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Project Team,
West Head Lookout Upgrade
National Parks and Wildlife Service, Sydney North

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National Trust submission relating to West Head Lookout



(Source: nationalparks.gov.au)



(Source: happinessandthings.com)

The National Trust of Australia (NSW) are very concerned about the planned works to be undertaken at West Head Lookout. They do not comply with the objectives of the Park's Plan of Management, and will destroy a unique piece of Australian landscape design by one of Australia's pre-eminent Landscape Architects.

The Trust well understand the need for safe and equitable visitor access to important locations. We also however note the unique heritage values of this site and its landscaping by the renowned Sydney Landscape Architect Bruce Mackenzie in association with architect Russell Smith. We feel that the where the original design offered a unique, site-specific solution to the site, the proposed upgrade works do not.

The NPWS website notes that "*The West Head Lookout is considered one of Sydney's best vantage points with views across Broken Bay to Barrenjoey Headland, Lion Island and the Central Coast.*" This is in large part due to the existing site treatment, and the influence of the modern movement in landscape design in Australia. These very qualities are under threat.

Heritage values not appropriately considered

The description of the current landscaping works notes simplistically that the current West Head Lookout is a "1960s lookout structure". What is missing from this description is that this particular work holds a very important, and well-documented, place in the history of Australian Landscape Architecture.

Land at West Head was resumed for military purposes in 1941. Gun emplacements, an observation post, searchlight stations, a trolley way, huts and other structures were constructed on the headland as part of the protection of Sydney during World War II. Following the war the military buildings near the point became a National Fitness Camp, while most of the remainder of the Lambert Peninsula was gazetted in 1951 as part of Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park. As part of the agreement to transfer the lands, military exercises were allowed



to continue on the peninsula during the 1950s and 1960s. In 1964 the camp closed down, the buildings were removed, the land added to the park and the lookout at West Head developed.¹

The NPWS website for this project claims that in accordance with NSW planning legislation, NPWS will carry out rigorous environmental and heritage assessment of the site with input from relevant specialists. We cannot locate any such assessment. Critically, it notes: “The proposed works align with the overall strategy for the management of Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park outlined in the Plan of Management (2002; amended 2014).”²

The National Trust have reviewed the Plan of Management, and we maintain that the proposed works most definitely do not align with this document. The document notes that “the most popular viewing point in the park is the West Head lookout at the end of West Head Road.”³ The document correctly identifies the pressures that increased visitor numbers bring to this place, and suggests sensible ways of dealing with this. Critically, the document notes that:

*“The sandstone paths and walls at the West Head lookout have recently been repaired and improved car parking provided. Improved information for visitors will also be provided at West Head. **The character of sandstone paths and low sandstone walls in a bush setting will be retained.**”⁴*

A specific policy reflects this ambition: **“The existing sandstone character of the West Head lookout will be retained.”**⁵

Most critical however is the following policy:

*“The landscape and scenic values of the park and nature reserves when viewed from both within and outside the park and reserves will be maintained. The natural foreshores, hillslopes and ridgelines will be retained free of built elements and any new facilities within the park will be designed, sited and maintained so as to **harmonise with their surroundings and not be visually intrusive.**”⁶*

The National Trust are concerned that identified items of historic heritage (in the form of the Bruce Mackenzie landscaping works) will be destroyed and that the proposed works are not compliant with the policy that requires new works to harmonise with their surroundings and not be visually intrusive.

The proposed works clearly do not align with the overall strategies and policies in the Plan of Management.

Bruce Mackenzie and the Sydney Bush School

The 1960s and the 1970s saw the rise of the Sydney School of architecture. This was an architecture practised within the Sydney region that expressed a natural affiliation with the Australian landscape; it integrated nature and architecture through spatial arrangements and choice of rustic simple materials and the application of craftsmanship.⁷

¹ Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park and Lion Island, Long Island and Spectacle Island Nature Reserves *Plan of Management* (2002; amended 2014), p. 25

² West head Lookout Upgrade website, accessed 26 August 2021 <https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/topics/parks-reserves-and-protected-areas/park-management/community-engagement/west-head-lookout-upgrade>

³ *Plan of Management* (2002; amended 2014), p. 42

⁴ Ibid, p.42

⁵ Ibid, p.42

⁶ Ibid, p.12

⁷ SHR Listing for Illoura Point <https://apps.environment.nsw.gov.au/dpcheritageapp/ViewHeritageItemDetails.aspx?ID=5061932>



The following excerpt has been taken from Barbara Buchanan's 2009 study *Modernism meets the Australian Bush: Harry Howard and the Sydney Bush School of Landscape Architecture* (pages 122-125):

Bruce Mackenzie was born in 1932 and raised in a suburb where the bush was still a part of its framework. His first experience of being closely involved in the detail of 'the bush' and the design of buildings was in the design of his own house with his wife Beverley on the rough bushland block at Dartford Road, Thornleigh. In 1960 he opened a landscape contracting business and began working with, leading modernist architects such as Harry Seidler, Sidney Ancher, Mortlock Murray & Woolley, Don Gazzard, Michael Dysart and Peter Johnson.

At this time he also developed a close relationship with Alistair Knox and Gordon Ford in Eltham, Melbourne, and through them he experienced the 'bush garden' movement, originating in the work of Edna Walling and Ellis Stones. Mackenzie and Knox both shared a passion for the search for an 'Australian Identity'.

*In 1964 Mackenzie was the landscape architect for four Pettit and Sevitt houses in Richmond Avenue, St Ives. Here he minimised the building footprint so that the natural landscape features of the sites were kept intact and created a mature garden on open-day. **In the same year he designed a lookout area at Commodore Heights, West Head with architect Russell Smith for Ku-Ring-Gai Chase National Park Trust, expressing a subtle adaptation of modernist principles to a living site, and was believed to be a prototype for Peacock Point, Balmain.***

The Trust note that Illoura Reserve, at Balmain's Peacock Point, is now listed on the State Heritage Register as "an outstanding twentieth century urban park that was an important forerunner to the implementation of the Sydney Bush School landscape design philosophy in public parks... (and) part of a movement towards environmentally conscious landscape design that was respectful of the special qualities existing in a place."⁸ The West Head Lookout was a key influence on the design thinking that led to this design.

Practitioners like Bruce Mackenzie rejected the traditional design of urban parks which used introduced plants and formal spaces. Bruce Mackenzie describes this new way of thinking as a "respect for a spirit of place, the land, the *genus loci*." Landscape architects began responding directly to the immediate site as well as having an appreciation of the broader landscape. The movement took on the name "Sydney Bush School".⁹

Mackenzie has described the impact and the essential elements of his Sydney Harbour Park designs:

*"Sydney Harbour Parks turned out to be a somewhat ground breaking realisation using local materials in a direct response to the immediate environment and the elements of the harbour landscape. **The ideas had been developing in previous years with prior experience at Commodore Heights, Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park**"¹⁰*

West Head Lookout

West Head Lookout is an excellent example of a sensitive approach to a site. The current landscape design represents some of the very best elements of Australian landscape architecture – in particular the use of Sydney's natural bush and sandstone to create low, serpentine, sandstone walls in a fluid landscape response to the informal character of the existing site that relates to its topography. This has been noted in the major heritage study on the Modern Movement in NSW commissioned by the NSW Heritage branch in 2013:

⁸ SHR Listing for Illoura Point <https://apps.environment.nsw.gov.au/dpcheritageapp/ViewHeritageItemDetails.aspx?ID=5061932>

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Mackenzie, Bruce, *Design with Landscape*, 2011, p.



*“His practical work as a landscape contractor and an appreciation of ecology was meshed with the ideas of architects to good effect. **Commodore heights lookout at West Head, Ku-Ring-Gai Chase National Park (1964) designed with Russell Smith was an early work where Mackenzie’s love of the Sydney sandstone landscape came to the fore.**” ¹¹*

Major concerns with this proposal

West Head Lookout is a seminal piece of Australian landscape architecture, and a much-loved visitor location within Ku-Ring-Gai Chase National Park, precisely because it is a place that combines that rare mix of a highly responsive and almost natural human intervention within a spectacular natural landscape. The Trust are very concerned that these heritage values have not been appropriately considered or responded to in this design.

The proposal put forward involves total demolition of the “redundant low stone wall” and its replacement with a generic 1200mm high steel balustrade. This intervention will destroy the unique qualities of this place. Where the original design represents some of the very best of landscape architecture responding to site, the proposal represents the very worst of an organisation responding to OH&S. Instead of a view of the sea, it will be a sea of balustrades.

The National Trust acknowledge that an engineering assessment has identified that the platform may require strengthening works, and indeed that similar strengthening works may be required to the existing walls. We have no objection to such works, sensitively implemented, being undertaken.

What we (and many people who have contacted us regarding this matter) do have a concern with is the installation of a tall, generic steel fence and the demolition of identified cultural heritage. These proposals do not align with the objectives in the NPWS Plan of Management for this site. There seems to have been no investigation of a design that responds in a sensitive way to this site, both in terms of existing landscape design and natural location – something we feel could be achieved by a skillful landscape designer. The Trust would encourage exploration of a design that retains the original Bruce Mackenzie and Russell Smith sandstone walls, and considers the use of other safety mitigation measures such as the use of a *ha-ha* or similar device.

West Head Lookout must be both safe *and* a beautiful.

The Trust recommends that:

- The proposed works as currently designed should not go ahead.
- A detailed heritage assessment needs to be undertaken to inform the design of more appropriate and sympathetic changes.
- Should these recommendations not be implemented, the Trust is willing to ask for an Interim Heritage Order on the site so that works cannot proceed as proposed.

Yours sincerely,

David Burdon

Director, Conservation

CC: Hon. Rob Stokes, MP, Member for Pittwater, Minister for Planning and Public Spaces
Frank Howarth AM PSM, Chair of the Heritage Council of NSW
Australian Institute of Landscape Architects Heritage Committee (c/o Craig Burton)

¹¹ Morris, Colleen, Spearritt, Peter, and Lumby, Roy (2013). The modern movement in New South Wales: a thematic study and survey of places. North Ryde, NSW, Australia: Hericon Consulting, p. 126