

# THE ROYAL PARK LANDSCAPE MASTERPLAN COMPETITION

THIS COMPETITION was sponsored by Melbourne City Council as a two stage competition which was completed towards the end of 1984.

The schemes of the four second stage competitions went on display at the Melbourne Town Hall for the first time during June this year and are to also be displayed during the AILA 1985 Sydney Conference over the last weekend of August.

The winning entry by Laceworks Landscape Collaborative was reported in the last issue of Landscape Australia. The developed schemes of the other three finalists are summarised on the following pages of this issue

As an introduction to the problem set by the competition, Bruce Echberg has prepared the following notes from a viewpoint as a competitor and designer who worked on earlier plans for the park.

## A summary of the design problem

The development of Royal Park posed a complex problem for competitors and jury alike. It was not a clean sheet awaiting the designers' inspiration. It is a large complex site with a variety of characteristics and many valid established uses. The political context of local resident interest, sporting interests and the park's further potential as a park serving all Melbournians and visitors to Melbourne, was a further overlay of complexity. The competition brief was of little help in clarifying and ordering these factors.

To enlarge on these factors:

- Royal Park sits within an area of relatively high residential density, by Australian standards, yet use of the park by the surrounding residents, particularly those in high rise public housing estates, is limited because access is difficult across major roads and other barriers around and through the park.

- The park is just two kilometres from Melbourne's GPO, it is 170 hectares in size and has good access by public and private transport. The Melbourne Zoo (22.2 ha) is surrounded by the park and already attracts up to 9,000 daily visits on peak weekend days. It seems desirable to cater for greater regional and tourist use of the park in ways which are broadly compatible with the resident interests and improvement of the general park environment.

- Melbourne has many large parks, including others close to its centre. Some, like the Botanic, Fitzroy, Treasury and Flagstaff Gardens, are excellent nineteenth century English style gardens. Others, particularly Studley Park and the new middle ring Metropolitan Parks, retain much of their pre-settlement native vegetation and develop their character from this characteristic. Royal Park and Albert Park fall into another category, that is, parks which have been substantially developed prior to the recent interest in native plants, but since the last war. They have been essentially developed as sporting parks and are increasingly used for this purpose.

Proposals to develop Royal Park beyond its present use as a series of sportsfields and carparks to the Zoo, were made in the mid 1970s. A report by the Melbourne City Council aptly called "The Royal Park Utilization Study" (1976) suggested that the way forward was to develop some commercially based new facilities like restaurants and night lit golf driving ranges. The intention was to generate some income to off-set capital and running costs of a more intensive, irrigated horticultural development of the large, under used, passive areas of the park. The Australian Native Garden near Royal Parade was constructed as a prototype of this development.

Local resident interest groups were outraged at this commercial approach and a new plan "The Royal Park Landscape Masterplan" (1977) was prepared after extensive public consultation. This new plan promoted the idea of low cost bush regeneration and non-controversial facilities like picnic areas, cycle paths and neighbourhood parks. These developments, it was hoped, would halt the gradual expansion of sporting facilities and keep activity in the park at a comfortable level.

This 1977 Masterplan also confronted the issue of traffic in the Park and suggested covering sections of Elliot Avenue/MacArthur Road and closing a section of this busy road along the frontage of the Zoo.

The resident groups were appeased by this plan but council did not act on it and none of the design recommendations were implemented during the following seven years.

Royal Park was resurrected as an issue by local councillors in 1984 and they decided to initiate the Competition. The brief was a sparse document which drew largely from the objectives and values of the previous masterplan. It was cautious about commitment to any development ideas which might be complex to manage or might alienate neighbouring resident groups. The brief gave no guidance on the complex traffic, or other land use issues which remained unanswered by the 1977 report.

**We are grateful to the Melbourne City Council for the financial assistance provided to cover fully the cost of colour plates used in this article.**