



DRAFT HERITAGE STUDY
and
REVIEW OF PROPOSED
LANDSCAPE MASTER PLAN
of the
McELHONE RESERVE



Prepared for South Sydney City Council

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.0	Introduction
1.1	Background
1.2	Aims
1.3	The Study Area
1.4	Methodology
1.5	Report Structure
1.5.1	A Three Strand Approach.
1.5.2	The Structure
1.6	Authorship
1.7	Report limitations
1.8	Acknowledgments
2.0	History of the Site
2.1	Site Development
2.2	The early role of Sydney City Council in Park Design
2.2.1	The role of Ilmar Berzins
2.2.2	An appreciation of Berzins
2.3	Early site management
3.0	Site Description
4.0	Current Concerns
5.0	Park User Survey
6.0	Community Consultation
7.0	Heritage Assessment
7.1	Basis of Assessment of Heritage Significance
7.2	Nature of Significance Criteria
7.3	Statement of Significance
7.3.1	<i>Forecourt to Elizabeth Bay House</i>
7.3.2	<i>The McElhone Reserve</i>
8.0	Conservation and Management Issues
8.1	Issues
8.2	Constraints
8.3	Opportunities
9.0	Conservation Policy
10.0	Implementation
10.1	Council measures
10.2	Community Liaison
10.3	Recommended works
	Appendix A Plan of first stage of Design Development of the Reserve, 1950
	Appendix B Site & Visual Analysis Plan
	Appendix C Petition to South Sydney City Council
	Appendix D Park User Questionnaire
	Appendix E Survey Findings

The McElhone Reserve- Heritage Report

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Background

The McElhone Reserve was created after Sydney City Council acquired three vacant lots in front of Elizabeth Bay House in 1948-9, 22 years after they had been put up for auction but not sold in 1927. These lots – 4, 5 and 6 – once comprised the sweeping lawns that served as a forecourt to Elizabeth Bay House, serving the dual purpose of displaying the House as an *elegant marine villa* when viewed from the Harbour, and of facilitating the enjoyment of the superb views from the House to the Harbour, right down to the Heads. It was a miracle that these three lots had remained unsold, despite a further attempt in 1934. It is possible that the House itself had generated such awe and respect, and that its visual relationship with the Harbour was so well understood, which had stayed the hand of prospective bidders. However, the onset of the Great Depression and the subsequent involvement of Australia in World War II probably had a lot to do with that. The House itself was enduring a period of neglect during this time, and was used as a boarding house for artists.

Shortly after purchasing the land, Sydney City Council had the site cleared, and requested Ilmar Berzins, a landscape designer on its staff, to prepare a park design. Just what instructions Berzins was given are not known, but it would appear that the Council principally envisaged the creation of a municipal park to serve the neighbourhood. It is not known if Berzins was told to pay heed to the original role of this open space as the forecourt to *Elizabeth Bay House*, although there were those in the Council who clearly placed importance on maintaining the views between it and the Harbour (see below). However, he appears not to have been told to re-establish its relationship to the House, nor to attempt to recreate its original layout and planting. In the event, he created a design which paid heed to the open space and natural rock features of the site, and whose plantings did not obstruct the two-way views between House and Harbour. He re-established extensive lawns on the site, introduced water by means of informal ponds, and provided for shade around the park edges. To that extent, therefore, he respected the origin and context of the original forecourt, for which we all are grateful.

Over the ensuing decades, local residents came to love and respect this park, and it was well maintained by Sydney City Council, to the extent of winning several garden competitions run by the *Sydney Morning Herald* in the early 1970s. For the last eleven years it has been managed by South Sydney City Council, and as the Reserve's fabric became worn, and plants matured and became over-grown or senescent, a little more intervention was required. In the process, incremental changes were made to the detail, the cumulative effect of which has caused subtle changes to its character. This, in turn, generated concern among perceptive residents and users, to the point where a petition containing approximately 250 signatures was put to South Sydney City Council, requesting the reinstatement of some plantings and removal of new pond edging. Because it became apparent that, in this case, the devil lay truly in the detail, Council decided that a proper heritage study should be prepared which would provide professional guidance for future management and maintenance. That is the purpose of this Report

1.2 Aims

To achieve the above, Council engaged Mayne-Wilson & Associates, heritage landscape consultants, to prepare a heritage study which would provide reliable historic information on the creation and evolution of the Reserve, identify its key values, and give guidance for its future management in a way that would satisfy residents. In addition, the consultants were requested to review the draft landscape master plan which Council officers had prepared, and provide advice on what changes or additions may be desirable. The community was to be consulted during this process by means of workshops and invitations to make submissions directly to the consultants. This Report therefore has been prepared to satisfy this brief.

1.3 The Study Area

The study area (to be referred to henceforth as 'the site') comprises the McElhone Reserve, an open space bounded on the north by Billyard Avenue, on the west and south by Onslow Avenue, and on the east by two tall apartment blocks, in the suburb of Elizabeth Bay. Directly across Onslow Avenue stands *Elizabeth Bay House*, the historic mansion to which the site once served as an open, grassed forecourt. The location of these elements is shown in figure 1.

1.4 Methodology

The consultants, as their first step, sought and obtained from the Curator of *Elizabeth Bay House*, Mr Scott Carlin, and from the Historic Houses Trust at Lyndhurst, relevant historic information about the original garden installed by Alexander Macleay, Colonial Secretary for NSW between 1827 and 1837¹. They then obtained relevant information and documents from the archives of Sydney City Council (for the period up to 1988) and from South Sydney Council for the later period. From these sources, the consultants acquired a good understanding of the site as it had evolved since 1827.

Included in the South Sydney Council files were letters and a petition from local residents expressing their concern about actions which had been taken in the park which they considered diminished its aesthetic qualities and established character substantially. As a consequence of reading these, the consultants suggested to the Council that a park user survey should be undertaken to ascertain what users liked and disliked about the park, what they used it for, and whether they would like any changes or improvements made. Council agreed to this proposal, and interviews were conducted during a wide range of hours when it was anticipated that different types of users would be available to interview, and different uses and functions may occur.

The consultants also undertook a detailed site analysis of the fabric of the park, focussing particularly on its vegetation and stonework, as well as its two-way visual catchment between *Elizabeth Bay House* and the Harbour. Its more subtle perceptual qualities were also recorded, such as the separate 'garden rooms' created by the plantings above the ponds; the changes in visibility of views to the Harbour (including the intrusiveness of rooftops of the large buildings below Billyard Avenue) as one moved about the park; the limited availability of shade; and the substantial degree of overlooking from tall, surrounding buildings.

Provision was made by the Council for consulting local residents about their views on the park, not only through the park user survey but by inviting them to correspond directly with the consultants and to attend two workshops, the first of which was held on 22 January 2001. Prior to this, the consultants had held discussions with Scott Carlin on 21 December 2000, and on 6 January 2001 with some members of the informal group of Friends of the McElhone Reserve. As a result of these initiatives, the consultants came to achieve a good understanding of the issues that concerned the local community as well those with a professional understanding of the heritage, aesthetics, and management of the park.

At the Community Consultative Meeting on 22 January, the consultants put on display 14 sheets which summarised their findings about the origins, evolution, design, and use of the Reserve between 1827 and the year 2000. Warwick Mayne-Wilson summarised the findings his firm had made and outlined the issues he had identified from the park user survey and his many discussions that must be addressed. He drew attention to the need to reach a sensitive balance between competing uses and perceptions over the last 175 years, and concluded by outlining what he suggested as desirable future works. These generally were endorsed by those present at the meeting, and commented upon by the Reserve's gardener, Kerry Rolfe in a supportive way. In the course of the discussion, considerable interest was expressed by some

¹ Macleay remained a respected figure, and was elected Speaker of the first Legislative Council in 1843. Source: Carlin, S. 2000 *Elizabeth Bay House: A History & Guide*. Historic Houses of Trust of NSW.

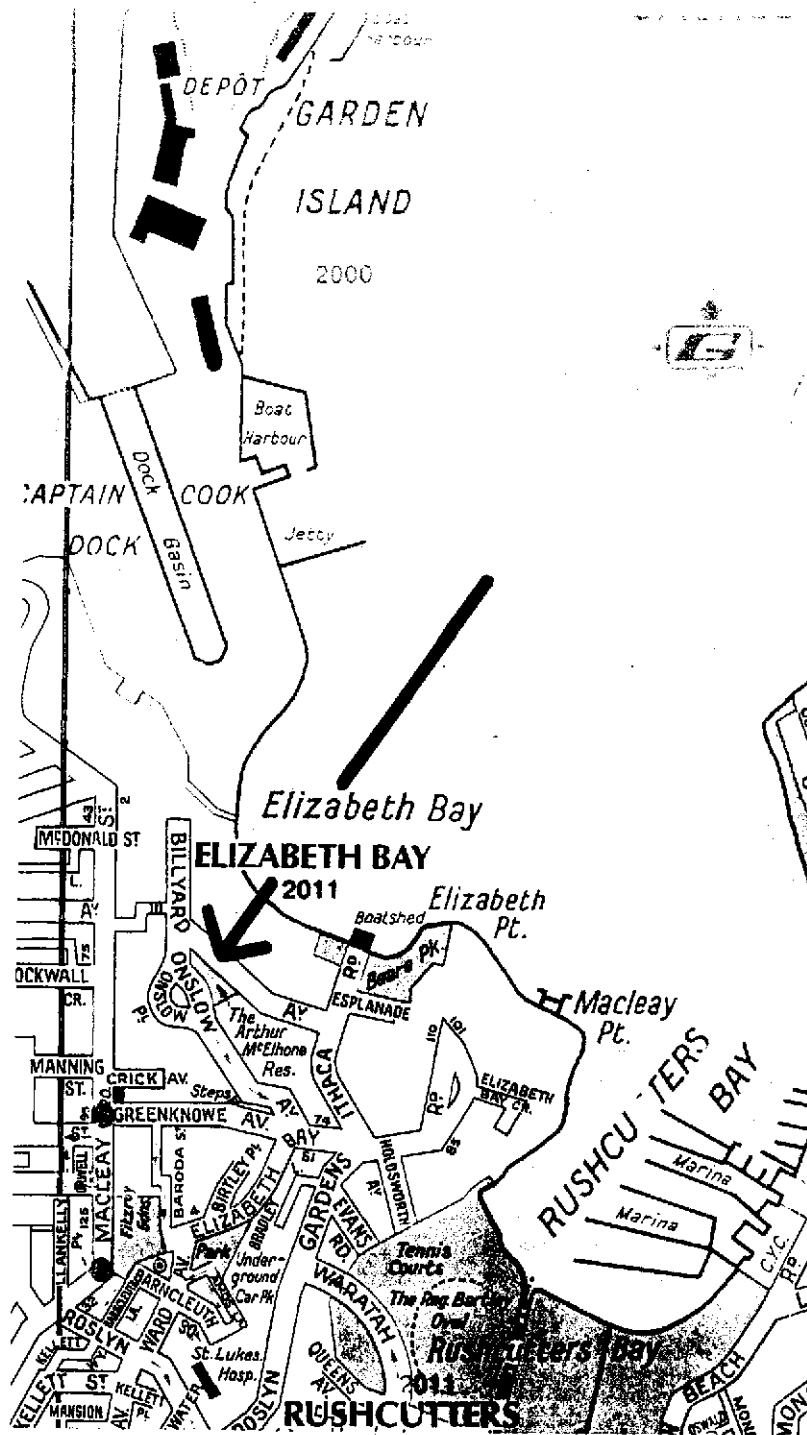


Fig. 1 Location plan - The Arthur McElhone Reserve, Elizabeth Bay.

participants in the original role and relationship between the House and the forecourt open space that now constitutes the core of the Reserve. Various suggestions were then made that this warranted further examination and public interpretation so that future users and visitors would appreciate it. It was agreed that this could be one of the matters addressed at the second community consultative meeting on 22 February, along with a more developed landscape master and planting plan.

1.5 Report Structure

1.5.1 A Three Strand Approach.

The consultants identified three main strands to be addressed in the research, analysis and assessment phase of this report, namely:

1. The creation of the site as a forecourt to *Elizabeth Bay House*
2. Conversion of the site to a public reserve
3. The attitudes and needs of contemporary park users and admirers.

The first two strands involved, in essence, the identification of the history and evolution of the site. This is set out in the first two sections under the heading 'History of the Site'. It is then followed by an assessment of its heritage values or 'cultural significance', which are assessed under the seven criteria used today for heritage assessment in New South Wales. One of these criteria has to do with the esteem in which the place is held by the community. As this covers communities in both the 19th century and the 20th century, up to the present time, it provides the linkage between the third strand and the first two.

1.5.2 The Structure

The identification and analysis of all the information gathered in the historical research leads to an assessment of the heritage or cultural significance of the Reserve, which will be summarised in accordance with the key points under each criterion.

Following this is a section identifying the principal conservation issues relating to the site, broad management considerations, community expectations, and the various constraints and opportunities. From this a conservation policy will be recommended, followed by series of strategies and detailed actions. This will be provided in the form of specific aims, or desired outcome, for every relevant aspect of the reserve, with prescriptive actions spelt out where appropriate. These are intended to be a useful guide to those directly managing the reserve. While not denying them the opportunity to exercise some discretion and judgement within such matters as planting schemes, repairs to stonework, pond maintenance, and so on, the guidelines are, it is hoped, sufficiently precise to ensure that, if faithfully followed, the heritage values, design intentions and community expectations are preserved and met.

A word of caution is necessary here. Most landscape architects and others with aesthetic or design training or self-education will have an urge to advocate what they regard as desirable aesthetic improvements or adjustments to such a site. However, aesthetic conceptions vary considerably between individuals, and change – evolve, become more informed and refined – over the years. Moreover, matters such as taste and fashion can be involved, especially vis-à-vis planting schemes, and these can be quite subjective and emotional. The task of a heritage landscape consultant is different from this: it is to identify the design intent and the period style of an historic landscape, plus the way it has evolved over time, and then assess its (cumulative) cultural significance, while *at the same time* taking into account contemporary uses, any consensus on aesthetic evaluations, and community perceptions and expectations.

It is often a difficult matter for judgement as to whether to select a key period for the site – usually when a designed landscape has reached its maturity or potential as intended; or whether to acknowledge and respect each and every change or addition that has occurred to the site since it was first developed, because these reflect evolving uses and 'inputs' (especially plantings) over its lifetime. This task involves

a judicious assessment of whether the original design and its underlying intention was superior in most respects – e.g. had greater integrity, fitness to purpose or aesthetic value - to the end product that has evolved over time. It is the task of this study to make that difficult choice. In the end, a nice balance has to be struck between retaining the best (i.e. heritage values) of the old while accepting the best of what currently exists. It is to be expected that not everyone will agree with the choices that are made here.

1.6 Authorship

This report has been written entirely by Warwick Mayne-Wilson. However, it draws on a range of research material, ideas, discussions and suggestions contributed by a wide variety of sources, which are acknowledged below. While he accepts responsibility for the expression of findings and recommendations in this Report, he has based these on wide research and consultations described above, including frequent discussions with officers of South Sydney City Council, his client.

1.7 Report limitations

While every effort – within the fairly tight timeframe available – has been made to obtain accurate and precise information about the origins, design and evolution of the McElhone Reserve, not every aspect of it was documented historically. Some assumptions have had to be made on certain matters, and it is possible that later, more detailed research by others will provide confirmation or greater precision. However, the author is confident that the broad lines of this study, including its research and findings, are sufficiently accurate for the purposes of this Report and the needs of his client.

1.8 Acknowledgments

The author would like to gratefully acknowledge the assistance and contributions which have been readily made available to him by Scott Carlin (Curator of *Elizabeth Bay House*); the archivists of the Historic Houses Trust, Sydney City Council and South Sydney Council; the Friends of the McElhone Reserve (especially John McIntyre); and landscape architects Jonathon Henderson of South Sydney Councils and Ari Anderson of Mayne-Wilson & Associates. Quite a number of individuals have put forward constructive ideas and suggestions, but while the former are too numerous to mention, it is hoped the incorporation of the latter – in one way or another – in this report will constitute an appropriate form of acknowledgment.

2.0 History of the Site

The evolution of the site of the McElhone Reserve can be divided roughly into four periods, of which only two are of sustained interest to this study. The first was the pre-settlement period, in which no information is available other than that the site consisted of a series of well-vegetated sandstone benches stepping down the ridge from what is now known as Kings Cross and terminating in a white, sandy beach which comprised one of the bays of along Sydney Harbour. From the sandstone benches facing north-east magnificent views could be obtained along the harbour, with islands in the middle distance and the heads on the distant horizon.

The second period begins with European settlement and the naming of that bay 'Elizabeth Bay' by the early administration. Although the bay and its backdrop (to the ridge of Kings Cross) was originally set aside as a public reserve by Governor Macquarie², his successor Governor Darling granted 54 acres of it to his Colonial Secretary, Alexander Macleay in 1826. (According to Carlin, the two men were politically quite conservative, and the relationship between their two families – and indeed their residences along Bridge Street in the city until 1837 – were quite close.)

² Carlin, *op. cit.*, p.2

A great deal has already been written about Macleay and his Elizabeth Bay property³ and it does not need to be reproduced here. However, certain salient points need to be made.

1. Alexander Macleay began molding the landscape of his property in 1827, eight years before the building of his elegant mansion commenced. He spent a great deal of money (and time) in having the landscape fashioned according to the principles of the late 18th century British landscape movement and the early 19th century precepts of the Picturesque. In particular, he created a large forecourt of gently sloping ground in front of the platform he created for his future house. He had two terrace walls built to create this forecourt, which he planted with lawn and a range of bulbs, many from South Africa.
2. Macleay envisaged the forecourt serving both to provide clear views out to the Harbour, while at the same time enabling it to be viewed as an elegant marine villa in a wild, picturesque setting from the Harbour. The general effect is shown in Conrad Martens several paintings of the property in the 1804s, the clearest of which is contained in figure 2. It became perhaps the most celebrated landscape in the Colony at the time, and elegant outdoor entertainments were held there from 1829 onwards, well before the house itself was built.⁴ Indeed, the cost of the landscaping works was so heavy that it served as a constraint on the completion of the House itself.
3. Macleay, and subsequently his son, William Sharp Macleay, were keen horticulturalists and entomologists, and planted the garden with a very wide range of trees and shrubs, mostly exotics which were collected or donated to them from all over the world. (Quite a number of these were planted even before they were acclimatised and propagated in the nurseries and conservatories in Kew.) An indication of the size and scope of the garden is provided in fig.3. Apart from some bulbs, however, few of these plants were planted within the forecourt, and the Macleays retained as many of the native trees and shrubs on its (north-western) perimeter as possible – see fig. 4. The forecourt was deliberately maintained as a spacious open lawn with the green turf sweeping right up to *Elizabeth Bay House* in the best 18th century British manor house tradition. This is clearly depicted in two photographs taken between 1895 and 1903 – see figs.5 & 6. As those photographs also show, some trees were planted on the south-east and north-west edges of this space, in order to frame the views between the House and the Harbour. At different times these comprised eucalypts, figs, palms and pines. Remnant Eucalypts are seen in the c.1865 photograph (fig.5) taken of the natural rock shelter at the base of the forecourt (now bordered by Billyard Ave.).
4. Although the land on which the elaborate gardens were laid out and planted have long since been built over, and very few of the original trees remain, quite detailed and extensive lists were kept of all the plants collected from many sources – see for example those attached to the Conservation Plan and to the publication *Mr Macleay's Garden*⁵. While it would not be possible to attempt to re-create Macleay's garden today, it would be possible to provide some link between Macleay and his surviving forecourt lawn by judiciously selecting from among those plants some which would serve the design purposes of the present McElhone Reserve.

The third period covers the interregnum between the final subdivision of the Elizabeth Bay estate in 1927 and the acquisition of lots 4, 5 and 6 containing the original forecourt by Sydney City Council in 1948. Despite the enticements in the advertisement of the 1927 subdivision - see fig. 7 - these lots had

³ The most authoritative account to date was written by the present Curator of *Elizabeth Bay House*, Scott Carlin. This appears both in his (draft) Conservation Plan and his *Guide* to the House, already cited.

⁴ Carlin, op. cit. p.82

⁵ A paper compiled by the Historic Houses Trust for an exhibition at Elizabeth Bay House, June – August 1981. See also the appendix to Dr Lionel Gilbert's publication entitled *Mr Macleay's Elizabeth Bay Garden*. Canberra. 2000



Fig. 2 All of the early paintings of *Elizabeth Bay House* from the late 1830s indicate that the immediate foreground to the mansion was always maintained as an open expanse of lawn, kept clear of any plantings which would interrupt its presentation as a marine villa or obscure key views to and from the Harbour. The many paintings of the property produced by Conrad Martens - such as the one above - show the house in a picturesque setting, sitting grandly on a platform at the summit of a sweeping lawn, as so many 18th and early 19th century mansions in Britain did.

A record of the commencement of the site works at Elizabeth Bay by Alexander Macleay's daughter Fanny Macleay in November 1832:

'My father has been levelling ground and blowing up rocks (by deputy of course) at Elizabeth Bay in order to gain a lawn for our new Residence - the foundation for which must be laid soon.'

A record of the continuation of site works at Elizabeth Bay by Fanny Macleay in August 1833:

'The House there is not begun yet, but a spacious, beautifully sloping lawn has been made, and drains (a work of expense and time, I assure you) completed now...'

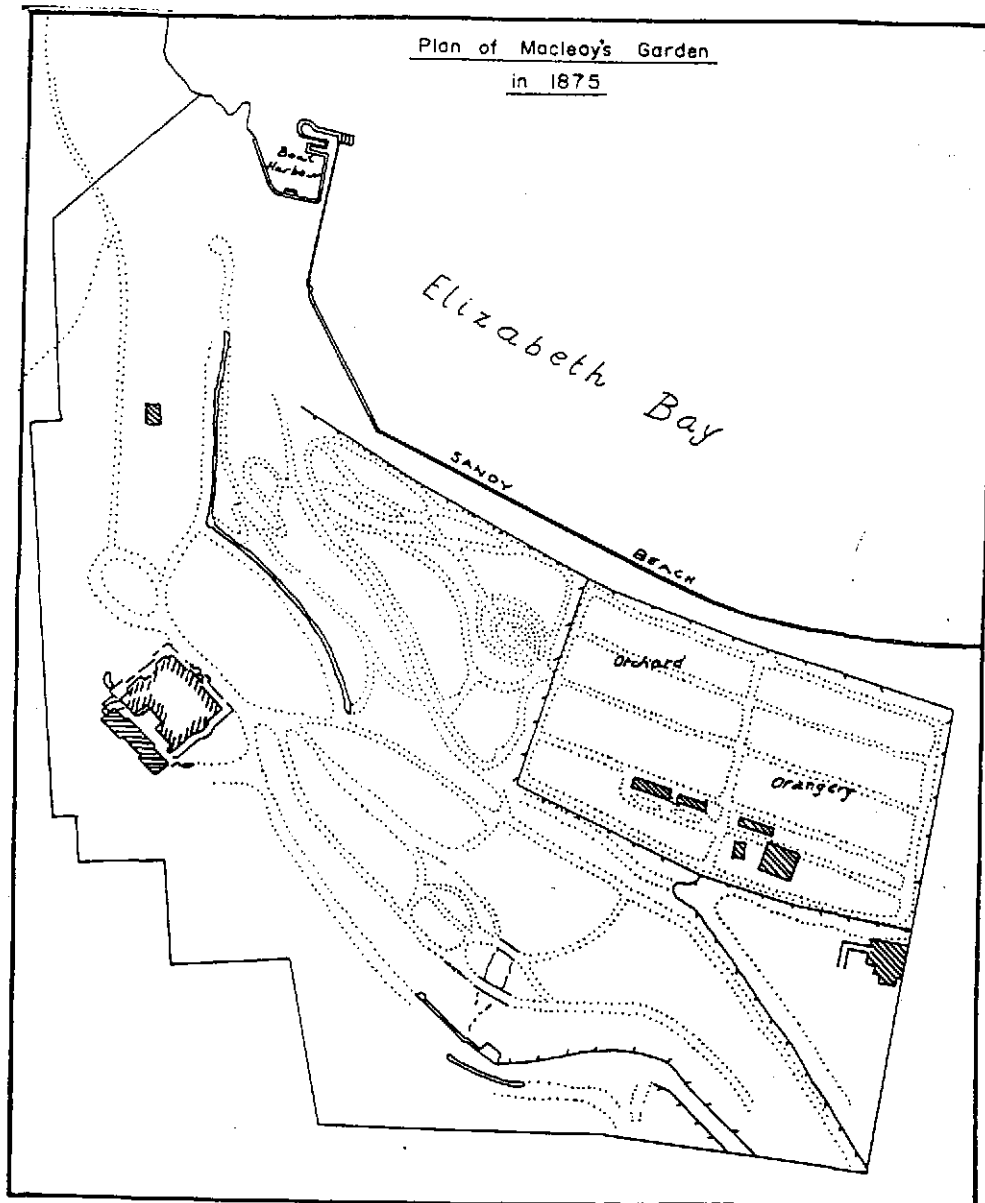


Fig. 3

A plan of the Macleay property produced c.1875 by surveyor F. H. Reuss shows that the area immediately in front of the mansion was not crisscrossed by paths and did not support elaborate garden bed designs. It is evident both from the patterning of the remainder of Macleay's grounds and from visitors' recounts of the property that most of the Macleay family's horticultural pursuits were carried out in zones beyond the mansion's immediate environs. The 'botanical' gardens, orchard and orangerie were located to the north and east, on the colluvial flats near the edge of the Bay, while the woodland walks were mostly in bushland north-west of the mansion.

Description of the entry drive to *Elizabeth Bay House* grounds by Thomas Shepherd in 1836. (Whilst the drive appears not to have built in the way it was described by Shepherd, the landscape treatment for the lawn that was to be the centre of the carriage loop remained the same upon construction)

'The approach of the mansion enters at the south-east corner; it is seen for several hundred yards, and then takes a bold turn towards the coach sweep in front of the house without any reverse turn, which adds to its beauty. The coach sweep will form an exact oval, the whole width of the front of the house, convex in the centre and covered with mowed grass. No clumps will be placed in the centre of the lawn, as that would lessen its breadth, but the lawn will be surrounded by a shrubbery...'



Fig. 4

Macleay, in accordance with the precepts of the picturesque, retained a portion of the native vegetation to frame his residence, both when viewed from the Harbour and as a framing, foreground element in the broad northerly view down to the Harbour from *Elizabeth Bay House*. This photograph, attributed to Sir William Macarthur c. 1865, shows that some native trees were retained close to the natural cave below the lawn forecourt wall and along walks to the west.

Description of Elizabeth Bay House grounds by nurseryman and designer Thomas Shepherd in 1836.

'The mansion is placed upon a flat piece of land, in the bosom of a gentle elevation, furnished with beautiful trees, branching off in thick masses to the right and left. A splendid open lawn is placed in the main centre front of the house, leaving to view from the adjoining grounds and windows one of the most interesting prospects of the harbour...'



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

Photographs of *Elizabeth Bay House* from 1895 and 1903, taken prior to the extension of Onslow Avenue in front of the mansion, showing it sitting astride a sweeping lawn which was bordered by mature trees (principally stone pines at this stage).

Marguerite Fairfax, recalling the occupancy of Sir William John and Lady Macleay at *Elizabeth Bay House* (1865-1903):

'the lovely lawn in front of Elizabeth Bay House - ablaze with ixias, sparaxis, and freesias of every colour'.



Fig. 7

Taken as part of an auction sale document in 1927, this photograph shows the maturity and style of the *Elizabeth Bay House* upper gardens, situated to the east of the main lawn area fronting the mansion. There is no evidence to suggest that gardens similar to these were developed within the area of the lawn platform that now supports the McElhone Reserve.

Elizabeth Bay House Estate subdivision document, 1927:

'The lawn, immediately surrounded by the fine carriage drive fronting the residence, is said to have cost originally 3000 pounds to make, and contained every specimen of Cape bulb that could be collected.'

The Sydney Morning Herald, March 30, 1937:

'In front of Elizabeth Bay House, but divided from it in the last subdivision of land, is the last remnant of this once famous old garden. It is a strip of land, say an acre or more, now covered with tangled grass and straggling garden plants run wild. The old stone wall along Billyard Avenue is now dismantled, but when I searched there last week I found the old stone steps which led up to the little wicket gate through which we had a short cut from the house to the Macleay Museum in Ithaca Road. A few of the old time trees still exist along the wall.'

Elizabeth Bay House, published by the Historic Houses Trust, 1984:

Beyond an expanse of lawn at the front of the house, a gravel walk was bordered by a low stone wall and paths meandered "among picturesque rocks".

miraculously not been purchased in 1927 nor in 1934 when they were re-offered for sale. However, the lawns were increasingly neglected, and various self-sown shrubs and other weeds accumulated there. Two photographs taken during this period show the unkempt state of these lots – see figs. 8 & 9. Local residents used to tip their rubbish there, and the northern retaining wall fell into disrepair. A decision was taken by Sydney City Council to clear the site before it could be developed into a municipal park. The early part of this period coincides with the neglect of the mansion and its use as an artists' squat until 1935.

The fourth period – that of the actual purchase of land and the design and construction of the Reserve – actually began during the third period, when Sydney City Council Town Clerk Roy Hendy wrote to the alderman of the Fitzroy Ward, Mr. W. J. Bradley on the 7th October 1938, informing him that Council agreed to the need for the immediate provision of more garden spaces in Kings Cross and to support a public movement which sought to raise funds for the acquisition of *Elizabeth Bay House* and the grounds fronting it. Prior to this correspondence, a petition signed by residents, rate payers and property owners of the area had been submitted to Council urging this action. However, World War II intervened, and such action was put on hold for its duration.

Then, on 29th July 1946, Sydney City Council approved in principle the concept of securing a strip of land which would extend all the way along the waterfront of Elizabeth Bay for 'park purposes'. (Ironically, this harked back to the public open space reservation there during Governor Macquarie's time.) It was proposed that this foreshore band of public open space would be approximately twenty to forty metres wide. A plan dated 1st April 1948, prepared by Sydney City Council, indicated this intent, identifying lots 4, 5, and 6 east of Elizabeth Bay House and the above mentioned linear park along the foreshore as spaces intended for public reserves see fig. 10. Of additional interest in the 1948 plan is the demarcation of five lots of land between Billyard Avenue and the foreshore, outlined as the area which would need to be retained as open space east of those lots upon which the new reserve was to be built, should uninterrupted views from it to the harbour be required.

On the 7th April 1948, the City Engineer detailed the size and nature of lots 4, 5 and 6 upon the request of the Town Clerk, following a letter regarding the creation of a reserve on these lots, forwarded to Council in March 1948 from the Health & Recreations Committee and the City Planning & Improvements Committee.

In his response to these Committees, the City Engineer described lots 4, 5 and 6 as making up 2 roods and 10 $\frac{3}{4}$ perchs and quoted the City Valuer's figure of 13,810 pounds as the unimproved capital value of these lands. He stated that approximately 4,600 pounds would need to be set aside for treatment of the area. Further, he described in some detail and with a certain fondness the unique siting of the park, the broad cone of vision available from it and possible future blockages to views should those lots between the reserve and the harbour not be purchased as an open space reserve as well.

Following a note by the Town Clerk on 14th April 1948 regarding the possible purchase of the property known as *Elizabeth Bay House*, together with the land it stands upon and lots 4, 5 and 6 across Onslow Street, Council's Valuation Branch outlined details of the residence on 20th April 1948. The House was described as being an apartment residential house containing fifteen separate unit flatettes (into which it had been divided by its new owner, Mrs. Evangeline Murray, after her purchase of it in 1940). The dimensions of the land upon which the house stood was approximately 106 feet 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches x 108 feet and was expressed as a 'complete island block'. The gross rentals received at the property were 1,904 pounds per annum at that time and the estimate of the land and improvements in its use at the time was given as 16,000 pounds.

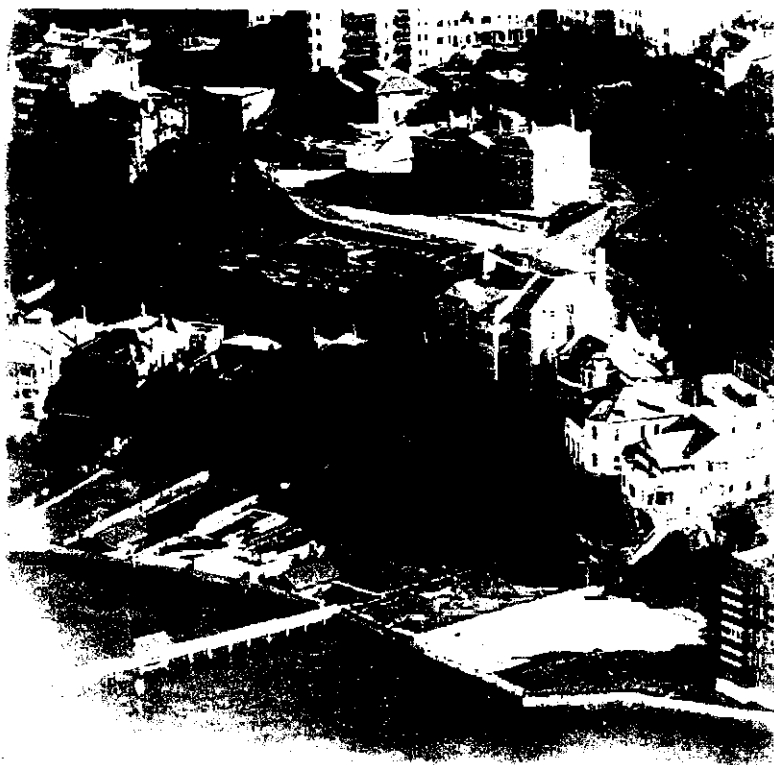


Fig. 8



Fig. 9

Photographs of the property taken between 1935 and 1937 indicate that the grass forecourt, which had by this stage been separated from *Elizabeth Bay House* by the installation of Onslow Avenue, was a bare grass platform only defined on its edges by street tree planting along Billyard Avenue and several large trees on the far south-eastern corner of what was to become the McElhone Reserve