

Ballast Point Park/Walama

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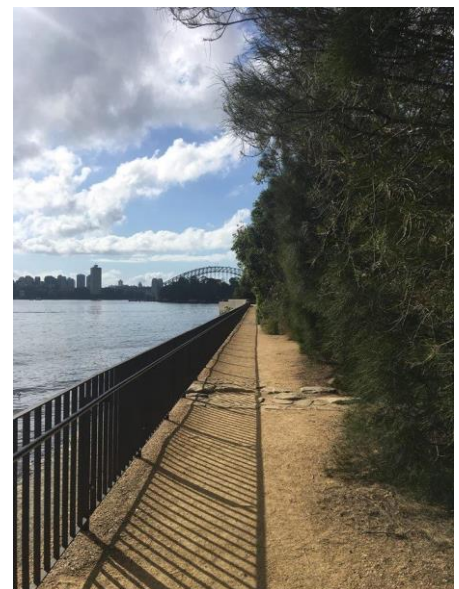
The significance and influence of Aboriginal culture at Ballast Point Park, dually named Walama, is understated and subtle. Located on the traditional grounds of the Dharug-speaking Gadigal people, the



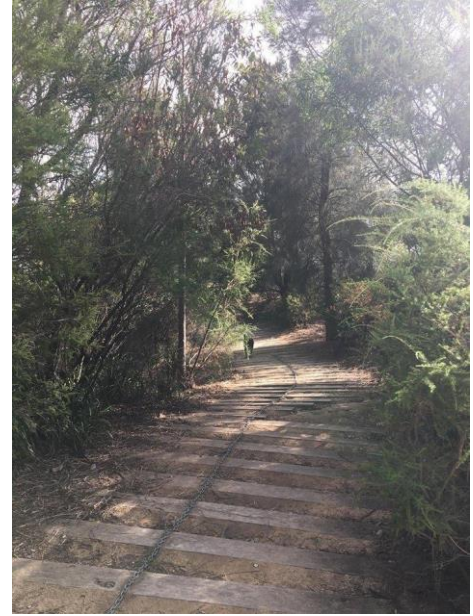
park is diverse and unique in its landscape. Stepping off the road and into the rocky clay clearing, there is the distinct feeling of leaving one place and entering a new one. I notice first the red and orange tones that are lit up under the harsh sun as I cross the clearing to reach the shaded path. All paths snake down the rocky cliffs to the water's edge where you have a panoramic view of the harbour. The site is known for its post-European settlement industrial history and littered throughout the park are remnants of tanks, pipes, and concrete slabs that pay homage to this chapter. However,

what is striking about this park is not the industrial remains themselves, but the way in which they have become interwoven and hidden among the native Australian plants.

Despite being cornered in the high-density suburb of Birchgrove, when I walk around the park I have a sense of isolation. In a way, the park is a maze of winding paths that lead off the main track to hidden lookouts. Although the walk is quiet and undisturbed, oddly enough the word that springs to mind is resilience. Resilience is a theme that arises consistently throughout post-colonial Aboriginal history in a plethora of different “strategies for surviving” (Goodall 1995). Since the first interaction at Botany Bay (Nugent 2008), regardless of the many forms these strategies have taken, one commonality was the consistent Aboriginal resilience. Standing surrounded by earthy reddish rock walls and dry native plants I wondered about the transition this place had undergone and how resilience had manifested in the landscape.



Before the settlers arrived, the harbour and coastline was home to Aboriginal people who “harvested the rich resources of the sea as well as the estuaries and inland woodland areas” (Goodall 1995, p. 61), developed fishing and hunting technologies and lived “almost sedentary” lives off the fertile environment. Post-colonisation, the site became an industrial working port and, for over a century and a half, was bartered around between white male owners and corporations. In the 1990s it was almost sold for development until public activists intervened (Rudowsky, 2014). The last few decades have seen the drastic transition from an oil refinery to the ecological haven it is now. Its traditional name Walama means ‘to return’; with vines that slide up concrete walls and the sounds of softly crashing waves, I can see how the land might have been for the traditional Gadigal landowners before its exploitation at the hands of European settlers.



I have visited this park many times, travelled through the harsh rocky clearings, down the quiet hidden paths, and to the water’s edge where I have yearned to jump in to escape the heat. I could never possibly imagine fully the connection Aboriginal people feel with this environment, yet when I am walking through this park I think it is the closest I can get to understanding it.

References

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