

Paddington Reservoir Gardens

Cnr Oxford Street and Oatley Road, Paddington, NSW

Paddington Reservoir Gardens is a striking new urban park that makes a ruined former reservoir available for the public to enjoy and explore.

Developed by the City of Sydney, the park reveals and interprets part of Sydney's nineteenth-century water infrastructure in new, unexpected and engaging ways, which respond to and draw on the long history of the site.

Paddington Reservoir Gardens also has an important urban role, providing open space adjacent to Paddington's civic precinct and contributing to the City of Sydney's Paddington Conservation Area, which has a wealth of residential, civic, public and military nineteenth-century buildings.

Site history and heritage

Built over 12 years in two stages (completed in 1866 and 1878) to designs by city engineer, Edward Bell, Paddington Reservoir was an integral part of the Botany Swamps Scheme.

In 1899 the reservoir ceased operating and the site was used as a government

storage utility and as a petrol station until 1990. A street-level, grassed park was built above the water chambers the 1930s. The public was also able to visit the empty reservoirs up to 1990, when the first structural collapse occurred and the site was abandoned.

The City of Sydney acquired the reservoir and park during the 2003 amalgamation with South Sydney Council. A Plan of Management (Master Plan) for the site was adopted by council in June 2004 and in 2006 Tanner and Associates prepared a Conservation Management Plan.

By 2006, the structure was in a dangerous state of collapse, with much of the western chamber of the reservoir in a state of ruin. The reservoir is listed on the NSW Heritage Register.

Opportunities

The design team was "captivated by the possibilities of revealing the nineteenth-century structures as a ruin through which members of the public could wander, taking in the dramatic spaces and play of light across the remnants of historic walls and vaults".

Challenges

A major challenge was the expectation that the site should be capped off, with the reservoir sealed below, and a new park built on top. However, the design team saw opportunity in the ruined structure and mounted a strong case to sceptical stakeholders. Through substantial consultation, the council and community was persuaded that

this disused, 'poetic' infrastructure was worth retaining and celebrating.

Pragmatic challenges included the time-consuming process of propping the existing structure to ensure public safety prior to new works starting. Petrol tanks dating from the site's use as a garage and service station were removed prior to the new work along Oxford Street.

Approach and outcome

The CMP provided a strong foundation for understanding the history and significance of the site, and was particularly valuable in supporting the argument for the reservoir to be retained and made accessible to the public.

The project aims to maintain the sense of a ruin while ensuring it is safe for the public to enjoy. All material from the historic structure is retained or reused – conserving both the embodied energy and the urban memory imbued within it.

New work is informed by, but clearly distinguished, from the brick, cast iron and timber heritage structure. Built in a restricted palette of steel, aluminium and concrete, these minimal new elements connect the historic remnants, signal entry and access points around the site, and provide interpretive cues to the reservoir's history, form, function and materiality.

The roofs over the entries to the lower level are based on the shape of the brick vaults below. Salvaged brick inlays and cast iron and masonry seating elements in the upper level lawn evoke the vaulted



Project team

Architect: Tonkin Zulaikha Greer. **Landscape architect:** JMD Design. **Conservation management plan:** Tanner Architects. **Client:** City of Sydney. **Design and project manager:** City Projects. **Builder:** Brisland. **Structural engineer:** Simpson Design Associates. **Hydraulic engineer:** Warren Smith & Partners. **Electrical engineer:** Haron Robson. **BCA consultant:** Blackett Maguire. **Planner:** Cityplan Services. **Access:** Accessibility Solutions. **Remediation consultant:** MPL Health. Safety, Environment. **Certifier:** Advanced Building Approvals.

Photography credits

1. Nathaniel Hughes.
2-5. Brett Boardman.



Lessons

- The team successfully changed public opinion about converting a dangerous eyesore into an exciting and welcoming public space.
- Existing fabric and structure is effectively stabilised as a 'ruin'.
- Heritage elements are used to help unfold the experience of the space and to encourage subsequent visits for further discovery.
- Interpretation is integral to the reuse, which creatively informs the public about the site's past.

arches and beams below. Plants are typical of the Victorian era.

Interpretation is built into the new work wherever possible. For example, a cast iron lid over the former valve chamber depicts part of the original drawing of the pipework connections, while the form of the petrol bowsers has been extruded to provide new seats in the bowsers' former location.

The project was built under a lump sum contract, which meant that all contingencies had to be foreseen and worked into the final design. This included a comprehensive strategy to accommodate unknowns or non-visible aspects over the course of construction.

The project is widely recognised as exemplary, and has received national and international awards for heritage, landscape architecture and urban design.

References

Industrial Heritage Adaptive Reuse Issues Paper accompanying this case study: www.dpcd.vic.gov.au/heritage/projects-and-programs

John de Manincor, "Paddington Reservoir Gardens" *Architecture Review Australia* 110 (June / July 2009).

SueAnne Ware and Julian Raxworthy, 'Literal Signifiers: Paddington Reservoir Gardens' in *Sunburnt: Landscape Architecture in Australia*, (Amsterdam: SUN, 2011), 120-127.

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