

Preservation by Design: Approaches to Landscape Preservation in Sydney Australia

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Abstract

This paper explores the proposition that the *creation* of designed landscapes on the Sydney Harbour Foreshore is contributing to the *preservation* of these places as individual and historic landscapes. The analysis of three foreshore parks aims to reveal how the design process—intentionally or not—was in effect, an act of preservation that made broader contributions to the conservation of a regional cultural identity.

Key Words

landscape preservation; landscape architecture; post-industrial parks; Sydney Harbour

Introduction

In 1979 American landscape architect Julius Fabos exclaimed in the inaugural issue of *Landscape Australia*, “Is preservation landscape architecture? It is!” (Fabos 1979, 16). Fabos reminds us that the “urge to preserve” is a central theme in the history of the profession of landscape architecture. Similarly, Ethan Carr asserts that the vision statement for the U.S. National Park Service (NPS) was based on “the underlying premise that landscape preservation could be achieved through park development... development that drew on the formal vocabulary and planning traditions of landscape park design” (Carr 1998, 79). As a leader in both landscape preservation and park design, the NPS has a strong and established association with the profession of landscape architecture, and the practice of preservation.

In Australia, the relationship between landscape architecture and preservation has evolved in a different way. Unlike the situation in the United States, there were no federal agencies like the NPS to foster a connection between preservation and landscape design. Nonetheless, preservation was an impetus for the founding of the profession of landscape architecture in Australia, and it has been a recurring theme throughout its forty-year history. This paper will explore how the creation

of designed landscapes in Australia, particularly on the foreshores of the Sydney Harbour, has contributed to the preservation of these sites and to the Harbour Foreshore as a whole. It also offers a suggestion for how strategies for historic landscape preservation and landscape design may merge into a unified practice. Ultimately, the following examples support my contention that landscape architecture is indeed landscape preservation in Australia.

It is significant that the practice of historic preservation (heritage preservation in Australia), the profession of landscape architecture, and the creation of state park service agencies emerged in Australia almost simultaneously (during the late 1960s and 1970s) along with the rise of the environmental movement (Pike 1979; Bull 2001). This was not a coincidence but rather the result of a congruence of concerns about the relationship between quality of life and the built environment. Because of this congruence, many early works of landscape architecture in Australia were motivated by the perceived need to manage change and the potential loss of landscapes in the face of expanding urban areas. Thus, the founding members of the landscape architecture profession often worked deliberately to articulate a sense of place and cultural identity within an increasingly urban context. For example, in his closing comments for the first Australian Institute of Landscape Architect's (AILA) conference in 1970, Lindsay Pryor said, "...we have, as most of us know, a quite extraordinary and in many ways unique heritage of living material, landforms and landscape which we have not sufficiently used yet in our basic landscape work" (Pryor 1970, 55). At the same conference George Seddon shared his thoughts on the importance of designing as

custodians rather than "transformers," and working with Australian genius loci (Seddon 1970).

Fundamentally, these ideas inspired work that was grounded in a new appreciation of the indigenous landscape. With like minded- architects, these landscape designers, sometimes referred to as the "Sydney School" (or Sydney Bush School), were the first to express a distinct Australian identity in the built environment. More recently, academic James Weirick reinforced this notion when he described landscape architecture in Australia as expressing a need to come to terms with the "stolen land" and undo the mistakes of the past (Weirick 2006). Hence the boundary between preservation and landscape architecture in Australia is, in some cases, barely perceptible.

Landscape Preservation in Australia

If preservation has been an important theme in the history of Australian landscape architecture, has landscape played a similarly prominent role in the Australian historic preservation movement? As in the United States, historic landscape preservation in Australia faces the challenges of documentation, recognition, and the ephemeral nature of landscape itself. There are very few historic or modern landscapes recognized through the various statutory registers. To date, the World Heritage nomination process is the most visible tool for landscape preservation in Australia, if one considers landscape to encompass natural and cultural values. The current *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention* defines cultural landscapes as "cultural properties that represent the 'combined works of nature and man'" and which are "illustrative of the evolution of human society and settlement over time, under the influence of the physical constraints and/or opportunities

presented by their natural environment and of successive social, economic, and cultural forces – both external and internal” (UNESCO 2008). Australia now has seventeen World Heritage listings dominated by places with unique ecosystems. Two explicitly recognize the value of cultural landscapes—Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park, and Royal Exhibition Building and Carlton Gardens. Other entries, for example the Blue Mountains World Heritage Area and the Sydney Opera House, are places whose significance is highlighted by adjacent cultural landscapes: the villages, resorts, roads, and tracks of the Blue Mountains, and the varied foreshores of Sydney Harbour. As a group, the Australian listings on the World Heritage Register synthesize diverse values and subtleties of Australian “place,” and work to promote regional, national as well as worldwide awareness and protection of vast landscapes.

At the national and state level, the Australia ICOMOS *Charter for Places of Cultural Significance*, known commonly as the Burra Charter, has shaped preservation practice since the 1970s (ICOMOS Australia 1999). This charter is the framework for all statutory registers in Australia. In New South Wales (NSW) statutory regulations are numerous and include the registers maintained by the NSW State Heritage Office, the NSW National Park and Wildlife Service (NPWS), and local environmental plans. The Burra Charter focuses on place, and thus seems to give generous scope and incentive to the recognition of designed landscapes. However, designed landscapes as a category represents a small proportion of protected landscapes in Australia; to date, surprisingly few historic designed landscapes appear on registers of significant places and items in Australia. For example, in a 2007 inventory of cultural landscapes

compiled for the ICOMOS/IFLA International Scientific Committee for Cultural Landscapes, Juliet Ramsay found that only twenty-three of the total 166 botanical gardens in Australia appear on various heritage registers (Ramsay 2007).

The general lack of recognition of historic designed landscapes is related to concerns about the need for a well-defined canon of Australian landscape architecture. Efforts to document and acknowledge significant works of landscape architecture have emerged only within the last few years. The first dissertation on the history of the profession was completed recently (Saniga 2004), and in 2006 the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects (AILA), in preparation for its fortieth anniversary, published a list of twenty-five significant landscapes (AILA 2006a; AILA 2006b). This was both preceded and informed by Catherin Bull’s book *New Conversations with an Old Landscape* (2002), the first publication to propose a canon of post-World War II designed landscapes in Australia. In the absence of an established canon, there is little inclination nor incentive to preserve landscapes through conventional practices. However, consideration of the history of Australian landscape architecture suggests that landscape preservation has occurred in other ways—namely, through the design practices established by designers of “the Sydney School.”

The Case Studies

Australia’s Sydney Harbour provides a compelling setting for examining the convergence of the boundaries between landscape preservation and landscape architecture because it has been the locus of practice for many landscape architects, as well as the locus of a changing post-industrial

landscape. Until recently, the harbor was as much a working harbor as it was a recreational space, and thus strategic portions of the harbor foreshore were occupied by facilities which provided the city with fuel or protected it from invasion. As part of the post-industrial economic shift underway in Sydney since the 1970s, much of this land has been transferred to the public domain. Several of these sites have been reclaimed and re-created as public parks, to great local acclaim. These lands are fragmented and managed by an array of organizations: former Commonwealth defense land is managed by the Sydney Harbour Federation Trust; the NSW NPWS manages 393 hectares (971 acres) and visitor facilities at approximately fifteen discontinuous sites around the harbor; finally, local councils manage discrete parcels of community lands as either open space, bushland, or reserves.

Within this context, three sites—Illoura Reserve, designed by Bruce Mackenzie (1970-1981), the Wharf Amphitheatre at Bradley's Head by CAB Consulting (1998), and the BP Parkland by Clouston Associates (2001) and McGregor + Partners (2005)—illustrate the convergence of preservation and design in Australian landscape architecture. Each site is now a park that occupies former industrial land on the harbor's edge (Figure 1). The histories of these designed landscapes span a critical period following the formative years of both landscape architecture and heritage practice in Australia, so as a trio they represent a range of perspectives on the interplay, or boundary, between landscape design and preservation. Finally, each has been recognized for its cultural significance in various ways. Illoura Reserve was listed on the National Trust of Australia's (NSW) register in 1986 and the local heritage list in 2001. Both the Wharf Amphitheatre at Bradley's Head

and the BP Parkland were informed by conservation management plans, an indication that the sites were considered significant even prior to the design work under discussion here. Also, both have received awards from the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects. Lastly, the 2006 AILA Sites of Significance list included Illoura Reserve and Bradley's Head; the BP Parkland is a likely candidate when it meets the five-year age requirement.

Illoura Reserve, Bradley's Head, and BP Parkland are also examples of a distinct landscape type—harbor foreshore post-industrial sites. The recovery and revisions of these former industrial sites in Sydney give preference to spatial configurations and uses that provide visual and physical access to the harbor. At the same time, each references, and thereby preserves, its industrial history in a variety of ways. At the broad scale of landscape planning, this is open space preservation through the reclamation of the urban edge constituted of the harbor foreshore. These revised landscapes are thus a significant register of cultural change during the last thirty years. The provision of a new series of open spaces around the harbor, and the resultant new opportunities for recreation reflects new social and cultural attitudes, as well as the central role of the Sydney Harbour in the public domain of the city. These landscapes also illustrate how landscape architects, through the reclamation of former industrial sites, have engaged the nature/culture dialogue that characterizes the work of the Sydney School and underlies much conventional historic landscape preservation practice.

Illoura Reserve

Formerly known as Peacock Point, the Illoura Reserve occupies a narrow strip of land on the

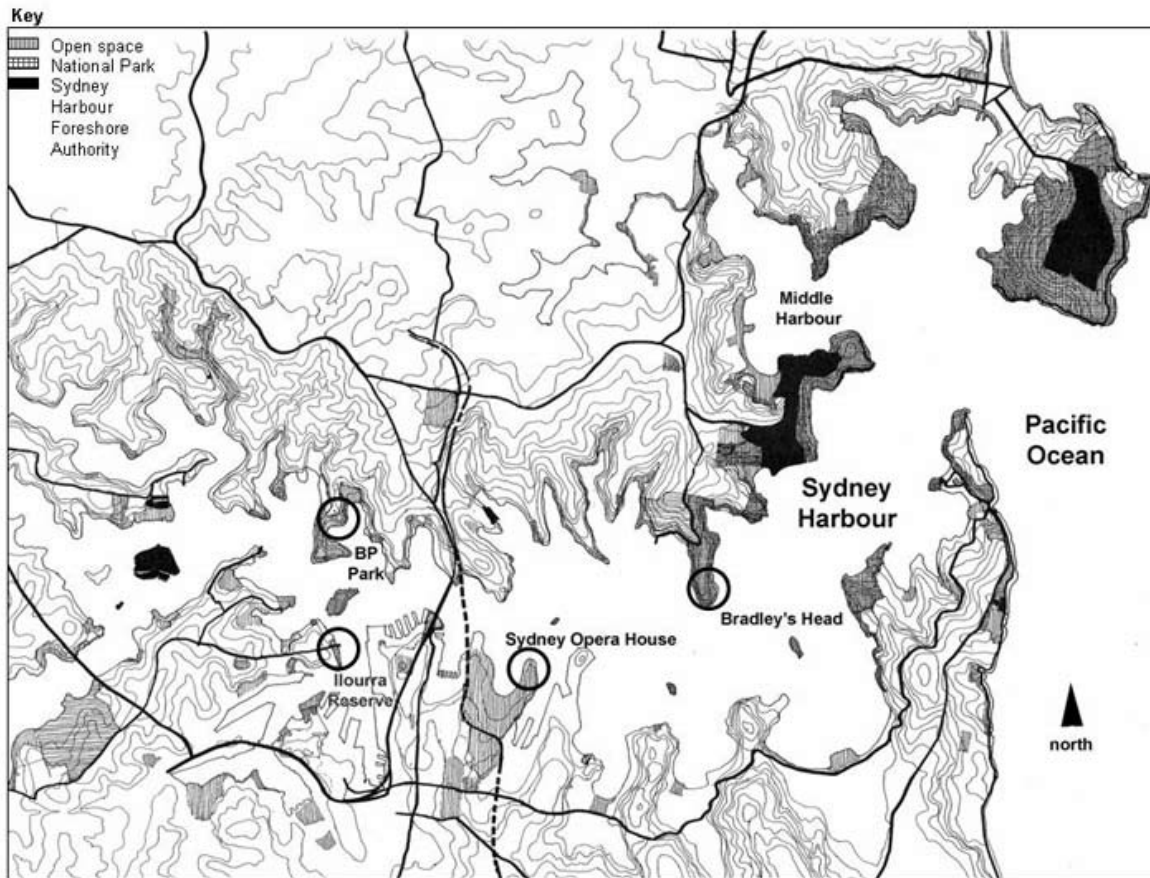


Figure 1. Open Space on Sydney Harbour Foreshore. (Drawing by Craig Burton)

southern edge of Sydney Harbour on the south-eastern edge of the Balmain peninsula, a suburb in Sydney's inner west. Through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this site was modified by quarrying and levelling to accommodate a shipbuilding yard and later a coal storage facility. In 1967, foreshadowing the transition to a post-industrial economy, Peacock Point was the first parcel of land acquired by the state in an effort to establish recreational facilities and reserves around the harbors edge (Evans and Buchanan 2003, 27).

Bruce Mackenzie, commissioned by the NSW Maritime Services Board, transformed this site into a park in two phases between 1970 and 1981. Peacock Point was a new type of park for Australia. Rather than level the site to create playing fields, Mackenzie accepted and celebrated the rugged landform that characterized the site. The ruggedness was partly inherent in the sandstone geology and partly created by industrial activity, especially quarrying. Mackenzie used this topographic variety to construct a series of terraces, separated

by sandstone retaining walls (Figure 2). On one hand, these are practical approaches to providing shelter from sun and wind and framing views to city, but Mackenzie himself labelled his work the “Alternative Parkland” (Mackenzie 1976), signaling his conscious and deliberate effort to abstract the essence of the bush and integrate it into the urban context (Figure 3).

Illoura Reserve is unabashedly a re-creation—or, in preservation terms, a reconstruction—of a general interpretation of the original, environmental condition of the Balmain Peninsula and the Sydney Basin as a whole. Its significance as a designed landscape rests in the fact that it epitomized a newfound ability to use the public domain as a locus for expressing a cultural need to identify and reconnect with the pre-urban conditions of nature being erased by the city. For landscape architecture in Australia, Illoura Reserve clearly articulated—ahead of the introduction of the Heritage Act (1977 in New South Wales) and associated preservation standards and guidelines—that an ethic of preservation could inform and inspire landscape design.

Mackenzie’s self-described “alternative park” was almost immediately recognized as pioneering. In

1987, only five years after its completion, the NSW National Trust proposed register listing of the site, and described it as a “seminal” work of design (National Trust of Australia, New South Wales, 1986). More recently, Leichhardt Council, the local government authority in charge of the park, listed it on its register of heritage items, noting that Illoura Reserve has both representative and landmark value (New South Wales State Heritage Office, 2003, p. 29). Finally, Illoura Reserve is the first landscape Catherin Bull discusses in her book, *New Conversations with an Old Landscape*, and is included on the AILA Sites of Significance.

Bradley’s Head

Bradley’s Head, also known as *Boroggi* (meaning “long tongue”) Point, is a long, narrow sandstone promontory on the north side of the harbor. During the early nineteenth century it was used by European settlers for defense fortifications and as an animal quarantine station. Over the course of the twentieth century it became known as Ashton Park and was used increasingly for recreational and commemorative activities. Today the accessibility, variety and beauty of the park and Bradley’s Head,



Figure 2. Illoura Reserve under construction, 1969. (Photo by Finn Thorvaldson, courtesy of Barbara Buchanan)



Figure 3. Illoura Reserve in 2007. (Photo by author)



Figure 4. The Wharf Amphitheatre at Bradley's Head, looking southwest to Sydney Harbour Bridge and Sydney Opera House. (Photo by author, 2007)

particularly its spectacular views across the harbor to the Opera House and the Sydney Harbour Bridge, make it a popular destination (Figure 4). In 2001, Mosman Council, the local government, listed Ashton Park as a significant remnant bushland with rare aesthetic, historic, scientific and social values at the state level (NSW State Heritage Office 2007b).

In 1998, in anticipation of intense use during the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, the NSW National

Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) commissioned CAB Consulting to transform a former quarry at the southern tip of Bradley's Head into an amphitheatre (Burton 2000, 306). CAB leveled the quarry floor to create a gently sloping grassy plane and installed a graceful curving spine of sandstone stairs to connect a parking lot to the wharf area. The design allows ample room for visitors to gather in large groups or individually, while the spine of stairs improves access to the water's edge. Most importantly, the design retains the historic landform—the quarry walls and the sandstone wharf—and improves physical and visual connectivity to the mid- and upper-levels of the headlands where the remnant fortifications and historic pleasure ground facilities are located (Figure 5).

The designers were particularly focused on making the most of the visual links between the headland, the water, and the Sydney Opera House by opening views into and out of the site. The prominence of Bradley's Head is a critical aspect of its cultural and environmental significance. Selectively revealing this prominence and proximity to the opera house was seen to engender an appreciation for the significance of the site. In addition, the designers, also authors of the conservation management plan, attempt to align their design ideas with the conservation aims for the site. These design ideas, however, met with resistance from the client, the NSW NPWS, because they involved the removal of vegetation to improve views into and out of the site. The regenerated indigenous vegetation at Bradley's Head is a significant value of the site. In its earlier functions as a fortification and later as a pleasure ground, Bradley's Head was cleared historically. Today it remains a singularly significant spot on Sydney's lower North Shore for enjoying spectacular views of the city, yet the

NSW NPWS prioritized the protection of natural vegetation in their 1998 Plan of Management over the conservation of scenic and landscape qualities (NSW NPWS 1998, 9). According to Craig Burton, the designer, “There were those who supported a degree of artful intervention and the need to integrate the park into the fabric of the living city. Others felt that humans should be excluded from such areas, to conserve the fragment of surviving nature...” (Burton 2000, 307). CAB Consulting was in effect arguing for the restoration of views long enjoyed but recently obscured. This debate typifies the nature/culture dialogue surrounding the reclamation of many former industrial landscapes in Sydney. At the Wharf Amphitheatre the design was as much a process of identifying and prioritizing the protection of natural and cultural values—often the focus of landscape preservation practice—as it was the artful reconfiguration of the space to a functional and beautiful place.

The BP Parkland

This fishhook-shaped sliver of sandstone was an oil storage and refuelling facility for BP Australia (British Petroleum) from the 1920s to 1994. Located on the Waverton peninsula on Sydney’s lower north shore between two older parks, the BP Parkland faces southeast toward the city (Figure 6). When a 1994 state government proposal to redevelop this site as residential units caused community uproar, NSW Premier Bob Carr halted development and prepared a vision statement for the harbor foreshores. Known as “The Premier’s Statement for Sydney Harbour Foreshores,” this statement embraced many aspects of preservation practice: it mandated the creation of public access, the management of natural and cultural history, and the ecological regeneration of thirty-seven sites

rimming the harbor (Carr 1997). The statement was quickly transformed into legislation, and the BP site was the first to be developed according to the new policy (Evans 2005).

The Waverton Peninsula Industrial Sites Strategic Master Plan (SMP), prepared by Clouston Associates and adopted by North Sydney Council in 1999, proposed transforming the site into a sequence of dramatic spaces for play. Inspired by the semi-circular tank cuttings and rugged topography exposed by the removal of the oil storage



Figure 5. The Wharf Amphitheatre at Bradley’s Head from the air. (Photo courtesy NSW NPWS)



Figure 6. The BP Site in Waverton, in 1991, before demolition. (Photo courtesy NSW Lands Department)



Figure 7. BP Site Waverton, detail of excavation of concrete bund wall. (Photo Courtesy BP Australia)



Figure 8. BP Parkland in 2006, with bund wall removed and sandstone exposed. Note the new railing tracing historic path through site. (Photo by author)

tanks, the proposal envisioned the upper and lower levels and the voids of the tank cuttings as settings for diverse activities including rock climbing, large parties, and quiet contemplation of the spectacular view of the city.

The plan also identified the need for two separate studies: a Flora and Fauna Assessment and a Conservation Management Plan (Clouston Associates 1999; Hoye 2001; Godden MacKay

Logan 2000). Remediation and the removal of infrastructure progressed while these supplemental reports were underway, literally bringing new issues to the surface. First was the historical significance of the industrial artifacts themselves. While there was no question about the removal of the storage tanks, smaller elements—particularly the concrete bund walls—sparked debate. By 2000, an intense controversy surrounding the transformation of Sydney Harbour from working harbor to a recreational harbor reached a peak. In heritage practice, the debate highlighted the need to identify and conserve the industrial heritage. Thus it was no surprise that both the SMP and the conservation management plan proposed preserving the bund walls and adapting them as retaining walls to extend the site's innate nature as a viewing platform. The community, on the other hand, saw more value in revealing the sandstone topography that lay underneath. In the end, the community's desires prevailed and the walls were removed to expose broad sandstone terraces (Figures 7 and 8).

The removal of tanks and walls revealed a robust and challenging framework for the design of a new public space. The remaining industrial elements included water pipes, concrete walkways, steps, and retaining walls. These created a functional and aesthetic syntax that informed the adaptation of the site to a parkland: broad concrete paths and stairs facilitated access and accommodated large crowds; steel decks extended the site's function as a viewing platform; rubble gabion walls extended the in situ walls.

The second major issue to surface as a topic of public concern involved the reclamation of the landscape by forces of nature. The removal of the

oil storage tanks resulted in rapid colonization of the slopes and cuttings at the base of the tanks by flora and fauna. The Flora and Fauna Assessment affirmed the viability of establishing a wildlife corridor on the site, thereby supporting proposals in the SMP for dense tree plantings on the upper and lower terraces of the site. This created more intense community debate about the nature of this parkland: was it a wildlife corridor or a public park? Here again, the community view prevailed, and far fewer trees were planted than proposed (Figure 9). As a result, the park that opened in 2005 is neither a wildlife corridor nor a traditional park—it is a new park specific both to its

immediate context and its regional, foreshore location (Evans 2005).

Conclusion

The designs of the Illoura Reserve, Bradley's Head Wharf Amphitheatre, and BP Parkland have contributed to the re-creation of the foreshore of Sydney Harbour as a useable, identifiable public zone. Each project offers a different response to the question of how landscape design simultaneously creates new places and preserves existing places. Illoura Reserve, the earliest of the three, anticipated



Figure 9. Photo of lower level of the BP Parkland showing newly established frog habitat at base of tank cuttings. (Photo by author, 2006)

the articulation of heritage policy and was one of the first designs by a landscape architect in the country. It was also conceived at a time of rapid urban growth and change—a time when urban and associated industrial activities carried connotations of pollution and ill health. In this social context, it is no surprise that the broad design strategy at Illoura Reserve focused on recovering, reconstructing, and integrating an idealized original landscape, one that had been lost to urban growth. It is also important to note that this original landscape was, at the time, considered to have more social and aesthetic value than the more recent industrial heritage associated with the site.

By the 1990s, heritage practice had expanded in scope and depth to consider the contributions of indigenous and industrial heritage to the making of significant places. Ecology also had emerged as the basis of conservation practice in the NPWS to demonstrate the loss of many species of plants and animals, and associated threats to environmental health. Against these developments, the design concept of tying back into the headland to strengthen connections at the Wharf Amphitheatre at Bradley's Head was a deceptively simple gesture. On one hand it speaks of an acceptance of industrial heritage and more recent histories. On the other hand, it is an expression of underlying tensions involved in negotiating heritage values, in this case between conservation of the natural vegetation and the recognition and enhancement of ongoing cultural values. At the BP Parkland, the design similarly involved a negotiation between the restoration of natural values and the preservation and adaptation of industrial artifacts. In both cases the outcomes transcended the debate: both have overlaid a robust structure with subtle adaptations of industrial elements to transform these sites

into places that are distinctly of and about Sydney Harbour.

Illoura Reserve, Bradley's Head Wharf Amphitheatre and BP Parkland reflect the evolution of practice in the fields of both landscape architecture and historic preservation. Indeed, the differences among the designs are largely explained by the temporal span they cover. Between the 1960s and the late 1990s, the conventions of preservation practice evolved toward today's focus on concepts of place; likewise, the profession of landscape architecture has focused increasingly on designing to sustain cultural, ecological, and aesthetic values. Most important of all, in spite of their different approaches to industrial heritage, all three designs have contributed to the preservation of a sense of place and context, rather than the preservation of the individual elements that constitute each landscape. This is an important distinction and the key to understanding how in Sydney Harbour, landscape design is landscape preservation.

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