
Colonel Light

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A unique suburb in Adelaide: law shapes the urban environment.

The residents of Colonel Light Gardens, Adelaide have good reason to be aware of the impact of legislation on the shape of the urban environment. Two pieces of legislation have had a significant role in influencing their neighbourhood. The first, the *Garden Suburb Act 1919* (SA), set the stage for the creation of the planned community of Colonel Light Gardens. The second, the *Heritage Act 1993* (which superseded the earlier *South Australian Heritage Act 1978*), which makes provision for the heritage listing and hence conservation of both areas and individual buildings, is at present the cause of much discussion about the importance of the suburb's past in dictating its future.

The garden city movement

The 1919 legislation was the result of work by Charles Reade – South Australia and Australia's first Town Planner. Reade was a leading advocate of the British garden city movement and was employed by the South Australian Government in 1916 to develop a plan for a garden suburb in Adelaide.¹ The *Garden Suburb Act* was the practical embodiment of his ideals and the blueprint for what was to become Colonel Light Gardens. The *Act* provided for the establishment of a garden suburb to be administered by a full-time Garden Suburb Commissioner responsible directly to the Government. The suburb was formally and administratively separate from the Council of Mitcham and the Commissioner was given powers similar to those of a municipal corporation. Under by-laws gazetted in 1921 he was to oversee roads, building requirements, building density, the zoning of areas for related activities, the provision of public buildings and services, and the aesthetic qualities of the development. All of these responsibilities were carried out according to the principles of the garden city movement as set out by Reade in his Mitcham Garden Suburb Plan of 1917.²

The garden city movement originated in Britain at the turn of the century based on the writings of Ebenezer Howard. The movement was originally one of social reform, advocating the improvement of the urban environment, and hence social conditions, through planning. Industry, welfare institutions and housing appropriate for every class were to be combined in self-contained settlements which were governed by democratically elected boards of management and which owned the land communally. The size and form of the communities were to be planned from the outset and were to include low density housing and extensive green belts and parklands. The single family house was of critical importance and the communities were to blend city and country, house and garden. The radical social reform agenda of the movement was soon abandoned but the attractive cosmetic elements were widely accepted and adopted by a number of related planning movements, including industrial villages and public housing estates. Charles Reade, the Assistant Secretary of the Garden City and Town Planning Association, organised a lecture tour to Australia in 1914 in order to further publicise the movement's aims.³ Both the lecture tour and the garden city movement were received enthusiastically throughout Australia and particularly in South Australia where, in 1915,

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they stimulated the government purchase of land specifically for the purpose of building a garden suburb and the employment of Charles Reade to design it.

The Garden Suburb Act

The *Garden Suburb Act* that brought the Mitcham Garden Suburb (later Colonel Light Gardens) into existence was one of a series of planning Bills enacted around Australia in the same period. New South Wales, Western Australia, and Queensland all passed planning Bills between 1919 and 1934, and South Australia in 1920 passed the *Town Planning and Development Act* which provided more generally for planning within the State. Only Victoria and Tasmania lagged behind, not passing planning legislation until 1944.⁴ This legislation aimed at developing planning policies in both existing communities and areas of new growth, and with planning generally. The *Garden Suburb Act* was unique, however, in its intent to specifically create and guide the development of a single suburb as a model community. Moreover, by separating the suburb from Mitcham Council, the *Act* created a uniquely autonomous region governed by a government appointee rather than by elected representatives.

Section 11 of the *Act* stipulated that the suburb would be planned, laid out and developed as a garden suburb, giving the Commissioner and the Town Planner direct responsibility for its design. The legislation also made detailed provision for the implementation of the design. Under the terms of the *Act* a special fund was created for the purpose of developing the suburb and paying salaries and wages. The fund was to be augmented by the sale of blocks and the collection of rates and constituted the ongoing operating fund for the suburb. The Commissioner was empowered to set aside blocks for charitable, religious, patriotic, or educational purposes, ensuring from the outset that the suburb would be self-contained. In addition, blocks could be set aside for public recreation. The latter in particular, through the creation of parks and reserves, was an integral part of the Garden Suburb design.

These provisions governed the overall layout of the suburb but the specifics of individual buildings were also guided by the terms set out in the *Act*. Purchasers of blocks were required under s.15 to build within two years of the date of purchase and to do so in accordance with plans approved by the Commissioner, guaranteeing his continued aesthetic control and the continued implementation of the garden suburb ideal. This control was exercised more explicitly in the provisions of Schedule 3 of the *Act* which empowered the Commissioner to make by-laws dealing with building plans, the placement of advertising, building density, zoning, and 'harmony in the exterior designs of buildings'. Finally, the legislation provided for the transformation of the suburb into a District or a Municipality once 300 or more ratepayers were resident in the suburb. At that time the office of the Commissioner would cease and his obligations would be transferred to the council of the local govern-



Colonel Light Gardens: spacious, low-density but under threat?

ment district. This provision was intended to retain control in the hands of the Commissioner until such time as the special character of the garden suburb was well established and unsailable by outside interests.

The Colonel Light Gardens

The first subdivision and sale of blocks within what was renamed Colonel Light Gardens took place in 1921 and by 1924 sixty houses were built or under construction. In that year, however, the South Australian Government chose the suburb as the venue for its Thousand Homes Scheme which aimed to provide reasonably priced homes for the families of returned soldiers. As a result of this decision, Reade's original plan for the suburb was considerably altered. Many of the parks and reserves were done away with and plans for ornamental gardens, an old folk's home, and cottage homes were abandoned. These changes were intended to increase the housing density in the suburb and to lessen the amount of unrateable land which was considered too great a drain on the suburb's finances. The wide, curved streets and extensive plantings of Reade's plan were retained, as was the concept of design harmony in the buildings, all of which helped to sustain the garden suburb image and calm residents' fears about lowered property values. In fact, although the houses built under the Thousand Homes Scheme were smaller and less elaborate than those already in the suburb, the development was felt to be a success and the homes both well built and attractive.⁵

Building in the suburb effectively finished by the end of 1928. In addition to the houses, most of which were modified versions of the popular California Bungalow style, Colonel Light Gardens had an infant school, a primary school, a public hall, a picture theatre, six churches, 20 shops, a large park and several smaller reserves. A strong sense of pride in the homes and in the neighbourhood developed. This included a sense of the unique origins and role of the suburb. The notion of community identity was strong enough to be a significant factor in the protracted discussions concerning the suburb's re-incorporation into the Mitcham Council local government area. When, after 35 years of negotiating, Colonel Light Gardens was officially amalgamated with Mitcham Council in 1975 and the

Garden Suburb Act repealed, members of the community formed a residents association to maintain the unique character of their suburb and to foster their separate community identity.

A State Heritage Area?

The relationship between Colonel Light Gardens and the *Heritage Acts of 1978 and 1993* stems from this history of community involvement and identity. The aim of the *Heritage Act 1993* is 'to conserve places of heritage value . . .' The Act makes provision for a State Heritage Register on which significant items are listed and, once on the Register, the items are subject to strict development controls. An item may be placed on the Register because it meets one or more of seven stipulated criteria, including either its rarity or its representativeness of a class of places, the degree to which it is an outstanding example of particular aesthetic, technical or design characteristics, or its special association with a person or event of historical importance. As the 1989 *Colonel Light Gardens Conservation Study* indicates, the suburb may be eligible under several of these criteria. Accordingly the Colonel Light Gardens Residents Association (CLGRA) has been leading an initiative to have the suburb listed on that register as a State Heritage Area.

Nominations for listing are frequently made by government authorities or by heritage professionals when items have come to their attention as a result of commissioned reports. However, it is also possible for property owners to nominate their own properties and this is in effect what is happening in Colonel Light Gardens. After the amalgamation with Mitcham Council, residents became increasingly concerned about the loss or degradation of the elements that make the suburb special and wanted to take action to prevent further deterioration. The CLGRA received funds from the National Estate Grants Program with which to commission a Conservation Study. This was completed in 1989 and included a statement of cultural significance for the suburb, planning recommendations for the area as a whole, and conservation and planning guidelines for individual structures and places.⁶

The authors of the report, Bechervaise and Associates in association with McDougall and Vines, recommended that the suburb be added to both the State Heritage Register and the Register of the National Estate. They stated that Colonel Light Gardens 'exemplifies the theories of town planning of the early 20th century based on the garden city concept, and is considered the most complete and representative example of a garden suburb in Australia, combining both town planning, aesthetic and social elements into a coherent plan'. The heritage significance of Colonel Light Gardens lies not only in the individual structures within the suburb but also, and perhaps more importantly, in the layout and design of the entire suburb. For this reason Bechervaise and Associates recommended listing the suburb as a State Heritage Area in order to ensure the protection of the roads, verges, laneways, reserves, and plantings within the suburb and to maintain the surviving elements of the original plans.

Since the presentation of the Conservation Study, the CLGRA and Mitcham Council have been working co-operatively to produce a mutually acceptable plan for the suburb's future. Some of the recommendations made in the Conservation Study echoed plans already set in train by the Council and have been implemented. These include the development of policies to protect features within the Colonel Light Gardens Suburb Zone and the appointment of a Heritage Adviser. In addition,

the suburb has been nominated to the Register of the National Estate as an item of national heritage significance. Because the Register of the National Estate is administered federally, listing there does not have legal implications regarding development or zoning but it does carry moral obligations to recognise and protect listed items.

Listing as a State Heritage Area does have legal ramifications however and for this reason has been the subject of careful consideration by Council and residents alike. A lengthy process of community consultation has been undertaken, including public education through letters, pamphlets, and the local press. Community meetings have been held and submissions received. Initially the community appeared to be split between those in favour of listing and those opposed, with residents expressing concern about the degree of control that they would have over matters such as their ability to build on to their homes, the kind of paint used, and the nature of fences built. During the course of the consultation however these concerns have been addressed and support for the State Heritage Area appears to be growing.

The heritage significance of Colonel Light Gardens lies in its design and in the external appearance of the streetscapes. Anything which is not visible from the street, and which is currently allowable under existing Council regulations would not be affected by heritage listing. Further, under the 1993 Act there is provision for modification of conservation guidelines to suit the individual circumstance. In the case of Colonel Light Gardens, guidelines would be worked out co-operatively by Council and the CLGRA and would be made available in draft form for public comment. At present the phase of community consultation regarding the proposed listing is coming to an end. The next stage will be to get an indication of public support through questionnaires sent to each resident. The results of this survey will then be forwarded to Council and if such action is indicated, Council will be formally asked to consider nominating Colonel Light Gardens as a State Heritage Area.

Conclusion

The case of Colonel Light Gardens provides an interesting example of the interaction between legislation and the urban environment. Initially the *Garden Suburbs Act 1919* was used to enforce a particular vision of town planning and suburban life. That vision was favourably received by the public and particularly by the residents of the suburb that it created. The Act created a special place and a community with a sense of its own unique nature. This has developed and been treasured to the extent that now the residents of that place are using another piece of legislation, the *State Heritage Act 1993*, to reaffirm the vision of planner Charles Reade and to protect for the future the place he created and the identity that it created in them.

References

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3. Freestone, Robert, *Model Communities: The Garden City Movement in Australia*, Melbourne 1989, pp.10, 12 and 67.
4. Freestone, above, pp.6-7.
5. Bechervaise and Associates, above, pp. 12, 14 and 19.
6. Bechervaise and Associates, above.