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RESPECTING THE SIGNATURES OF OUR PLACES

Di Lucas landscape planner, Lucas Associates
Marokapara, 351 Manchester Street
Otautahi Christchurch, Aotearoa New Zealand

For centuries this has been a gardened land. A land managed by people. People working with soil, with water and with plants. There is a long history of intervention even in many seemingly wild places.

The ancestors in these lands, and my much later ancestors, came to a special land. A land of very different flora and fauna from anywhere else in the world. They have long intervened. Here in Canterbury, karaka and ti kouka groves are from plantings to mark ancient people places. Even in the high country, hillside undulations mark old garden scoops and pits. And, if you cross the Southern Alps from the west into Canterbury and the Rakaia catchment, you may be lucky to time your trek to see the kowhai flowers lined out to mark the trail of Rongomaraeroa, the trail of peace.

Aotearoa New Zealand, the land of little landscapes. Where the mountain flax is reputed to display a different flower colour on every range. Ponder that for distinctiveness! Where the cicadas sing a different song in different districts (Park, 199). The land where long ago the tussock grasses were split, spread and nurtured (Lucas, 1991). A diverse and distinctive land, deserving of diverse and distinctive management for tomorrow.

It is appropriate the conference setting is adorned with the stones of these Canterbury Plains - Whakatekata o Waitaha, and their ti kouka (cabbage trees), harakeke (New Zealand flax) and native grasses. These plants have been gardened here for perhaps a thousand years. Together they are an expression of plains Canterbury, a signature.

The stoney plains have different signatures from Canterbury hill and mountain lands, or glacial basinlands, the limestone country, or, the volcanic peninsula. Each has different indigenous ecosystems. Each generated different management responses from ancient gardeners. From modern farmers, too, although much has been masked by the green sward, the ubiquitous pasture - the "clean and green" signature of agricultural product marketers.

In 1981 (the first time I climbed onto the podium at a landscape conference to plead of the profession, "New Zealand - Where are you?") I challenged the dominant romney-ryegrass-radiata signature on rural lands. Since then, romney, radiata and ryegrass have all been genetically fine-tuned. They, or their close relatives in pastoral farming and softwood plantations, continue to dominate most of rural New Zealand. Their domination not only requires banishment of indigenous biodiversity, it also (thankfully) bans most exotic biodiversity, for farming in particular keeps the rural lands "clean" - uncluttered with spontaneous cover, whether indigenous or introduced. These uses implicitly involve input of people and funds to manage broadscale vegetation.

Emerging now is perhaps the "rafting-reeboks-restaurants" signature. The visitor industry is becoming a major rural landuse. There has been no assumption in the industry that this will involve commitment of people and funds to manage broadscale vegetation. Without management, there will be an explosion of vegetation. Our indigenous ecosystems are very vulnerable. In much of the country this will be firstly, and most dominantly, introduced plants.

Although agriculture is widespread, gardening has retreated from the more widespread of ancient times to the urban, domestic and industrial. Many of these gardens are not of the land. They are imposed upon, separate to, even alien to, the lands beneath and beyond. Seeming an anachronism, Christchurch's "Garden City" promotional image was despatched with a few years ago. Ian Oelrichs yesterday proposed its re-emergence in other forms. I welcome proposals to (again) garden the lands of Canterbury beyond the urban or domestic fence. I welcome sensitive and appropriate broadscale gardening that recognises the distinctiveness in that land.

Some more extensive gardening has already spread to lands around cities and towns. Rural residential and lifestyle blocks, small holdings or hobby farms, have multiplied to become the major peri-urban landuse. Yet many of these people are not of rural heritage, not of the land, they often do not have a land management tradition. These visitors to the countryside who have bought a patch, are, I suggest, an enormous threat to landscape integrity and indigenous biodiversity. They frequently lack expertise and will in animal and plant pest management, and have a propensity to plant a plethora of non-local plant material. Much of this has the potential to spread far and wide in vulnerable remnant ecosystems.

The Resource Management Act, 1991, was an international milestone with its purpose of promoting sustainable management of natural and physical resources. This includes the life-supporting capacity of ecosystems. Although a major threat to ecosystems, as yet, the introduction of non-local plant material is seldom controlled, and its confinement seldom required. The potential effects of the new age managers frightens me (Lucas, 1994c). Lifestyle blocks are a time-bomb which it is hoped landscape architects will be proactive in seeking to de-fuse.

We are a fenced country. With twenty times more sheep than people in New Zealand, stock not only has to be fenced in, beyond the city sheep and cattle have to be fenced out.

The conversion of Aotearoa New Zealand from a gardened land to a grazed land has changed the character dramatically, and impoverished our biodiversity. The conversion of a forested country to one of pasture, not only suited the meat and wool export industry, it has also been the desired aesthetic. The simple, green short-grazed grass mantled the country from north to south. Grazed or mown, the grass sward became the signature of New Zealand. Nature's diversity has been obliterated or reduced to museum-like relics in many regions.

The simple grass sward aesthetic allows an acceptance of the golf course of the rafting-reebok-restaurant era. It also has been used as a surface to display the archaeological history in our lands.

However it is increasingly under question as we seek to manage sustainable ecosystems and to express our identity in the world. Recent rural consultation in north Canterbury (Lucas, 1995) revealed a strong preference for indigenous wildness, strong opposition to exotic wildness. They seemed rather neutral about the green sward - there was little passion expressed for it.

Increasingly the preferred aesthetic is the least-modified, the most natural.

This is a friendly land - as has been noted by our visitors - of friendly peoples. It is also a friendly land for plant growth. Almost any plant from anywhere seems to find a cosy niche here. more competitive than local plants, they settle in. And spread. And spread . . . As landscape architects we have a responsibility to introduce only those plants that can with certainty be contained within the site. Many have escaped already - escaped garden plants choke some native forests, choke out our grasslands, dunelands, wetlands and crowd in to dominate our open braided rivers which are an international signature of Canterbury. I therefore like the idea of "braided river gardens" of management to retain their indigenous openness. Many rivers have been abused and neglected. Some care and attention is well overdue. To undertake at the essential large scale this is, however, an enormous task.

Although like me their hearts may be in the country, most New Zealanders are tucked into or around a few coastal cities, the rest of the country is short of managers and funds for management. It is extremely vulnerable.

A community survey I undertook (Lucas, 1994; Harding, 1994) for vegetation change in Canterbury mountainlands demonstrated a desire for the unmodified, the apparently unmanaged, the most natural, most indigenous. Yet people also saw this cover as unlikely to eventuate. Although seen as highly likely, the grass sward and the plantation were not really wanted. The study sought to develop a technique for finding common ground in a controversial area. A non-adversarial, multi-round postal survey was used. Realistic images were circulated of their predicted vegetation changes for different types of country. People identified the possibility, desirability, likelihood, and sustainability of the various vegetation changes demonstrated. There was a very high response rate and very high agreement achieved. Identified common ground could form a basis for planning in the area.

Last year I facilitated an "indigenous farming" workshop at the International Women in Agriculture conference in Melbourne (Whilst scarce in decision-making, most agricultural workers of the world are women.) The wide-ranging experience and perspectives presented there, all sought respect for the traditions of nature and appropriate traditions of culture. All were suffering from international, monocultural farming regimes that ignore local identity and the long-nurtured relationships between vegetation, animals, soil and people. Homogenising of landscapes is feared and resisted, and restoration sought.

Our colleagues have often been involved in such change. Considered in isolation, the designer may show a superficially visually sensitive proposal for landscape change - different uses, vegetation, etc. but responding to local patterns, colours, etc.. Considered in full landscape context, what is the effect on the experience of that landscape? A recent ruling (Planning Tribunal decision No.W114/94) supported consideration of landscape as both the physical and the experience. Even though there was minimal visual disruption from the proposed airport development being considered, disruption of locally valued rural tranquility was accepted as a significant adverse landscape effect. Every place is experienced as a different landscape by different people. The shared experience needs to be recognised and respected in design, in assessment, and in communication of a proposal.

The approach taken in developing the guidelines for the Waimakariri highway corridor (Bennett & Lucas, 1992) - noted yesterday by Neil (Armstrong) Challenger - I would now alter to ensure it was driven by the community. I would not merely meet with and invite them to comment on and accept our analysis and proposals for their district. In the process of developing those guidelines we did not adequately acknowledge locals' stake in those lands.

Although the guidelines may have come out to be the same, with a consultative process their ownership would be different. It may seem easier as a professional to get on and draft something up and then discuss it. This is not necessarily very constructive in terms of community acceptance.

Consultation with tangata whenua is required to assess the effects on their landscape. Often it is inappropriate to seek that tangata whenua identify special places or values in order that we may avoid impacting on these in planning and designs. Often it is not appropriate for the knowledge of special values to be revealed. This has to be respected. Discussion of preliminary proposals may enable them to indicate areas and resources that should be avoided, protected, or, that could be enhanced, and thus make a proposal acceptable.

Recent community consultation (Lucas, 1994a,b, 1995) has demonstrated the ability of communities to articulate appropriate and inappropriate landscape management before any analysis or concept had been drafted. Although diverse views are held, a widely shared position can usually be identified.

Following infighting in a low-key holiday village down the lake from Queenstown, a request for me to facilitate a one day workshop allowed locals to identify assets and issues and draw up their preferred future. This resulted in unanimous agreement on the proposals when put together (Lucas, 1994a) and advertised by the Council - one submission was received saying they all agreed!

Similarly at Arrowtown, also near Queenstown, and George Seddon's example of "phoney culture". I recently facilitated a planning workshop in the town as locals were unhappy with the direction in which they were being taken. A well-intentioned local councillor had achieved budget allocation for unit paving of the main street, street tree planting proposals were being drafted by consultants, old buildings had become indistinguishable from new, the town was sprawling out beyond its geographic niche in the landscape, and, locals felt they should be allowed to decide on the direction of development, not just respond to proposals. To service visitors, key sites such as their daily street-chat place and rough riverside bar-be-que area were felt to be threatened with "improvement" out of existence.

A four day community process produced a set of 8 plans for the town and a 50-page report (Lucas, 1994b) which are now being developed into the District Plan with full community backing. Many will be pleased to know they tossed out the style book that required new buildings to copy 1870s buildings - and which resulted in old buildings being revamped to copy the new old! They also rejected the unit paving, tree plantings, etc. proposed as inappropriate to their place and contributors to the homogenisation of other places. The community sought sensitive new development that respected and responded to the old, but did not pretend to be old. They want the low key and the wild, the small-scale, and, to allow the old to look worn. Minimal hard surfacing was wanted, and a no-build town belt defined to contain the town. (Maybe, George, you will see some of your sought-after old paint there in decades to come!)

The Arrowtown charette process was most encouraging. With a sensitive technical/design team at the workshop to assist and document community views, the whole planning process produced some very interesting and practical proposals, was completed rapidly, and, received good community support. The future direction of Arrowtown was reclaimed by the locals, for themselves and for the visitors on which they depend.

Investigating vegetation management at archaeological sites that pre-date the introduction of the grass sward to Aotearoa New Zealand (Lucas, 1993), I challenged the ubiquitous grazed or mown sward as a cover to ancient sacred places. Whilst it may provide good visual and scientific access to a site, such grass and its management is not of that place - not of that time being commemorated. This requires challenging our aesthetic. Plants appropriate to the place may be able to be established and managed, even if only as a window to that time. Otherwise, natural wildness is often preferred, particularly if the site carries hurt and bloodshed - a blanket of wild vegetation has often been sought by tangata whenua to cover their sad sacred places.

As a profession we can (re)place reminders in our lands. Plant reminders. Name reminders. We all know the "Woodend"s where forest is not evident, the Totara Valley with no totara forest remnant. Naming past ecosystems in our planning helps evoke alternative images for future opportunities. The grass sward has not been forever, and need not remain forever!

Inspired by the birds - tui, kahu, gull and duck - that formerly belonged to that place, reknowned sculptor, Neil Dawson expressed the signature of lost Wellington with these fragile feathers above their High Court. Reminders may be useful in encouraging necessary restoration of some of the specialness of the nature lost to much of our overly friendly lands of Aotearoa New Zealand. signposts to the past may be turned to become signposts to the future.

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