ABOUT STEVE CALHOUN

Steve Calhoun is a leading practitioner of urban and landscape design, in which his life work initially in the United States, then ongoing in Australia has helped establish the highest standards. His firm, Tract Consultants, has won well over 100 professional design awards.

In 2016 the Faculty will award its first Steve Calhoun Scholarship, made possible by Calhoun’s generosity.

ABOUT ANNE LATREILLE

Anne Latreille is an author, journalist and editor with a long-running interest in landscape and garden design for city and country. She first wrote about Tract Consultants in 1990.

Tell me about your background in the United States – and your decision to settle in Australia.

I grew up in a country town in Iowa. I had no interest in school and would sit in class looking out the window. Then in my last year they offered – for the first time – studies in drawing. The light-bulb went on! I wanted to do landscape architecture but couldn’t get into university because my marks were so low. So I worked as a draftsman, then attended community college and, eventually, Iowa State University where I graduated top of my class. After work in Philadelphia and further study at Harvard I moved to California, spending five years with the landscape and master planning firm, Seskar Walker. One day in 1976 its director Peter Walker (whose fine design for Barangaroo, on Sydney Harbour; opened late in 2015) walked by and asked if I could go to Australia to fill in while landscape architect Rodney Wullf headed to Harvard. ‘Yeah!’ I said. I joined Roden’s Melbourne-based firm, Tract Consultants (aligned then with Merchant Builders). Didn’t actually decide to stay, I just never went home.

What did you bring to Australia?

An understanding of space – I love working with voids, whether these are in tiny courtyards or large areas of land. My first project for Merchant Builders was Vermont Park, a four-hectare cluster housing project.

A desire to share – from day one – what I had learned about looking at the big picture. This soon happened with our 1979 landscape master plan for St Kilda Foreshore, which extended from Port Melbourne to Elwood and included many transplanted date palm trees for immediate structure and luxury. Then with our winning 1981 entry for the Newcastle foreshore, where we tied the central business district to the waterfront.

How did Tract Consultants grow and develop?

With three directors, we were a good team. Howard McCormick’s strength was planning and managing. Rodney was an environmental designer and planner, I loved design and creativity. By the late 1970s Rodney was back with his PhD, and he and I were teaching the first course in landscape architecture at RMIT.

That urban design-based Newcastle project really set us off so that from the early 1980s our focus broadened. Our firm expanded fast as we looked at the big picture in Perth, Brisbane, Sydney, overseas in Hong Kong and Shanghai. And of course in Melbourne, especially with an early 1990s plan (suggested by Evan Walker and David Yorcken) to open the rundown industrial land along Southbank to the Yarra River.

Then came the 1991 recession. We found ourselves suddenly with no money and no work and our staff numbers fell from 70 to 13. But we stayed positive and gradually it came back. We now number around 140, and work nationally and internationally.

What’s your main aim?

To create places and open spaces that call people in and offer positive changes. As we developed this approach we found that no-one really seemed to have tackled it before, and it added great richness to existing communities. At Cairns in 1998-2003, we transformed unusable mudflats...
YOU MUST HAVE THE ABILITY TO CREATE EXCITING URBAN AREAS IN TERMS OF SPACE AND CONTENT, BUILDING AND PLANTING, I LEARNED ABOUT THIS IN THE UNITED STATES, AND IT'S EVER MORE IMPORTANT IN AUSTRALIA AS OUR CITY POPULATIONS MULTIPLY. GOOD DESIGN IS A GAME-CHANGER.

adjoining the foreshore and industrial land into an inviting park and esplanade that contains what may be the world's largest free public swimming lagoon. In 2016 our plan for Wangaratta includes attention to railway lines, water, space, buildings, planting, and opening up places for simple low-budget recreation and relaxation.

We want to benefit collective wellbeing – combining design and health, improving environment and quality of life. Often communities are in disarray, so we work to create a focus that pulls them together and makes them feel better in a richer place.

What are your ideas on design and planning?

First, you need a central focus. I heard the architectural critic Ada Louise Huxtable observe: 'There’s no “there” there.' And my good friend the graphic designer Gary Emery told me: “You can’t afford to be too subtle, you’ve got to go “bang”.” It does differ, of course – generally speaking, big-scale urban projects require rich community emphasis, while small-scale landscape projects need connection with a house or building. But I am as happy designing around several hundred hectares of land as I am with a tiny courtyard.

Second, you must have the ability to create exciting urban areas in terms of space and content, building and planting. I learned about this in the United States, and it's ever more important in Australia.

as our city populations multiply. Good design is a game-changer.

Third, international exposure is fundamental. You need to draw on worldwide experience, especially in urban environments. I do extensive trips each year, often to new places where I can reconnoitre, work and study. Barcelona has been my most important and exciting destination. This year I'm off to South America.

Fourth, you should take time. I put all my ideas – design and planning – into my computer/database head. I don't try to leap into a solution and I try to find out as much as possible about the related environment. Then one day I'm awake... a concept flashes... and I draw it up.

How much emphasis is needed on public (as opposed to private) spaces?

Plenty, due to our growing population and the need to find places to visit. Take Tarrawarra, near Healesville, once a dairy farm, now with a winery, restaurant and art gallery. We began reshaping it in 1979 with a progressively implemented master plan that includes two fine architect-designed buildings, the vineyard layout – I helped plant the first vines – roads, dams, revegetation of environmentally sensitive areas. There's ongoing involvement with its stunning landscape evolution: it's a "big picture" project that is near and dear to my heart. Maybe nearest and dearest?

What inspired your generous annual donation for a Master of Landscape Architecture student?

Two years ago, when I turned 70, I was coming home from my Christmas holiday and realised that I had to start planning the next stage of my life. I thought about how much I had gained from my interactions with the University of Melbourne – and decided that creating a travel scholarship would be my way of giving back. As simple as that! I am thrilled to be able to do it.

THE STEVE CALHOUN SCHOLARSHIP

Steve was the recipient of a travelling scholarship during his university days. He felt the scholarship broadened his experience and opened his awareness to opportunities that lay before him. Drawing toward the completion of an award winning, successful career at Tract, Steve wanted to provide similar opportunities to students in the discipline of landscape architecture. The Steve Calhoun Scholarship offers recipients the chance to travel in order to advance their research to obtain data and source material.

msd.unimelb.edu.au/scholarships