

Land Use in Australia: Rouse Hill House and Farm and the Struggle between Tradition and Modernity

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Land use in Australia from the period of Aboriginal occupation to European settlement and through to the present day can be understood by drawing on the concepts of modernism and tradition. Furthermore, a critical study of decisions concerning land management reveals a tension between these two ideologies, the dynamics of which continue to shift as society's values and demands evolve. This is revealed by a study of Rouse Hill House and Farm, located on the north-western outskirts of Sydney, which has undergone the transition from bushland, to farmland for agriculture, and most recently a site for high density housing and a National Park. The site reflects the impact of the progress on Australia since 1788, and furthers our understanding of the factors which encouraged, and now challenge this movement; most notably society's understanding of environmental impact and *terra nullius*.

Rouse Hill House and Farm offers a rich history, having housed six generations of one family over almost two centuries since it was built by Richard Rouse in 1813. Rouse was a free settler and worked in the colony as Superintendent of Public Works and Convicts at Parramatta. Rouse received extensive land grants in the area Governor Macquarie named Rouse Hill, and it is the ongoing use of this land which forms the basis for this critical analysis (Thornton 1988).

Settlement and Colony: The Early Years

The harsh conditions experienced by settlers in the early years of the colony both affirmed and furthered the belief in progress, which became an integral concept in the development of modernity. Initially, the land in Australia was 'unfamiliar and topsy-turvy' to the British settlers, while disease was rampant in the years immediately following settlement (Young 2000, p.14, Bowd 1986). The need to improve living conditions led the colony to undertake rapid development. By the late nineteenth century, Australian settlers enjoyed one of the highest standards of living in the world (Ville, cited in Beinart & Hughes 2007). The successful settlement and development of the New South Wales colony gave credence to the 'sense of being in transit from a primitive origin to a utopian end' which characterised the enlightenment philosophy (Gillen and Ghosh 2007, p.33).

The ability of early settlements to produce part of their food supply was crucial to their survival, and subsequently agriculture played a major role in the development of the colony (Young 2000). After the Rouse Hill area was opened up in 1794 when a track was cut from Parramatta to the Hawkesbury River, this land was identified for agricultural use. However, the area was covered with woodland, and in order to meet the colony's needs and desire for development, vast areas of bushland were cleared. Young (2000, pp.17-18) describes the clearing as "the most significant land-use change since settlement", and notes that the "changes were rapid and irreversible". Beinart and Hughes (2007, p.101) assert that the British people were skilled at 'unlocking the potential of newly available lands', and that usable space soon became abundant. It was the success of colonies like the one in New South

Wales which created what Gillen and Ghosh (2007, p.33) describe as the “belief in the ability of societies to organise their own self-improvement”, which shaped the course of colonialism and subsequently became crucial in the development of modernity.

Whilst it is clear that the colony’s development was driven by both desire and necessity, a more complex understanding of the concepts of modernity and tradition can be gained from considering the circumstances and context in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which allowed the colony to settle so rapidly and progress so successfully. The European approach to settlement and attitude towards development was guided by the concept of modernism, while heavily influenced by the social and political context of the period. Two factors which allowed the colony to progress so rapidly were the lack of any environmental concern or awareness, and the concept of *terra nullius*, which saw the settlers disregard Aboriginal occupation of the land.

The Settler’s Approach to the Environment

Concern for the environment and awareness of damaging impacts to the land were not prevalent in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which encouraged the modern mentality and resulted in rapid clearing of land. According to White (1998, p.37), from the very beginning the project of modernity was to give ‘man’ control over ‘nature’. This attitude is evidenced in the use of land in Australia, which from the earliest years had far-reaching environmental impacts (Beinart & Hughes 2007). The priorities of the settlers and the consequences of these are well captured by the perspective of Aboriginal spokesmen who observed that “the European people [were] very good at managing cattle and sheep but not so good at managing land” (Barr & Cary, cited in Beinart & Hughes 2007, p.104). Williams (Young 2000, p.18) suggests that the colonisers were ignorant to the impacts of their land clearing, and as a result, “the woods, like other elements of the landscape, such as grasses, soils and waters...were swept away in the pursuit of improvement, development and progress as then understood”. Beinart and Hughes (2007, p.104) however, believe that there was some awareness of environmental degradation early in the period of settler expansion, and that by the nineteenth century colonisers “understood something of their impact”. Despite this, the obsession with progress and a “determination to force the land to yield a living for them” were more highly valued and subsequently dictated land use decisions (Young 2000, p.33).

Terra Nullius

Alongside a lack of environmental awareness, the concept of *terra nullius* allowed the Europeans to justify the use of land which had been previously occupied by Indigenous peoples. Whilst the settlers were obviously aware that the Aboriginal people occupied the continent, the nature of their occupation did not lead the British to believe that the Aboriginal people cared for or sought to improve the land. As explained by Reynolds (Elder 2007, p.150) the colonisers viewed the land as belonging to no one and subsequently claimed it for themselves. The settlers observed the native inhabitants and considered them to be a “dying race”, unable to survive the “inevitable onslaught of the modern world” (Elder 2007, p.151). As a result of this, the Europeans approached the land in terms of what value it could provide for them, clearing bushland in pursuit of development.

Prior to the clearing undertaken by the settlers for agriculture, the plains and hills in the Rouse Hill area were covered with woodland, with this vegetation and the fauna it supported used by the Aboriginal inhabitants as a source of food and materials (Staib and McDonald

2004). Williams (Young 2000, p.18) refers to the way in which the native inhabitants were 'swept away' to make way for European 'progress'. However, whilst Richard Rouse burnt off and cleared land on his property, most of the Rouse properties were given Aboriginal names, including Guntawang and Cobra (Thornton 1988). Thornton (1988, p.78) suggests this reflects a desire by the Rouses to '[leave] the past behind as they went westward', and whilst the use of Aboriginal names is largely symbolic given the treatment of their land and people, it offers a different perspective to the dominant discourse that the Indigenous people were simply disregarded.

The conflict and tensions between the ideas of tradition and modernity are exemplified by the attitudes and perspectives of the native inhabitants and the European settlers. Elder (2007, p.164) asserts that in the ensuing narratives following settlement, "change and progress are understood as associated with non-Indigenous cultures, whereas Indigenous cultures are represented as fixed" Elder goes on to describe how the dominant presumption was that Aboriginal culture was "fixed" in a "primitive mode" (2007, p.164). Subsequently, it is clear that the idea of the modern in the context of the colony was a distinctively a European idea which was at odds with the traditions and lifestyles of the Aboriginal people.

The Twentieth Century: After Farmland

The analysis of the colony's attitudes towards land use following settlement reveals the prominence of the modern tradition, which for over a century drove development and progress. This was driven by the needs and desires of the colony, and reflects the dominant values of the social, cultural, political and economic context. By definition, however, development is ongoing, and land use in New South Wales has continued to change to comply with society's needs. The second major wave of development at the Rouse Hill area has been taking place since the 1990s, and provides stark contrast to the initial development in the late eighteenth century. In order to properly explore the ideas influencing the new development, it is necessary to first detail the transition of Rouse Hill House and Farm over the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Agricultural production in the area declined in the twentieth century, partly as a result of soil erosion. As Rouse Hill House and Farm was passed through the generations, it was progressively subdivided, and by the late 1960s much of the area had been subdivided into five hectare rural blocks (Staib and McDonald 2004). This initial subdivision was in many ways a precursor to the current development which is taking place at Rouse Hill. In the 1980s, Rouse Hill was identified as a suitable area for Sydney's expanding population, with the Rouse Hill Development Area expected to house 300,000 people when completed (Staib and McDonald 2004). Rouse Hill House and its immediate surrounds such as the gardens and stables are now managed by the Historic Houses Trust, while the remaining land surrounding the heritage site is now used as Rouse Hill Regional Park, and is managed by the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service. The dramatic change of land use at Rouse Hill since the late twentieth century has been influenced primarily by modern ideas such as progress, but has also been challenged by movements stemming from the ideas of tradition, romanticism, conservation and post modernism.

National Parks and the Emergence of Environmental Awareness

Decisions about land usage in Australia in the past few decades have been influenced by increasing environmental awareness and an increasing knowledge of the adverse impact of

humans on the land (Elder 2007, Young 2000). Elder (2007, p.230) refers to a “tension” in Australia “between the love of a beautiful place and a desire to turn that place to economic benefit”. When the so called “beautiful place” also holds immense historical value, as in the case with the remaining forty three hectares of land at Rouse Hill Farm, these tensions are increased. While the areas immediately surrounding the remaining farmland were being rapidly developed into high density housing in search of progress, it was a combination of increased environmental awareness and the traditional concept of conservation which influenced the decision to protect the land by establishing a National Park. However, it can also be argued that the development of post modernism as a movement is reflected in such decisions. As Young (2000, p.23) points out, the “altered [environmental] awareness has been accompanied by a changing mood among Australia: from one of optimism and regard for progress, to one of pessimism and the conviction that most change has meant environmental degradation”.

Whilst the establishment of the National Park acknowledges a desire to protect traditional European heritage, it is noticeable that the history of the area promoted by the Historic Houses Trust and the National Parks and Wildlife Service neglects to acknowledge the Indigenous traditions and links to the park. The NSW Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water state that the “landscape surrounding historic Rouse Hill House...has been gradually transformed from paddock to parkland” (www.environment.nsw.gov.au). This account of the landscape neglects to recognise that the area was previous bushland, ignoring the clearing that took place and the subsequent displacement of the Indigenous inhabitants. This supports Elder’s (2007) argument that the dominant ideas of what heritage is are shaped by British tradition, and that the culture of Indigenous people is often neglected by the heritage movement.

The establishment and purpose of National Parks has always reflected society’s values and reveals the prevalence of the movements of tradition, modernity and romanticism. According to Elder, (2007, p.231) in the nineteenth century National Parks were designed to ‘provide a refuge where urban-dwelling folk could escape from...their city lives’, but that by the mid twentieth century this had been replaced by the desire to ‘preserve and protect...different areas [from humans]’. In the case of Rouse Hill Regional Park, however, both the decision to create the park and its ongoing use by the community reflect elements of both these mentalities. The conversion of the area into a National Park reflects the value placed on heritage and tradition by society, reflecting the romantic notion of conservation, which is largely a product of pessimism about the environmental impacts of further development. In contrast, the development surrounding Rouse Hill has an extremely high housing density with lot sizes as small as 450m² (Staib and McDonald 2004). Subsequently, the presence of a nearby National Park provides the “escape” and “refuge” from the high density housing environment in which many of local residents live (Elder 2007).

The conversion of the privately owned farmland into a National Park open to the public also reflects contemporary values of egalitarianism and equality. The concept of having the park freely open to the community to undertake recreation and celebration marks significant social progression from the early days of the settler colony. Initially in the colony, the large number of convicts enjoyed virtually no freedoms, while Richard Rouse and other free settlers enjoyed a higher status and were subsequently granted large areas of land. These social imbalances stand in great contrast to Australia’s current composition as a multicultural, egalitarian society, which is reflected in the current use of the area.

Indigenous Heritage, Heritage Assessment and Urban Development

Whereas under the belief of *terra nullius*, the rights and traditions of the Aboriginal inhabitants were disregarded by settlers following colonisation, Aboriginal rights were acknowledged by the dominant non-Indigenous population from the late twentieth century. As a result of the recognition of the Aboriginal people as the traditional custodians of the land and acceptance of the need to protect their heritage, traditional Aboriginal sites and land rights are now considerations in all infrastructure development projects. Subsequently, with Rouse Hill identified as an urban development area, assessment of the indigenous heritage in the area and the potential impact of development has been undertaken. The assessment of the Rouse Hill Development Area uncovered extensive evidence of approximately ten thousand years of past Aboriginal occupation (Staib and McDonald 2004). Roughly eighty thousand artefacts were found, including rock shelters with vestiges of prehistoric art on their ceilings, stone axes, and tools with blood and plant residue up to 2000 years old.

Assessment of the Indigenous heritage of an area identified for high density urban development, whilst consistent with contemporary attitudes which value Aboriginal heritage, represents a tension between tradition and modernity. Unlike the period following settlement, the desire to further economic development to benefit and meet the needs of contemporary society must now be balanced against the value of protecting Indigenous heritage sites which are threatened by the development.

Whilst processes such as Indigenous heritage assessments attempt to protect Aboriginal traditions, in many respects they are undertaken from a very modern perspective. The Indigenous artefacts discovered during the assessment process were retrieved and then “scientifically analysed” (Staib and McDonald 2004, p.3). This reveals how through the assessment process, our understanding of Aboriginal association with the land is informed by the use of modern, empirical methods. As White (1998) acknowledges, this quest for knowledge is a primarily modern concept, and whilst it is beneficial to non-Indigenous appreciation of Aboriginal culture, the understanding gained is ultimately superficial. Whilst the assessment was conducted with input from local Indigenous groups, Young (2000) believes there is a need to approach the so called ‘facts’ of an assessment with caution. The postmodern idea of scepticism challenges the unquestioned faith in empirical techniques, which have been used in an attempt to enhance understanding of something non-Indigenous Australians are ultimately distant from. The comment from Yolngu activist Galarrwy Yunupingu (Elder 2007, p.172) that “we [Indigenous people] are part of the land and the land is part of us...we cannot be separated by anything or anybody...”, suggests that modern techniques to understand Aboriginal culture will always be superficial as the investigator does not share the same connection with the land as the traditional inhabitants.

Whilst dominant non-Indigenous methods of locating and analysing significant heritage sites are inconsistent with Indigenous understanding of the land, the location of significant sites successfully influenced the design of infrastructure and urban layout of the Rouse Hill Development Area (Staib and McDonald 2004). As outlined by Staib and McDonald (2004, p.6), “an environmental objective of ‘impact avoidance’ rather than “impact mitigation” was adopted”. Furthermore, the identification of these Aboriginal heritage sites presents the opportunity and the requirement for conservation, and requires an approach to the long term management of lands. So whilst contemporary attempts to progress through urbanisation and infrastructure development threaten Aboriginal sites and heritage, the completion of an indigenous heritage assessment, somewhat paradoxically, increases our understanding and

body of knowledge about Aboriginal culture. Despite the heritage assessment being undertaken as a result of the decision to develop the area, within our contemporary context, the primarily modern quest for progress actually helps ensure traditional Indigenous spaces are conserved.

Conclusion

It is clear from a critical analysis of Rouse Hill Farm that land use in Australia has been influenced by the conflicting movements of tradition and modernity, and that the struggle between these concepts is ongoing. Whilst these concepts enhance our understanding of the site, a study of the site from this critical perspective also increases our understanding of land use in Australia more broadly. It can be concluded from the study of the last two centuries that as traditional Indigenous and European heritages are continually threatened by an expanding population, the conflict between tradition and modernism, as well as the emergence of new movements such as post-modernism will continue to influence decisions about land use in the future.

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