

The yard goes on forever: Community initiatives in maintaining and revitalizing local open space

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Abstract: Open space has long been a valued amenity in metropolitan settings for the multiple dividends delivered: active recreation, passive leisure, conservation, scenery, community gardens, environmental management. Small parks contribute singly and collectively to the quality of urban life but often face distinctive problems and challenges in terms of access, utilisation, safety, management and upkeep. Yet such spaces constitute a tremendous resource as local foci for collective action aimed at creating more sustainable cities. Community engagement is vital for such spaces to realize their potential. This paper reviews efforts to better utilize and manage a particular type of neighbourhood greenspace. This is the internal reserve inspired in early twentieth century Australia by international experiments in best-practice worker housing and upper-middle class garden suburb arrangements as a discrete shared space ringed by houses and with a multiplicity of uses. Since their creation in their hundreds throughout estates often now almost a century old, internal reserves have in many instances remained intact only by default as bland grassed spaces, like big under-utilised backyard. Of most interest here are instances where residents have seized the opportunities to reinvent these spaces through new gardening and leisure initiatives. The paper reports on three success stories in the Melbourne suburbs of Keilor, Footscray and Reservoir. The larger significance of the findings is in identifying empowering pathways for enriching the environmental and cultural capital of a more sustainable suburban environment.

Introduction

Public open space is a vital element of productive, sustainable and livable cities. Constituted at every imaginable scale and assuming countless permutations, open space is as vital to the amenity of cities in the 21st century as it was to relieving the growth pressures of the newly industrializing cities of the 19th century (Thompson 2002). While it is the great parks that are duly celebrated, from the earliest days of the town planning movement small open spaces serving predominantly neighbourhood leisure needs have been highly valued. Then and now, small parks have constituted a multi-dimensional resource providing a string of community benefits across a spectrum of recreational, conservation, community and place-making functions (Forsyth and Musacchio 2002). The quality and quantity of neighbourhood open space is extremely variable. Many parks can descend into disuse and be effectively abandoned by communities due to a variety of factors relating to the park's location, physical attributes, access, and perceived safety. At the same time in other neighbourhoods there can be moves to transform vacant spaces into small parks for various health, play, safety, and scenic reasons; the emergence of DIY urbanism is one new force that has promoted the greening of lots in distressed communities. In urban greenfield and brownfield settings, urban designers continue to experiment with new forms of neighbourhood open space.

Here we deal with the legacy and promise of a particular type of neighbourhood-scale open space: the internal reserve. This is a form of enclosed open space within residential blocks usually, but not always, publicly owned and maintained. Size and positioning are relative, and the exact use made of these spaces can be very different as can their contribution to the quality of life in different settings. While planimetrically comparable to the communal spaces framed by perimeter housing blocks at medium-high densities, the essential quality is their suburbanity in insinuating themselves into the texture of low density settings. Their invisibility is both strength and curse. These are spaces which have been conceived as the micro-building blocks of community life but their scale and geography has often seen them redefined as desultory left over spaces, neglected and in some instances resumed for housing and other purposes. On

the other hand, newly created internal reserves carry greater promise as sustainable open spaces valued by their communities.

This paper moves between these polarities of decline and rediscovery. It revisits the historical form of the internal reserve, its trials and tribulations, and its reinvention. It is especially concerned with reserves provided with the best intentions by idealistic urban designers have descended into forgotten or at best underutilized spaces and their renaissance, not without struggle, through community action. Prefaced by a brief historical preamble intended to capture the dominant narratives of the internal reserve form in Australia and globally, the paper is structured around three Melbourne case studies of rejuvenation through community power.

From town planning to new urbanism

The precedents for internal reserves lie in various historic forms including gated park spaces in 18th century London townhouse blocks. Their modern incarnation arises in late 19th century England in connection with the rise of the early town planning and garden city movements. The original intention behind such spaces hidden in the interior of housing blocks was primarily as agricultural allotment gardens. They provided opportunities for tenants to grow fresh vegetables in healthy semi-communal outdoor settings. The plan of Port Sunlight, near Liverpool, developed by William Lever as a company estate from the late 1880s is a prototypical design that proved particularly influential on the early 20th century garden suburb (Hubbard and Shippobottom 1990). Transplanted to Australia, internal reserve spaces were envisaged by leading planners ranging from the British-born John Sulman, the Americans Walter and Marion Griffin, New Zealander Charles Reade and 'natives' such as Melbourne's Saxil Tuxen and Perth's Percy Hope and Carl Klem as local park space for children's and/or adults' activity. Their prospective use was purely indicative, lying within a spectrum between active and passive recreation to be determined by local needs within a framework of community volition and voluntarism.

While the majority of such reserves in Australia today can still be credited to the first wave of interwar 'town-planned' suburbs of the 1920s, later formulas such as cluster housing and 1960s apartment and townhouse developments across Australia also saw planners dabbling with the same form. Similarly, peculiarities of topology and, in some instances, 'accidental' quirks of development saw reserves appear either simply as land on which it was impossible or at least extremely difficult to build on, or as open space provision on one estate development later rendered 'enclosed open' by another.

The internal reserve's destiny in planned Australian suburbs was, however, very different to those in other countries due in large part to the emergence of an aspirational and individualistic middle class in the early 20th century. As materialism, individuality and family-centred households took priority in postwar Australia and as geographically-defined communities gave way to recreationally-defined communities of interest in the second half of the twentieth century, the centrality or value of internal reserve spaces came up for question. Local governments – themselves often the subject of boundary rationalization and mergers – found themselves unable to justify maintenance budgets for space which is often, perhaps by dint of its low visibility, neither acknowledged nor appreciated by surrounding residences and in many instances lies unknown to neighbours in streets nearby. In many cases, such as in the suburbs of Menora and Coolbinia, Perth, ongoing attempts to sell off internal reserve spaces either to surrounding households, to become backyard extensions or other purposes were thwarted only by a policy ruling requiring agreement of all landowners. These spaces, currently maintained as sparsely landscaped passive recreation space, are now acknowledged by the City of Stirling as adding 'significantly to the character of the suburbs' (City of Stirling, 2010, p. 33). In other instances – including Reservoir, Melbourne and some of the many reserves provided by land surveyor-entrepreneur Henry Halloran on the NSW east coast – local councils have carried through resumption proposals for redevelopment; in the majority of cases, for housing or community uses.

In the late 1960s cluster housing reinterpreted the internal reserve form with uneven results. The example of Claymore, in southwestern Sydney, is an example of an internal reserve system branded a 'failure' and redesigned. Claymore had been designed in the early 1970s as a public housing estate with large

sections of interior open space which, when visited by the present authors in 2010 was primarily well-maintained, if underutilized. The area, known as one of the most deprived in Sydney (Baum, 2008), was slated for large-scale redevelopment under the lemma/Keneally government in a program similar to that carried out at Bonnyrigg. The redevelopment program was then put on hold (effectively, halted) by the incoming O'Farrell government (Groenhart, 2012). The unwillingness of state government – limited by ideological and political concerns – to commit to comprehensive redevelopment aside, the essential underpinning of the Claymore redevelopment was in large part an understanding of the generous open space as a place of waste, expense and 'failure', rather than an opportunity for cultural expression. This is particularly unusual given that a decade earlier, the Claymore reserves had been celebrated as a productive landscape for culturally appropriate local agriculture (Freestone and Nichols 2004 p. 118).

The story of the internal reserve is not, however, merely one of an archaic format to be 'dealt with'. This spatial type has been reborn as a component of many new urbanist designs across the world, in varying incarnations and renderings which, like the plans of a century earlier, anticipate the creation of new community amongst residents inspired by the possibilities of small local open spaces in their midst. New Urbanists such as Peter Calthorpe have clearly embraced the notion of the 'pocket park', and the incorporation of 'mews' and/or expanded pedestrian-only areas in a multitude of new residential developments is de rigeur. Mandanipour (2003) has made much of Calthorpe's adherence to 'pedestrian pockets' (p. 144) and 'defined public space' (p. 139).

In many new developments, the reincarnated internal reserve has been reborn as a core feature. Two international examples can suffice for many: Staiths South Bank, at Gateshead south of Newcastle-on-Tyne and Stapleton in north-east Denver, Colorado. At the Staiths, houses face out into the street and the courtyards are located behind, often accessible through small gates which superficially appear to be house-side walkways. At Stapleton, many houses face into reserve areas with vehicle access through rear laneways, a version common to new urbanist designs and with hybrid origins in Radburn planning. In Australia, one example is the new suburb of Newington at Homebush Bay in Sydney which incorporates small community recreational spaces within housing blocks as a means of leavening the visual impact of the garagescape. Melbourne examples are the small, open-ended 'mews' configuration that appears in both Beacon Cove and Kensington Banks, two showcase inner-urban Melbourne brownfields developments of the 1990s.

The care and revitalisation of older "legacy" spaces remains our primary interest. There are examples to be rounded up across Australia including iconic model suburbs such as Colonel Light Gardens in Adelaide (Brasse and Marsden 1979) and Castlecrag in Sydney (Walker et al 1994). Here we confine our survey to three Melbourne examples. While each of these presents a unique set of circumstances, they serve to elaborate several present day issues surrounding internal reserves: core concerns of physical activity, safety, amenity and community identification. If nothing else the concurrence of such issues shows that the internal reserve for all its theoretical promise still remains a somewhat problematic form in which the best case scenario is often an attenuated balance between positives and negatives.

Fighting to keep legacy local space: Anders Park



Figure 1 Anders Park, West Footscray in February 2013

Anders Park, in West Footscray presents a remarkable recent success story in the renewal of an internal reserve space, the park, known locally as Anders Triangle, is a small internal reserve that owes its existence to the industry of local timber merchant, builder and, briefly, Mayor Anders Hansen, active in the area between the 1920s and 50s. Long neglected, the space was threatened with redevelopment by council until local residents campaigned for its protection and conservation.

Now signposted and recognized, it is used frequently by locals despite council regulations prohibiting the construction of any buildings within it. There is a low-key attempt at some informal agriculture in planter boxes, as well as seating, but the space's primary value seems to be that of community association, including children's and adult's recreation and events such as birthday parties. In this instance, it was no doubt the threat of redevelopment and removal of open space that rallied local block residents to lobby council to retain the site and use it. However, there is also little doubt that the space itself is appreciated by a new generation of residents, many of whom use the area frequently. The area could be typified as recently partially gentrified and many of the residents whose homes surround the 'triangle' are middle aged or younger people, some childless and some with young children, who value the space for its recreation and community creation potential.

Residents are kept apprised of developments in the maintenance and use – including events, crop availability:

There are lemons on the lemon tree that look ready for a-picking! ...parsley, basil and a few other herby things that can help bring your dinner to life! Enjoy, enjoy!

They are also rallied to attend events such as the visit of a local councilor and his staff, via a dedicated Facebook page. The current challenge faced by users of the reserve is the availability of a water supply, which will advantage the community garden component (ideally, around one-third) of the space.

Using internal reserves to celebrate local culture: Wilson Boulevard Park, Reservoir

The Merrilands Estate, designed by Saxil Tuxen in 1919, was the result of research undertaken by the 'well-known surveyor' in Sydney, where developer T. M. Burke 'sent' him to 'study developments in town planning that have there taken place, either under Government supervision or through private enterprise' ('Town Planning Scheme'). Apparently influenced by the NSW state government's Daceyville estate, Tuxen included 14 internal reserve spaces in his design which were long regarded as problematic by the local government – Preston, and later Darebin, council. Many have been sold off but one important response, established in 2005, was the landscaping of what has become known as Wilson Boulevard Park under the aegis of the City of Darebin (Fig 1). The park space in question had long been opened to the road by the purchase of one housing lot which would otherwise have masked its presence from Wilson Boulevard.

A proactive response to the space was created in 'consultation with the local neighbourhood community' (City of Darebin). The multicultural heritage of the local area, derived chiefly from post-war Mediterranean migrants, has been commemorated through the planting of stands of olive trees into the reserve, as well as ornamental pear trees. A barbecue and seating is also provided. Council has a long-term expectation that, as the flora in the reserve becomes established, the reserve will become a local attraction. The Wilson Boulevard Park landscaping commemorates its community's postwar development, rather than its origins as a large scale 'garden suburb' of the interwar period.

Figure 2: Darebin's plan for a revitalized Wilson Boulevard Reserve (2005)



Creating a place for celebration: East Keilor Sustainability Street Community Garden

In *Town Planning at the Crossroads* Lewis Keeble (1961, p14) noted the extraordinarily forward-thinking housing standards, density and common space arrangements in Port Sunlight that, seventy years later, were beginning to be recommended as universally appropriate to new housing estates. Walter and Marion Griffin's last realized suburban subdivision, the Milleara Estate in Melbourne's west captures this movement towards innovative community design for mass housing. Their design which dedicated a quarter of the ground plan to 'parks, playgrounds, and wading pools, etc.' heralded, for one journalist at least, 'a new era of better living conditions, healthy children and more beautiful surroundings for the home' (Anon, 1930). However the internal reserves which were also a trademark of the Griffin's work elsewhere have languished as, at best, informal play spaces and at worst, and for most of their existence, waste ground since they were first gazetted as open space in 1928-9.

Only a few of the suburban pioneers who purchased in the late 1920s would have lived to see their land developed. The Milleara estate, with its distinctive elliptical roads and symmetrical shopping block entranceway, remained largely undeveloped for thirty years. When suburban development caught up with this section of Keilor, new residents, building the first homes on the allotments pegged out for close on half a century, found that in many cases small empty spaces existed within suburban blocks.

The northernmost of these, off a street known as Tuppal Place, has had a chequered history. When the area was host to young families in the 1970s, the 'Tuppal Reserve' was the stage for organized play for children – Little Athletics – and later, a BMX bike reserve. As the demographic of the area changed and the children grew up and left home, the reserve deteriorated and, to some minds, brought the character of the neighbourhood down with it. People would ride motorcycles in the reserve, or use it as a 'party spot', according to Margaret Marshall, local resident, and key figure in the creation and effective running of the

East Keilor Sustainability Street Community Garden. 'We called it the waste land or the triangle,' she recalls. 'It didn't have a name at that point, the council didn't maintain it.'

Every summer, says Marshall, local residents would contact their local council, the City of Moonee Valley, to complain that the long grass and rubbish in the Tuppal Reserve presented a fire hazard. Council park maintenance workers would duly mow a strip alongside the back fences of residential allotments, but there was no further attention given to the space, and even many residents adjoining the block regarded it as an appropriate place to dump 'hard rubbish'. Some residents moved away, specifically citing the hazards of the rear space, most notably when motorbike riders would careen through it using the convenient narrow laneways at either end.

Figure 3 The first of the Milleara reserves to be developed with fruit trees and small agricultural beds (2001).

Author photo



Marshall and her neighbours surveyed three options: the beautification of the area, the development of a community garden, and of course the possibility that no action be taken at all. The second of these was decided upon. A precursor which may have inspired the group (and/or the council) was the Prospect Reserve, 2.5 km south of Tuppal Reserve, in which local residents had planted fruit and olive trees, and constructed seating (Fig 2); initial impetus came directly from the environmental education organization Sustainability Street (Marshall, 2012 p. 103). On agreeing to the garden option, council, community and Sustainability Street worked closely thereafter, with the charismatic and determined Marshall as a key figure. Strict policies were decided in the early stages of development – for instance, the offering of two years' refusal rights to garden plots to those whose properties abutted the space. Council provided the resources to level the space; garden beds were constructed from railway sleepers, as the soil of the reserve itself was regarded as unusable (and unsafe; gardeners are still picking out broken glass from 70 years of neglect). Council also provided the community with a number of important opportunities such as the option to recycle surplus Moonee Valley rubbish bins as water tanks. In addition, numerous small grants and assistances have been made – usually in response to community lobbying – in the nearly ten years that the garden has been operating. One of the smaller sheds on the site was formerly the property of Ansett Airways; Melbourne Airport, a site for local employment, is less than 5 km from the site (Figure 3a). Other buildings (such as a toilet block) are similarly recycled, and a large open-faced community building features tables, a refrigerator, bookshelves, a kitchen and similar useful facilities.

Figure 4 a&b southern wall of East Keilor Sustainability Street Community Garden in 2006 showing the Ansett shed; the same vista on Open Day, April 2013.
(Author photos)



Part of the Community Garden's lease agreement – negotiated with Council and, of course, only requiring a peppercorn rent – is that Open Days be held three times a year (Fig 3b). But the Garden's value to the community is broader than this. Local aged care facilities have been provided with a raised accessible garden, shared with disabled residents (Marshall, p. 106) children (usually, given the demographic of the area, grandchildren) are provided with some play equipment and a 'children's garden'.

If further proof is needed of the positive aspects of a community garden, the testimony of Peter Harnik (2010, p. 83) that community gardens 'can provide beauty, supply food, educate youth build confidence, reduce pesticide exposure, grow social capital, preserve mental health, instill pride, and raise property values' should suffice. However, in this case, the East Keilor residents have gone one better. They have assisted in creation and maintenance of a space which not only solves the initial problem (the space was feared and it was anticipated that dangerous activities threatening residents and their property would be generated from there) but replaces it by giving the local community a new amenity that is productive not only in terms of food grown, but also of community creation and provision of social activity for local people. It is notable that some of the most ardent supporters and participants in East Keilor activities are not strongly interested in gardening per se; they are, however, dedicated to and appreciative of the garden as a community locus and a social space.

One element distinguishes the East Keilor garden, as currently managed, from other internal reserves; an exceptional aspect which, while entirely rational, seems to strike at one plank of the original Griffin platform. The reserve space, once freely accessible to all, is now gated and locked at both ends. While many residents retain free access to the space via doors or gates from their backyard fences into the space – a common internal reserve attribute – aside from open days and unpredictable times when gates are open for users' convenience, entry is at the discretion of gardeners. This was a decision made early in the establishment of the community garden. There have been some instances since of unlawful entry, typically blamed on bored youth (who did not, in any case, cause any notable damage). An internal reserve 'purist' would, however, be justified in suggesting that this fact strikes at one of the basic aspects of one of the oft-cited original intentions of the internal reserve concept. This might be countered in part by the fact that the intruders mentioned above were noted, and peacefully ejected, by local homeowners who maintain 'eyes' on the reserve at all hours.

Perhaps the firmest evidence of the community garden's success is that others are seeking to replicate it: two new gardens within the same LGA have spun off from the original and one of these is, similarly, in a Griffin internal reserve elsewhere on the former Milleara Estate. Marshall writes in her history of the Estate that Walter Burley Griffin was 'an idealist, who thought that the surrounding residents should dictate the purpose to which the reserve would be used' (Marshall 2012, p. 104). While it may arguably be a demographic quirk – notably, the age of current residents in the area, many of whom are past retirement age – it does appear that in the second decade of the 21st century, the internal reserves of Milleara are finally finding favour with locals.

Conclusion

One of the key problems which beset the internal reserve as an urban form is lack of understanding or acknowledgment of its principal features. The internal reserve is usually officially public space, but in practice a blend of public and private. While it is almost always open to any member of the public who might wish to access it, its placement, size and layout typically encourages only those whose properties adjoin (or who live very close by) to use it on a regular basis. Globally, the most successful reserves are those in which most backyards facing into them have low back fences, or no fences at all, giving maximum surveillance between reserve and housing. Additionally and connectedly, the socio-demographic mix and leadership within the small group of surrounding residents becomes a vital ingredient of forward looking community action.

Fashions in planning, like almost any fashions, are cyclical; nonetheless the revival of the internal reserve does, as suggested above, signal a new appreciation for the potential value of small internal open space. There are clearly – arguably in the present climate, more than ever before – advantages not only to provision of small open spaces but to enclosed open space. However, when new internal reserves are presented as an ideal solution to lack of backyard space and the key to instant engenderment of community, planners, developers and members of new communities need to understand the inherent problems in the form – primarily, the need for rules, surveillance, and a prescribed range of uses. These might ideally be altered by community decree as a suburb passes through changing demographic cycles. Additionally, recognition of the history of either specific reserves or the internal reserve as a form or type may (and indeed has, in the case of many icon garden suburbs around Australia) serve to engender local pride and interest in spaces.

In the case of both new and old internal reserves, therefore, it is primarily to local community action with the assistance of local authorities and supportive environmental organisations that we must look to reinvigorate their immanent potential as living spaces for sustainable suburbs.

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