to Newington by barge for the duration of their stay.

The site

The site was developed in a number of phases. Each has a distinctive architecture and intervention in the landscape. The first is the nineteenth-century precinct, close to the river with brick and stone buildings served by small-gauge rail. The layout is determined by minimum separation distances, rail gradients and radii and an attempt to minimize modification of the landform and is quite intricate. The later phases show extensions of the rail but less concern with minimizing earthworks as mechanical excavation became commonplace. The last phases in the south show the shift to a more extensive

Figure 1 Military facilities on the harbour.
Figure 2 Major components of the Newington depot and the village site.

and spread-out road based transport system and use of the existing landform as part of design for the munitions storage.

The village site

The aerial photo can be seen as providing a diagram of possible urban structure that could be built on. Three of the five competition schemes used this as the driver for their design and retained the bunkers. Typically, the northern nineteenth-century section was not part of the village site because it was simply nineteenth-century and deemed to have higher heritage value. Personally, I've found the more things resemble a Haberfield federation house, the more often they are recognized by the public as having heritage value. That is, cute brickwork, domestic scale and some nice sandstone details. I know this is a parody, but too often true. So it comes as no surprise that the northern section of the depot that has these characteristics has been set aside while the twentieth-century south has been reduced to a few 'type' examples.

So from that initial point at the river there was some modification of the landscape but essentially it is an intervention of minimal effort which is a recurring theme in Sydney. Using the landform as infrastructure: just look at the woolstores in Pyrmont, and Hickson Road at Walsh Bay for the use of topography to achieve grade separation in lieu of building. It's always been a principle: 'let's do the absolute minimum'.

Newington Armaments Depot illustrates the typical development pattern of large military sites. Unconstrained by land economics they are typically opportunistic, sprawling, organic and ad hoc, and they use space and landform instead of building for their purposes. Thankfully, military facilities management includes a disinclination to demolish and a propensity to adapt and reuse buildings and infrastructure. The need for continuing operations without disruption is shared by the military with other institutions like hospitals, major industries that have occupied the same site for a long period and these too have always shown organic growth and remarkable improvisation and ad-hocery.

Why then shouldn't the design of the village continue this approach?

I've worked on the Olympic Village in a number of ways. Firstly I submitted a design on behalf of Greenpeace in the original Design Competition for the Village held in 1992. In their wisdom, the judges awarded five equal first places and we decided not to have a second stage to select a single design, but rather to collaborate, which was a very interesting exercise. The reason this was possible was that there was considerable overlap and similarity of approach in the various schemes. Our approach included street grids and ridge roads, which drew from the patterns of development in Sydney, and the retention and incorporation of much of the armaments depot into the designs. Our design was called Aurora Village.

Later on, in 1997, I was team leader for the urban design and architecture for the Aurora bid for the actual construction of the Olympic Village. The design team included Allen Jack and Cottier, Annand Alcock, Oculus and Jackson Tece Chesterman. This later design continued many of the approaches of the original design for the Sydney Olympic Bid. The overall approach of our design was very different from the village that was finally built, which was named 'Newington'.

Figure 3 British bunkers.

On the village site there are three types of bunker, which invite a national stereotype joke: there were an Englishman, an American and an Australian and they were asked to build a munitions storage facility. The Englishman re-opened his pattern book where he’d last opened it in India, Rhodesia, and Malaya. And the pattern book specified 500mm concrete, with 20 and 50mm steel reinforcement at about 100mm centres; the same specification around the world; a big investment.

Figure 4 American Arco bunkers bottom left, Australian on right.
during the 1940s; solid, stolid, slow and expensive. These faced out across the wetlands, so that the blast doors would simply open and all the explosion would be directed at the migratory birds. So there was a different set of priorities in the 1940s. Then, when there was a need for a quick expansion, the American didn't really want to wait around, so he called Stateside and got over some prefabricated Armco steel, barrel vaulted structures, with bolt-on ends. Relatively lightweight, quick, just there for the duration. The Australian didn't open any book, didn't call anyone but jumped on the excavator, dug a big hole, got in some hardwood 4x2s and whacked up a fibro shed and tricked it out with a nice bit of sandstone rockery work at the entrance.

Apart from the bunker there were a range of other facilities including testing laboratories, munitions assembly and disassembly and so forth. These interesting fibro laboratories and testing sheds had solid concrete blast-walls in between them. So that if some poor bloke gets blown up in one, the people next door still turn up for work the next day. The fibro became, a bit of a 'leitmotif' during the design of the Olympic Village. This caused a lot of controversy during the final design because asbestos by that time was a major occupational health and safety issue. Our clients couldn't understand what the hell we were going on about even suggesting that they might be retained, and at that point Alan Groker who was on the team said: 'I don't know what you're complaining about, when I was a kid I used to eat the stuff'. From that point on of course he was known as 'Fibro' Croker.

**Figure 5** The Greenpeace sponsored scheme showing the bunker road.

**Response to the site**

I will now show how the elements were incorporated into the various designs. In the Greenpeace scheme of 1992, the bunkers and those blast walls were retained and the cottages reinterpreted as community facilities as part of the major ridge road. The British bunkers were adapted for various Olympic and post-Olympic functions along the bottom road.

**Aurora bid 1996**

We thought our design discipline should be to endeavour to keep everything; the undulating bunker road that goes up and down, service roads, and, the bunkers. The western street grid was generated by the extension of the adjacent streets. This collides with the archetypal Sydney ridge road. The eastern street alignments are generated by the foot-slope bunker road and are spaced by the wonderful bunker promontories which terminate each street. When you’re this far west (Newington has the last outcrop of sandstone on the south side of the harbour), you’re pretty desperate for a bit of topography so this artificial landscape is precious. A bunker at the end of the street is a wonderful place to stand and look out over the wetlands, is something that might engender enquiry as opposed to having it wrapped up and interpreted. And the other thing was of course, that if there is so much that's kept, the interpretation by default should be able to be minimal; particularly with the bunkers further to the north of the site.

**Figure 6** Relationship of Aurora village layout to retained elements.

**Differences between the Aurora and Newington schemes**

Master plans all tend to look the same at first glance: they all have roads, parks etc. They are impenetrable because as a two-dimensional graphic viewed from above they attempt to represent a reality that will be experienced on the ground sequentially and in time. All too often they convince by making obvious graphic gestures. For example a squarish park surrounded by houses is graphically symbolic of ‘equitable community’. So it is worth pointing out the most obvious differences between the two schemes.

There’s not a continuous park road in the Newington scheme; that means that those edge roads on the scheme on the right, which is the current village, is not a public road in a sense, It is not used, It means that there are three separate neighbourhoods which is an idealised, utopian way of thinking about things but it is also a very closed way of thinking about urban design. This is entirely consistent with North Newington being kept as a ‘heritage precinct’. Newington does not have an open relationship to the venues or to the landscape, nor to the past. The scheme that is built is something so new, that it has involved complete erasure. The roads were removed so the context or logic of the bunkers was lost. The roads could have also been disruptive elements - the only undulating road in Sydney! So the opportunity for juxtaposition on the one hand and context on the other were lost.

In contrast with the Newington scheme we developed about 30 house types so that we could fit them around the bunkers.

![Historic Environment Volume 18, Number 2 2005](image-url)
and spatially define the public domain. We got down to the precise design of the stairs etc. that flank these bunkers; that would allow retained elements to sit in a sensible way in relation to the street, so it wasn’t too haphazard. So that it could work for both the Olympics and Paralympics, we used the grade separations and the disjunctions that were there from the military as built barriers instead of fences everywhere, which is what eventually happened in 2000.

In the Aurora scheme the ‘bullring’ became a sunken road in a ring park. Why would you want to go and design mounds and design landscape features when all this stuff is already there and you can work with it? Minimal intervention really, we were working as closely as possible with what was there. The sunken fibro shed and earthworks were turned into sunken gardens for surrounding apartments. Our logic was: ‘If it is toxic fibro, it’s going to have to have all the fibro sheeting removed. Fine. Let’s re-clad it with lexan translucent sheeting or something similar, or let’s turn it in to green houses. If there is a problem, and we are going to have to change the fabric, well let’s do something with it. Let’s not just erase it’.

Nevertheless, we did manage to cook up a whole lot of different activities to put into them: there was water storage, there were scout halls, there were various craft activities, workshops, nightclubs and whatever. So we managed to satisfy them, but it was an underhand game and we were really just trying to keep them. And again the dichotomy. The ‘closed utopian’ approach which, like nature, abhors a vacuum or an empty space without a defined use. Utopia is threatened and insulted by a crumbling ruin and strives for completeness and perfection.

Functionalism

Having overcome the difficulty of incorporating the physical elements into the planning, we were confronted with an even greater philosophical challenge that could be called functional Calvinism. That is, unless something has a use, it should not exist. Firstly, we had a devil of a time convincing the clients that we should keep the bunkers; they said ‘well, what are you going to do with them?’ and we said ‘well, during the Olympics we’ll use them for accreditation, and storage for all the gear and they’re nicely sound proofed for the gas co-generation plant and so on’.

Then we went to the government and presented, and they said ‘well, what are you going to do with them after the Olympics?’ and we said ‘well, do we really have to do anything with them? Why can’t they just sit there, they’re not going to go anywhere. 500mm thick concrete, they’re probably going to stay there for a fair while and look after themselves. What’s wrong with having ruins? You know, if they are embedded in the landscape in a way where it actually becomes a landscape feature as part of the urban design, then where’s the problem?’.

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Conclusion

I have sought to articulate two different approaches to urban design: ‘closed utopian’ and ‘open contextual’. The first is dominant in architectural and urban design practice because it is neat, complete and easy. Most current heritage and interpretation practice is also aligned with this approach, not because there is any collusion nor for that matter shared values, but rather because heritage and interpretation are usually highly constrained by the dynamic and forcefulness of development. So the scope for heritage is generally limited to that carved out by heritage legislation. It puts heritage on the back foot immediately by forcing it to adopt a museological accessioning approach. This involves identifying the best example of type according to ‘criteria’ before bringing it into the ‘collection’, making a commitment to maintaining it and because it been de-contextualised, interpreting it. And of course these precious few things that are retained are then untouchable. When you approach one of these framed objects you know ‘now it’s the time for me to appreciate heritage’. This careful framing and sanitisation removes the jolt of incongruity or surprise. A place for everything and everything in its place.

The open contextual approach offers an alternative. In one of the other papers at the conference, mention was made of Tilden’s comment about how important provocation and the unexpected are as generators of interest and therefore as the first step in interpretation – grabbing someone’s attention. This is lost when things are wrapped up and made in to special places with curtilages. And our proposition here was: it’s the unexpected, it’s the juxtaposition, it’s the unusual that is actually embedded in normality that will then be sufficient for people to interpret the place with minimal assistance – they can trace the line themselves. On the village site it wasn’t just the buildings and bunkers but the road alignments, the mode of the intervention in the landscape, which links the site back to the first fortifications and patterns of institutional land use over the whole city, that is important.

An approach which simply starts out with the intention of keeping as much as possible, irrespective of ‘value’, will inevitably lead to a richer more provocative sense of place. This goes well beyond the requirements of heritage conservation and interpretation. Rather it is a pro-active intention to use the remaining elements as the generator of urban design. You could call it ‘urban design opportunity’ which is another set of values that is more extensive and includes heritage, but isn’t in legislation. And because much of this fabric is deemed ‘second-rate’, it is very liberating because as architects, it gives us some license to intervene. It’s not hands-off. The Olympic village process shows that where there were two very focused commercial bids, with a drop-dead deadline, with the same site, with exactly the same program of 15,322 athletes and officials, it was possible to pursue this alternative ‘open contextual’ approach.

The pity is that it doesn’t happen more often.