

Transcript

Julian Bolleter:

What we design provides a pointer to what's going on in the kind of collective psyche, right? So the way different schemes have been proposed for the foreshore and indeed the way people have reacted to them, the general public, it's generally indicative of something deeper which is going on in the collective psyche and that might relate to our identity as a post-sort-of-colonial society.

How we might relate to these kind of, you know, the Indigeneity of the landscape of the Derbal Yaragan, the river. I believe the way we produce design work and the way it's responded to is indicative of what is in the kind of collective conscious and unconscious of Perth's populace, and that's where it gets really interesting for me.

Sarah Tout:

Hello, and welcome to the Geoffrey Bolton Lecture 2022. The Geoffrey Bolton lecture is an annual celebration of discovery and insight, informed and enriched by archives. My name is Sarah Tout, and I have the immense privilege of introducing and facilitating this lecture podcast. I'd like to acknowledge that this podcast was created on Nyungar Boodjar and pay my respects to Elders past, present, and emerging.

You're about to meet Julian Bolleter, landscape architect, designer, and researcher who's been writing about climate change and its impact on the Perth foreshore. And what follows is a portrait of looking back and looking forward, and how our past and future inform one another. Julian's work includes extensive research: through current studies and sources from the State Archives of WA.

This two-part lecture firstly introduces us to a story spanning the last 100 years of designs along Perth's Derbal Yaragan, the Swan River. We walk through the different worlds that have existed and been Dreamt along the river's edge. And in Part Two we will look ahead at what is coming with a particular focus on climate change: what water is headed our way and what we need to do to adapt to its arrival.

We will explore evolving edges of river-space. How they're changing both with the ebb and flow of what is built along them, responding to the needs and aspirations of Perth dwellers, but so too, how the tides are literally turning with alarming shifts in our environment.

We begin with Dr. Julian Bolleter, co-director at the Australian Urban Design Research Centre, author, landscape architect, designer, teacher and researcher at UWA.

Here, Julian describes his work and what draws him to contemplate the design implications of where a city meets a river.

Julian Bolleter:

The two relationships I'm most interested in is between the city and natural systems, uh - and I'm talking about the city in a morphological sense in terms of its form - and the city and people. I think, um, they're probably some of the richest interactions you can have between these different elements.

And the foreshore is so fascinating because you are trying to reconcile two systems: the city, which is an urban system, which is kind of standardised and generic and fairly fixed, and you are trying to relate that to a river which is ancient, changeable and in a state of flux. And is a, you know, enormously complex kind of system.

So an urban designer or a landscape architect working in the context of a foreshore is somehow trying to reconcile those two systems, which by their nature are very different. And so you get a kind of tension forming there. Um, and I think in that tension is interest and henceforth my focus on the foreshore in my research.

Sarah Tout:

I want to understand more about the Perth foreshore: that liminal space between river and city. What is there now, what it once was, and what it could be?

Julian Bolleter:

It's such a potentially enriching space, the foreshore between the city and the river, because it's animated both by the river and by the city. So it's got energy kind of feeding into it, into that foreshore, that green foreshore environment.

And with that energy should come huge richness and functionality, and beauty and interest y'know. But the foreshore doesn't live up to those aspirations at all. It's not to say it's unpleasant, but it's generally pretty vacuous. It's pretty flat, it's pretty unremitting. There's not a lot of shade and it's pretty good at the speed of a car but when you're walking along it, I mean, the amount of kind of visual richness that you experience at pedestrian speed is minimal.

Sarah Tout:

So let's look at some of the places that *almost* existed along the river, starting with a particularly ambitious plan for a grand casino on an island in the middle of the river itself.

Julian Bolleter:

So this was Frank Vincent. He was an engineer in 1930, I think, and it was in the grip of the Great Depression. He felt that we should build an island in the middle of Perth water, which would be 120 hectare island. It would have a, um, a residential subdivision, shopping centre, a small aerodrome, and golf links for the, what he termed *the busy city man*.

So this was prior to the freeway going in, and it would also provide vehicular connection between Perth City and South Perth, and it was really a way of keeping the boys busy during the Great Depression. It would've been a vast engineering exercise. They would've had to armour the entire edge of it, so that it didn't get washed away in a flood. It would've required huge reclamation, um, and, you know, I mean, casinos often happen on islands - Macau being one example. When they built Burswood Casino in the 1980s, it would've been the logical home, sorry for Crown Casino then to have been developed on Perth Island and who knows, it could have been pretty wild and wonderful.

But, um, you know, I think it likely would've likely elicited or produced flooding of Perth City 'cause water would've been diverted around the island and it would've been devastating for ecology.

Sarah Tout:

Speaking of places for people to party during the Depression, one thing that *did* exist for a time on the foreshore was White City. Tell us a bit more about that.

Julian Bolleter:

Yes, as I understand, White City was a kind of an amusement palace, built on the edges of the foreshore, on what would've been the esplanade. And this was a kind of fun park as I understand it. But it had had its sort of darker undercurrents of violence and boxing, and prostitution, and a bit of gambling. Uh, and it ended up being removed by the, I think, a combination of the state and local government. Because it wasn't seen as appropriate to, you know, the, the civic foreshore that should celebrate a capital city like Perth. It was, the undercurrents, I think, which White City was associated with, were regarded as not appropriate contribution to the identity of Perth and therefore not appropriate to the foreshore.

Sarah Tout:

And it's such a strange name as well for an entertainment park. I mean in some ways it's quite uncomfortable and unfortunately named, but it does speak to colonialism, and conservatism, and puritanism in this idea of it being *white*. And then it doesn't seem to really surprise me that when it broke free from those conservative constraints it was removed.

Julian Bolleter:

Yes, it was stomped on. I can't speak to the symbolism of the 'White City' name, but certainly the buildings looked pretty white. So yeah I guess there may be more - maybe the name's more of a pragmatic expression of that, but who knows?

No, I think the only other pivotal scheme was a scheme by the Main Roads Department in 1966. To build a huge freeway infrastructure along the foot of Perth City along where is now Riverside Drive and Langley Park, but also encircling the city. Sort of creating a noose around the city.

So the freeway infrastructure would essentially be where the Northbridge Tunnel is now, but it would also extend along the foot of the city where Riverside Drive is.

As Paul Ritter, a planner at the time, said, *choking the life out of Central Perth*, with this freeway kind of noose around the city.

This was an interesting idea, which relates to the motto I recall from the 1980s of *Your Car is As Welcome As You Are*, as it described central Perth. And I think reflected the fact that we'd built this, kind of, vacuous foreshore landscape. We'd reclaimed it all, but then we didn't quite know what to do with it.

So it became the dumping ground of freeways and car parks and things.

A scheme which was actually victoriously resisted by planners at the City of Perth (Paul Ritter being one, and also Max Hipkins, who went on to being Mayor of City of Nedlands). So certainly, you know, there was a win there that that particular scheme didn't get built. There's some I wish did get built. I'm really glad that one didn't get built.

Sarah Tout

Absolutely. Oh. But I do feel intrigued to ask you, what do you wish had been built?

Julian Bolleter:

There was an absolutely beautiful scheme for a botanic garden in the 1970s by a government architect, or landscape architect, John Oldham.

It was the idea - and picture this in your mind - of a botanic garden, which would extend from UWA in Crawley, through Kings Park, down the slopes of Mount Eliza through to the freeway interchange, which was under planning at that point. The Botanic Garden would sweep along Langley Park at the foot of the city, encompass Heirisson Island, pivot around South Perth, and conclude with zoological gardens on the foreshore. Which would be an extension of the South Perth Zoo down onto the foreshore.

So it was an urban forest of epic proportions and the structuring logic was that of a botanic garden.

And he did a plan for this. And I think it was a beautiful idea that could have actually stitched together all of these disparate landscapes into one composition, which would've been uniquely Perth in a way. And would've been expressive of this idea of a Swan River Arcadia, which goes back to Stirling in the European imagination.

But what happened was, the commissioner for Main Roads who was delivering the interchange, which was the filling in of Mounts Bay for the huge snarl of freeway infrastructure at the foot of Mount Eliza. Um, he said to John Oldham, *if you design and we build that section, then we'll look at doing the rest.*

And of course that didn't happen. They just really effectively built the botanic garden or the gardens within the freeway interchange. And there are the botanic gardens in Kings Park. But the larger vision was never realised.

There was, there was a whole series of schemes, for the foreshore as part of an international design competition in 1991. The winning scheme actually did look at excavating the river back to the foot of the city. But actually introducing a lot of endemic wetland treatments to the river. I think that would've been a beautiful and sensible scheme, which would also have delivered wonderful amenity to the city, which currently is lacking and the foreshore isn't really contributing to.

So that, I think, resonated with John Oldham's botanic garden scheme, but had perhaps more of a focus on endemic landscape and also re-sculpting the foreshore. And reconstituting river edges.

Which would've been pretty interesting and I think would've been just maturing now quite beautifully. And would mean that we have a much more enriching foreshore environment.

Sarah Tout:

Mmm. I've heard you use the phrase, *endemic landscape*, a few times. I wonder if it's worth sharing a concise definition of that for us, as well.

Julian Bolleter:

As I use endemic in relation to plants I mean, I essentially mean *local*. They're local to this region.

Sarah Tout:

So, having illustrated some of these schemes, I want to understand more about why Julian is drawn to these historic, never-realised plans. And what design-ambitions tell us about people.

Julian explains that designs have meaning.

Julian Bolleter:

Yeah, they can be read. They can be - and perhaps *read* is not the right word - but those schemes can be interpreted for their meaning through a classic kind of interpretive research strategy which kind of presumes that the meanings behind things we are doing are not clear.

And that the researcher can hold different things, such as a scheme for the redesign of the foreshore, up to the light and consider what it might say about us. They can interpret that.

Sarah Tout:

So, if we take a wide view and consider the Perth foreshore from the time of settlement through to now, and interpret the patterns of how people have shaped the land, and also how the river and ecosystem responds and replies: a particular story emerges.

Julian Bolleter:

I began to think of it like you might a romantic relationship. If we consider the two central characters of the river, and the city or the township of Perth. Um, like most relationships that are romantic, I would guess they begin with some form of infatuation. We see that from the very early days when James Stirling and his botanist, Fraser, sailed up the Swan River, in 1829, I think it was, no, 1827, sorry.

They sailed up the Swan River to Guilford and it was after an uncommonly moist and cool summer. Everything was very green. Their accounts of the Swan River landscape are that of a kind of arcadia: it is bountiful and beautiful.

The extent of their romanticism, I think is, is shown by their belief that the cool easterly winds - the land breeze they experienced at night when camping at the edge of the Swan River - was quite a cooling breeze and they believed it must have emanated from a snow-capped mountain range to the east of Perth.

So they were very romantic. They went back to England, these accounts of the beauty of the Swan River landscape were printed in the newspapers at the time, and it precipitated what was called Swan River Mania. Which was a lot of people, you know, the aspirational classes, wanting to move out here to what became the Swan River Colony.

So the romantic relationship began with infatuation. It then moved into a mood of domination. So, uh, obviously, European settlement began in the township of Perth. And very quickly, the river and the wetlands to the north of the city began to be recognised as being problematic.

There were just swarms of mosquitoes. It was very hot. It was regarded that a more perfect purgatory could not be envisaged.

And the foreshore and the wetlands were problematic from the perspective of the settlers in the sense that they were kind of muddy, unsanitary. Um, you know, sewerage would collect in the wetlands.

There were tiger snakes. There were areas where the Indigenous would collect food and hunt.

In time they weren't regarded as being - the relationship of the township, or the city, to the river was regarded as inadequate and not befitting this township of Perth.

So then the mood shifts to one of domination where we begin to get calls to reclaim parts of the river and to fill in wetlands.

So it's an attempt to kind of dominate the landscape. And I guess you could - maybe the analogy is a bit tortured - but there is a phase here where the romantic partners have moved in together and there's a kind of battle of wills and there is a degree of domination going on.

And we see that just really in attempts by colonial culture to fill in and to reclaim and to make civic and sanitise the foreshore environment to the river.

Um, the third phase is one where we have a kind of - things become romantic again. And this happens later in Perth's history. This is actually quite recently. It's the late eighties and nineties where there is an attempt to re-naturalise the river's edges and to return it to an endemic condition.

So I guess there's a kind of romanticism about that original Swan River landscape, which we were so infatuated about in the first instance. And so there's a kind of return to this idea of wanting to excavate back these reclaimed areas, these filled in areas, and return the river to some kind of natural condition.

Sarah Tout:

That's particularly poignant when you set up the contrast between what the fantasy of the landscape would be with the reality, and that would've been a really confronting contrast.

Julian Bolleter:

Indeed, it was very confronting. And a lot of the settlers who could afford to leave did leave. Which attests to the degree of confrontation.

I mean, I think we, we always exist in a place somewhere between the desired or imagined qualities of the space or place, and the reality of it.

So we do always exist somewhere between those two worlds. But I imagine in the early European settlement of Perth, those worlds would've been so divergent between what lured people there, the Arcadia of the Swan River landscape and the reality of this mosquito-plagued, brutally hot and dry and difficult and alien landscape.

The tension between those two extremes must have been something to reconcile and, uh, evidently for many of the settlers, they couldn't reconcile it and henceforth left.

Sarah Tout:

Mm. And when we've spoken about this project before, you've used words like *sanitising* and *fixing*: this sort of attitude of wanting to, as you've said, dominate the landscape kind of comes into that history as well. There's this sense that we need to change what is here.

Julian Bolleter:

Yeah, look the unsanitary kind of landscapes - of the wetlands to the north of the city and the foreshore to the south, the city centre - in the 19th century, there were some kind of strange ideas that vapours called *miasma* would emanate from low lying, swampy land and that these vapours were kind of pestilential to both the physical health of residents, but almost the moral health too, you know?

Um, there was a kind of the corrupting influence of wetlands. So I think we can see... You can see the tendency of Perth and colonial culture to fill in wetlands and drain them.

*Draining the swamp*, as being very pragmatic at one level. Often it was done to deliver sites where you could deliver housing, um, to manage what was regarded as problematic flooding.

And also to deal with wetlands, which became polluted and, you know, there were cholera and typhoid outbreaks, you know, which I think partly resulted from sewerage contamination in wetlands around Perth.

So there's definitely a pragmatic dimension too to filling in those landscapes and sanitising them, but it was also highly symbolic, I think.

You know, if you look in psychoanalytic theory, rivers are often associated with the unconscious or with Indigeneity.

So there's something about training the Native River, I think, that might have resonated consciously or unconsciously in the people who are delivering such policy and planning.

Sarah Tout:

Yes, and I jumped in before when you were going to discuss this fourth phase of the relationship.

Julian Bolleter:

The fourth phase, I think, is consummation.

So the romantic partners have finally consummated their relationship. And I would say that is the moment where the city breaks through the green belt, the reclaimed green belt, which otherwise kept the partners apart. And there's a truly urban embrace of the river.

So the river was let into where the esplanade is/was. That was all excavated and the city kind of walked down the hill and then encircled that inlet.

Now that process is still ongoing, but you can feel it happening.

So in the fourth phase, there is this true embrace, uh, between the city and river. The green belt is broken through, I guess, on both sides, which was keeping the partners apart and, you know... I guess for a lot of people that sort of long anticipated and glorious union and marriage was something to celebrate.

Obviously other people felt the loss of the esplanade deeply. But the interesting thing about it is, that embrace is momentary. And a fragment of, you know, the many kilometres of edges to the edge of Perth water, or indeed the river more generally.

So it's an unusual moment for Perth 'cause we've never had a kind of an urban model for the Swan River in the way that, um, policy makers and planners in Melbourne had a vision of the Yarra as the Seine in Paris. And the idea that it would have an urban - It would be an urban river with the city pushing up right up against it. We've never had that vision in Perth, so it's a big deal for Perth. And the controversy lingers.

The fifth phase, and the final phase, is one of humiliation. Which is, I guess, where some romantic relationships do finally conclude. [*laughs*] Or linger.

And humiliation is this, in my mind, that the 19th and 20th century was very much about us reclaiming from the river and training it, you know, into our model of what a river should be.

We are gonna find in the 21st century - and beyond - that, the river will reassert its power to reshape the city. Which is, it will break through the city-beautiful straight jacket of masonry walls that we've created. Uh, it'll break through them and it will reclaim the foreshore. It will truly reclaim the areas it lost, and it will not finish there. It will then begin to reclaim areas of the city.

So there's an inversion of, I guess, the relationship and, in a way, I think the river will reassert itself in this respect.

Sarah Tout:

I think this relationship metaphor is an interesting one, and I find particularly poignant that the river is set to reassert itself.

In the next episode, we explore in-depth what this may mean in terms of climate change and sea level rise, but there's an important spiritual element that Julian acknowledges here too.

So whilst we do need to consider how we might -

Julian Bolleter:

protect infrastructure of roads and, you know, and sewerage pump stations and things, um, and buildings, but there's also a symbolic dimension.

We talked about, in psychoanalytic theory, how the river and water is often associated with the unconscious in Indigeneity and the Indigenous story or creation story behind the Derbal Yaragan the Swan River is the idea that the Waugal created it, which is a serpentine dream-like Dream Time creature.

Now, the Waugal was both a, um, a creative force, but also a punisher of wrongdoing. So the river breaking its banks and reclaiming the foreshore, reclaiming parts of the city has a powerful symbolic dimension, which we don't normally allude to, but I think resonates with this idea of the Waugal as a punisher of wrongdoing, and to some degree we have done wrong, in both our relationships to Indigenous culture and Indigenous landscape.

Sarah Tout:

Julian expands on this idea of reclamation further and - somewhat fittingly - you might be able to hear a chainsaw, a kind of intrusive and violent interruption of the landscape itself in the background while Julian adds -

Julian Bolleter:

What is interesting, I think in this idea of the, the river reclaiming the city is, it is reasserting itself, but it's evident for some time that European culture, you know, there is a level of discomfort with what has gone on, particularly in our relationship to Indigenous culture, but also to, you know, the river, I think as partly as an expression of that. And I think one piece of evidence which would support that claim is the amount of Indigenous cultural centres which have been proposed along the river over the years.

Some at Belmont, uh, some on Heirisson Island, the north end, the south end, uh, up in Kings Park on the outcrop of Mount Eliza and also in the actual Elizabeth Quay planning, there was always a proposal for a stage two, Indigenous cultural centre. So, you know, these can be, I think these attempts to deliver an Indigenous cultural centre are at some level sort of reparations too, for how we've treated the river and how we've treated Indigenous culture. They can be expressed in that way.

What is interesting is, the second stage Indigenous cultural centre for Elizabeth Quay, essentially, you know, got hand-balled into some distant future, and a lot of the aspirations to deliver such a cultural centre then sort of wandered up William Street and found expression in the development of Yagan Square, which is an Indigenous-themed precinct with interpretive artwork and, I think - till recently - some indigenous businesses operating within there.

Uh, however, that has, um, had its own issues. Both in terms of its economic viability and the degree to which many of the themes that went into the design are actually interpreted and understood by the average person on the street.

Sarah Tout:

Mm. That is quite interesting. I hadn't appreciated that Yagan Square was an evolution of something that was going to initially be part of the quay.

Julian Bolleter:

Yeah, that's right. I think pragmatics, in the end, won the day. And the idea of building, um, an Opera House equivalent in terms of an Indigenous cultural centre just got too difficult and too hard.

And, in that way we tend to do in Perth when it's too hard, we sort of find a more modest way of trying to achieve those goals. Uh, but whether Yagan Square really does or not, I think is open to conjecture.

Sarah Tout:

So it's becoming clear that ambitions for Perth's foreshore have been numerous throughout its period of European settlement since 1829. One of the unrealised schemes that I find quite intriguing is former Perth Lord Mayor, Lisa's Scaffidi's apparent vision for a Statue of Liberty-like monolith at Elizabeth Quay.

Julian Bolleter:

Yeah, so look, that was a fascinating idea. She was thinking that in terms of the bicentenary of Perth's founding and the idea, I think, comes from a recognition that there is not a lot of cohesive elements which bring together Perth Water, Buneenboro, into one composition.

If you consider there's multiple local governments: we've got the City of Perth, we've got the Town of Victoria Park, City of South Perth, and there hasn't really been an attempt to bind that space together into one kind of room.

And I think the Statue of Liberty idea is that you would plonk one in the middle of this Perth water and it would be this kind of unifying element, which would bind together this otherwise disparate kind of space of Perth Water.

So, you know, I guess, in spatial terms, it could play a role like that, but it also would be highly symbolic.

The problem with it is, is the question of, well, who would it be? Who would be that statue? Like, who could possibly sustain it?

[music: *Easy To See by Erasers*]

Sarah Tout:

Many of these ideas and schemes became the foundation of Julian Bolleter's book, *Take Me to the River, the story of Perth's Foreshore* published in 2015.

Having examined this planning history in such depth, and considering his philosophy that these spaces and plans can be read, when we consider these patterns and the evolution of the Perth foreshore over the last century, what have we learned?

Julian Bolleter:

Look, hundreds of schemes have been prepared for the foreshore in that period. Um, which, which many of which I exhumed for the book; to hold them up to the light and consider what they might mean.

In terms of what we've learned, I think, one thing that I would observe is that there's a kind of cultural amnesia that seems to go on. And it's tied to the short-term electoral cycle as well, that we tend to just endlessly go around in circles, sort of remembering and forgetting and making the same kind of mistakes again. And then learning the lessons and then forgetting them. We don't have a very strong institutional memory, I think, for things that didn't work.

There's a tendency in Perth - and I use the term as a verb, uh, for things to be *Perthed*. We can be a bit half-assed in some respects, and there's certainly evidence for that on the foreshore.

Sarah Tout:

Remember the Botanic Garden scheme designed by John Oldham that Julian mentioned earlier? It's one of many examples of a pattern that often sees only a fragment of an idea ever be realised.

Julian Bolleter:

And I think this fragmentary planning doesn't serve Perth water very well. I would say Elizabeth Quay is a little bit similar in that respect.

Um, you know, it's a moment where urbanity broke through the green belt to embrace the city, but there's not a larger sense if that should be the dominant relationship with the city or whether that should be just an isolated moment of an urban embrace of the river.

And I think, um, part of the reason these things have been difficult is because the space of the foreshore is so symbolic.

It's symbolic of how we, as Perth people, see us relating to the river and to Indigenous culture, to Indigenous landscape, to endemic landscape. And so therefore it means all these different things to different people and it has to kind of -

That's a heavy burden for a space to carry. It makes it difficult for a designer to intervene because you're not just dealing with the pragmatic issues at that site. You're, in a way, having to express these much broader aspirations, which the Perth populace have about that space.

And therefore it's heavily loaded and it's not easy to enact change. And we saw that with the, you know, with the significant protests, to the redevelopment of the esplanade which have occurred in the last ten years.

Sarah Tout:

And we will explore just what these protests were and the importance of public space for democratic expression in our next episode. Thank you for listening to part one of my conversation with Dr. Julian Bolleter for this Geoffrey Bolton Lecture 2022.

*[music: River Mouth by Benedict Moleta]*

This podcast has been produced by the State Records Office of WA and myself, Sarah Tout. It was mixed and mastered by myself and Adrian Sardi at Sugarland Studios. This episode includes music by Erasers and Benedict Moleta.

Please join us again for the second episode of this two-part podcast lecture for an important conversation that explores not just protests and democratic use of open space, but also, continuing this political thread, we shift into a stark and important conversation about climate change: what is coming for the foreshore and what we need to prepare and to consider if we're going to respond successfully or at all. It's important listening.

You can find it, and more podcasts by the State Records Office of WA at their website and on SoundCloud.