

## WILLIAM LIGHT'S ADELAIDE

### *The genius of place and plan*

KELLY HENDERSON  
khenderson@picknowl.com.au

**Abstract.** In designing the City of Adelaide Colonel William Light reveals the effect the landscape had on him. The form of Light's plan is largely due to the topography and his sensitive response to the place. Analysis of the physical site, its creator and the people who use it, suggests the plan has been enjoyed, revered, and stoutly defended for generations. Accumulated layers of meaning and misunderstanding and social and political practices and pressures have left their mark. Nevertheless the pervading sense of significance remains attributable to Light's intuitive act of creative genius. Set betwixt hills-face and harbour, spanning a river valley, laced with a unique figure-eight of open space, Adelaide demonstrates a rare rapport between the genius of place and plan. Today Light's city remains a permanent testimony to a man who had the sense to recognise, and the ability to respect, the genius of the place.

### 1. The 'Genius of the Place' Design Theory

The design theory based on the 'Genius of the Place', extolled in verse by Alexander Pope, may have its greatest exponent in William Light, Founder and planner of Adelaide – the antipodean Ideal City of the English philosophical radicals. Pope considered the first principle and foundation in everything to be 'Good Sense' and the chief proof of this to 'follow Nature':

'... To build, to plant, whatever you intend,  
To rear the Column, or the Arch to bend,  
To swell the Terrace, or to sink the Grot;  
In all, let Nature never be forgot...  
... Consult the Genius of the Place in all;  
That tells the Waters or to rise, or fall;  
... Now breaks, or now directs, th' intending Lines;  
Paints as you plant, and, as you work, designs.

... Start even from Difficulty, strike from Chance;  
 Nature shall join you; Time shall make it grow  
 A Work to wonder at ...' (Pope 1731).

Light certainly started from difficulty: "the obstructions for this work were greater on this particular spot than any other part of the plain. It may be asked then, 'Why choose it?' I answer, 'Because it was on a beautiful and gently rising ground, and formed altogether a better connection with the river than any other place'." (Light 1839)

## 2. William Light and the *Genius Loci* of Adelaide

In founding South Australia, 'the Great Experiment in the Art of Colonization', sole responsibility for selecting the site of the capital (the seat of government), and for the city's design, was entrusted to Colonel William Light (1786-1839). By appointing Light as their first Surveyor-General, the Colonization Commissioners for South Australia could hardly have obtained greater measure of Pope's good sense. Congratulating themselves on having secured a man who was pre-eminently qualified, the Commissioners had, perhaps unwittingly, chosen an artist with a fine topographical instinct, adept at consulting 'the Genius of the Place'.

On Adelaide's plain the genius of the place had broken and directed Light's intending lines. In designing a city of 1000 saleable acres Light observed the Para plateau and River Torrens valley, avoided areas subject to inundation, and placed his City to the north and south of the River, on rising ground. Reunifying these bifurcated nascent urban forms with his 'Adelaide Park' Light interwove a unique figure-eight of open space – through and around the City.

Light had wisely realised the 'almost ideal geographical conditions for the site of a city' and sought 'to make the best use of the geographical advantages' (Historical Memorials Committee, 1937). According to Fenner (1931:239) there is 'no other city in the world, of similar importance, where the various geographical factors determining the site can be more easily recognized.'

Notwithstanding obvious natural advantages, the difficulties of the site aided concerted efforts to usurp Light's power of determining the site. The Governor, Captain John Hindmarsh, 'clung to the idea of moving the capital', dragging the Surveyor-General and the settlement into a controversy which raged for years, and informing Lord Glenelg

‘no earthly power can bolster Adelaide up to a higher rank than that of a pretty village’ (Hindmarsh, 1838).

It could be said that the trouble lay in William Light’s own genius – Bodfan’s description of Frederick Law Olmstead may be equally applicable to Light: ‘He had the poet’s understanding and the painter’s perception of the beautiful, the sublime and the picturesque in landscape. He was master of the genius loci, a man instinctively attuned to the subtleties of a particular place, its geology, topography, and plant life. These were the materials of his design.’ In choosing the *best* site for a permanent capital, from 1500 miles of coastline, Light had perceived ‘in a country perfectly in a state of nature’ what others proved incapable of comprehending - the ideal site for his intended beautiful and healthy city (Figure 1).



*Figure 1.* Plan of the Preliminary Country Sections in the District of Adelaide, South Australia. From the Surveys of Wm Light Esqr Survr Genl. and Assistant Surveyors, drawn by Henry Nixon late Lieutenant

96th Regiment. c.1838. Image reproduced by courtesy of The National Archives of the UK. CO700/SOUTH AUSTRALIA-2Pt1 (4).

Light's letter to George Jones, RA, in September 1836, praised the landscape, 'Nature has done so much that very little human labour and [art] is requisite to make this one of the finest settlements in the whole world.' Writing to the Resident Commissioner, James Hurtle Fisher, in February 1837, Light also detailed his observations of the country whose capabilities he considered so superior. The good soil, extensive neighbouring plains and sheep walks, proximity of a plentiful year-round supply of excellent fresh water, easy communication with its harbour, a likely connection with the Murray River, and also the beauty of the country were the objects which in Light's mind 'could admit of no doubt of its capabilities for a capital'.

According to Norberg-Schulz (1980), 'through building, man-made places are created which possess their individual *genius loci* ... determined by what is visualized, complemented, symbolized or gathered.' Light visualised a beautiful and healthy capital, set amidst the plain between hills-face and sea. On a site pre-eminently adapted for his purposes he looked to the future, and designed an urban form which complemented Nature's provisions, with conscious purpose. As an unprecedented experiment in the Art of Colonization, Adelaide would represent a radical reform in urban planning – the combined works of man and nature would elevate the rectangular plan to a remarkable exemplar of a 'Garden City'.

Light's masterpiece of adaptive symmetrical regularity stands as a striking contrast to L'Enfant's (1791) condemnation of the regular plan which Jefferson proposed for the Federal Capital of Washington. According to L'Enfant, however answerable or seducing they might appear on paper, such a plan must become tiresome and insipid.

### **3. Remembering and Forgetting**

Although Light is not known to have been influenced by any specific city plan, he was born in Kuala Kedah (Malaysia), and had traveled widely throughout India, Portugal, Spain, France, Switzerland, Italy, Sicily, the Mediterranean, and Egypt. He had observed great art and architecture, and painted townscapes, landscapes, seascapes, peoples, and antiquities with accuracy and sensitivity. The South Australian 'Experiment' also received assistance from notable thinkers including

Jeremy Bentham, George Grote, Robert Owen, John Stuart Mill, and E. G. Wakefield. Before Light's appointment a detailed examination into the past successes, failures, and progress of Greek City States, Spain's colonization of the New World, Pennsylvania, Georgia, British Canada, America, New South Wales, Van Dieman's Land and Swan River had been carried out.

Returning from Canada, J. A. Roebuck deplored London's smog and advocated public green and open spaces for towns – encircling 'large tracts of common lands ... maintained by the town authorities'. 'We must create a public trust and prevent by law if necessary the rights of the common people from being swept away' (Hyde 1947). Herein lay the seeds of an idea. Along with J. C. Loudon's (1829) proposal for concentric rings of country within a metropolis, he foreshadowed Adelaide's great municipal Park. Observing Nature's delineation of low-lying inundation-prone land Light was destined to lace the city with a signature figure eight of Park Lands. A natural setting of over 2,338 acres: encircling the entire city; meandering along each bank of its central watercourse, and punctuating the intended built areas, would decorate the 1,000 acres of saleable lands mandated for the capital by the Commissioners.

Entirely original in its form, Light's plan of Adelaide symbolises a wide gathering of human endeavour, evocatively suggesting more than a nodding acquaintance with Gother Mann's 1788 'Plan for Toronto Harbour'. From a surveyor's perspective, the square one-acre town sections common to Mann's model and Adelaide are not predicated upon convenience (Porter 2007). Although never implemented, Mann's urban design seems nonetheless memorialized in Adelaide's inscrutably 'square' Town Acres.



*Figure 2.* Proposal for concentric belts of country for London. In Hints for Breathing Places for the Metropolis, and for Country Towns and Villages, on fixed Principles. J. C. Loudon, 1829. Colour added.

Despite despoliations and alienations Adelaide's vast Park provides tangible evidence of Roebuck's campaign to secure public walks, and of Loudon's (1829: 686-689) '*beau ideal* of a capital for an Australian or European union' (Figure 2).

The ideal Australian city design of Maslen (1830), also never implemented, seems partly memorialised in miniature in the hierarchy of Adelaide's street widths which undoubtedly assist the city to avert the tiresome insipidity L'Enfant attributed to regular plans.

### 3.1 AFTER LIGHT

With Light's death in 1839 the art of natural design was lost – the *genius loci* and South Australia were deprived of their greatest ally, Light's good sense. A proliferation of little Adelaides (Williams 1974:356) were senselessly stamped out across South Australia, ignoring the genius of each place. Without Pope's 'true Foundation' 'the best *Examples* and *Rules*' had been 'perverted into something *burdensome* and ridiculous', and drew inevitable and bitter criticism.

With heavy sarcasm the editor of Jamestown's *Review* derided the 'rules' of the surveyors who had set that town across Belalie Creek: 'Avoid all sites that are naturally high and dry and possess natural facilities for easy drainage. If there be a gentle slope, sheltered by friendly upland, avoid that also; eschew any elements of the picturesque, and select rather the flattest, most uninteresting site possible; if a flat with a creek running through it and subject to overflow, by all means get on the lower bank of the creek and peg away. If a running creek be not available get in the way of a storm channel. A mangrove swamp with sinuous cozy channel is a combination of favorable conditions too good to be often hoped for, and if subject in addition to direct tidal overflow, consider it perfection.' Street layout was characterized as a 'wanton exhibition of cussedness'.

Despite the inability to replicate Light's successes his plan continues to inspire Adelaide's citizens to protect their city's layout and Park Lands, with the notable exception of its harbour. Adelaide's harbour had once taken centre stage. However, today it is strangely divorced from its crucial place in Light's Plan for the City, Port and

District of Adelaide. Notwithstanding the fact that 29 of Adelaide's Town Sections were chosen at the harbour, 'Light's Plan' is often mistakenly considered to be limited to the City of Adelaide (North and South of the River Torrens) set within its Park Lands (Figure 3).



*Figure 3.* City of Adelaide detail from the Plan of the Preliminary Country Sections in the District of Adelaide. Image reproduced by courtesy of The National Archives of the UK. CO700/SOUTH AUSTRALIA-2Pt1 (4).

Ebenezer Howard's comments on the advantages of Adelaide's design have often been noted. However, the vastness of Light's Plan also escaped Howard who mistook North Adelaide for a subsequent extension rather than part of Light's original plan. In Australia Light's Plan is also subject to similarly strange misunderstandings.

As a mandatory prerequisite the harbour (Port Adelaide River) had figured largely in Light's design: 'one of the finest little harbours I ever saw ... I have never seen a harbour so well supplied with little creeks that would answer for ship building ... as beautiful and safe a

harbour as the world can produce' (Light, 80). Although Light's plan of Adelaide is being considered for inclusion on Australia's National Heritage list, Australia's Environment and Heritage Minister rejected an emergency application for heritage protection, concluding 'there was insufficient evidence ... to form a belief that the role the Wakefield Scheme played in the history of [Port Adelaide] was in itself of outstanding significance to the nation' (Campbell 2005).

Given the multitudinous writings on the South Australian experiment, 'insufficient evidence' seems hardly credible, yet that decision stands despite a wealth of evidence of the harbour's importance in Light's Plan and for the success of the experiment defined by Bentham, Grote, Mill, Molesworth, Wakefield and others.

In addition to eschewing the use of convict (slave) labour, the experiment sought to revolutionise Britain's management of Crown Lands well in advance of Lord Durham's Report on British Canada, and was emulated in Australind (WA), Wellington, Christchurch and elsewhere in New Zealand.

With the 'City' increasingly being equated with the central business district (formerly South Adelaide), further contraction and encroachment upon the Park Land river banks encourages the cynical view that such redefinitions presage further attempts at alienation.

The art of forgetting seems greatest in the State and Municipal governments, joint custodians of Light's Adelaide Park. Despite documentary evidence of the land having been purchased in fee simple and dedicated in perpetuity, Government and Council maintain the nonsense of the land being 'Crown' land. The historical evidence of their own able advocate, R. D. Hanson, refutes this. Hanson, who had served with Lord Durham in Canada before arriving in South Australia via New Zealand, was instrumental in defending Victoria Square from being constructed upon. Even the Speaker of the House of Assembly (Kingston 1877) denied the right of the Government 'to interfere with or make any use of any portion of the Park Lands not specifically reserved or set apart for Government purposes by Colonel Light.' Others have defended Light's Plan and his Park Lands from the infamous Metropolitan Adelaide Transport Scheme and other such destructive 'plans'.

#### **4. Adelaide's Guardian Spirit**



Lieutenant-Governor and Chief Justice, Sir Samuel Way (1905), recognised Light's topographical instinct: 'the exercise of that instinct preserved the infant community of South Australia from being strangled almost at its birth ... After 70 years no better site can be found. A mile or two either way would have spoiled the whole thing. It is situated on one of the finest plains in the world, under the shelter of the beautiful hills which have moderated the climate. They have secured us from drought, and have furnished us with a beautiful water supply and a glorious picture. Hour by hour and day by day throughout the year the hills make a beautiful landscape that eludes the skill of the best possible landscape painter ... The verdict of posterity has been given ... generations to come ... will bear in remembrance the honoured name of Col. Light, the founder of the City of Adelaide ... the saviour of the State of South Australia.'

Despite often erroneous or cropped interpretations of 'Light's Plan', it continues to be invoked as a defence against encroachments upon the public realm of the City of Adelaide. Inspired by Light, town planner Charles Reade (1919) asked, 'What finer monument is there to the memory of genius than the logical continuation of its great and imperishable work?'

Like Schama's guardians of landscape memory, Light became rooted in the landscape of the City of Adelaide. Of all his adventures – from Kuala Kedah to his service in the Royal Navy, Peninsular Wars, and for the Pasha of Egypt – Light completed his greatest work in South Australia. In fulfilling his aim to follow in the footsteps of a father who had founded the British settlement of Penang Light was beset by formidable opposition which threatened to bring all his efforts to nought. It seems fitting that Light's endeavours to preserve his vision for the good of future generations is a battle those generations have continued to this day – invoking Light's name to protect the place, and consulting Light and his original Plan as their guide and measure of good sense.

William Light, founder and planner of the City of Adelaide, has become its *genius loci*.

### **Acknowledgements**

Figures 1 and 3: Images reproduced by courtesy of The National Archives of the UK. The Public Record Office gives no warranty as to the accuracy, completeness or fitness for the purposes of the information provided. Images may be used only for

purposes of research, private study or education. Applications for any other use should be made to the TNA Image Library, Kew, Richmond, Surrey TW9 4DU. Infringement of the above condition may result in legal action.

## REFERENCES

- . 1878. Surveying New Townships. *The Jamestown Review*. 26 September. 2EF. Quoted in D. W. Meinig, *On the Margins of the Good Earth: the South Australian Wheat Frontier 1869-1884*, 181-183. Hong Kong: Rigby Limited, 1962. Quoted in Michael Williams, *The making of the South Australian landscape: a study in the historical geography of Australia*. 354. London, New York: Academic Press, 1974.
- Bodfan, J. St. 1963. The Pursuit of Nature Undefined. In *Landscape architecture magazine*, 108. Vol 54 No.2. Harrisburg, Pa: Lay, Hubbard & Wheelright.
- Campbell, Ian. 2005. Statement of reasons for decision under Section 324F of the *EPBC Act*, 1999. 29 July. Internet. Available from <http://www.environment.gov.au/heritage/laws/publicdocuments/pubs/105847.doc>; accessed 11 July 2008.
- Fenner, Charles. 1931. *South Australia: a geographical study*. Melbourne: Whitcombe & Tombs Ltd.
- Hindmarsh, John. 1838. Despatch to Lord Glenelg, 11 January 1838. Quoted in Mayo, M.P. 1937. *Life and Letters of Col. William Light*, 149. Adelaide: F. W Preece and Sons.
- Historical Memorials Committee. 1937. Adelaide – its selection and planning. *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia (South Australian Branch)* Vol. XXXVII: 77-81. Also *Advertiser*, 16 February 1937.
- Hyde, Francis E. 1947. Utilitarian Town Planning 1825-1845. *The Town Planning Review*. Vol. XIX, nos. 3 &4, 156. Quoted from Roebuck. MSS. On a motion ‘That this House views with concern the present state of the industrial town’.
- Kingston, G. S. 1877. Letter dated 9 November 1877, to *The Advertiser*. 12 November. Quoted in Thomas Worsnop, *History of the City of Adelaide*, 417-420. Facsimile edition. Adelaide: Lutheran Publishing House, 1988.
- Light, William. 1839. *A Brief Journal of the proceedings of William Light, etc.* Adelaide, South Australia: Archibald MacDougall. In *William Light's Brief Journal and Australian Diaries with an introduction and notes by David Elder*, 95. Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 1984.
- Loudon, J. C. 1829. Art. VIII. Hints for Breathing Places for the Metropolis, and for Country Towns and Villages, on fixed Principles. In *The Gardener's Magazine, etc, Vol. V*. London: printed for Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green.
- Norberg-Schulz, Christian. 1980. *Genius loci: towards a phenomenology of architecture*. New York: Rizzoli.

- Pope, Alexander. 1731. Epistle IV To Richard Boyle, Earl of Burlington. In *Alexander Pope Selected Poetry and Prose*. Introduction by William K Wimsatt, 270-280. USA: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1972.
- Porter, John R. 2007. Light's Survey of Adelaide – facts, fables and fancies', *South Australian Geographical Journal*, Vol 106, pp 53-83. Adelaide: Royal Geographical Society of South Australia Incorporated.
- Reade, Charles. 1919. Planning and Development of Towns and Cities in South Australia. In *South Australian Parliamentary Paper* No. 63 of 1919.
- Reps, John W. 1965. *The Making of Urban America: A history of city planning in the United States*. 248 (footnote 11: Undated communication by L'Enfant in Kite, *L'Enfant*, 47-48.). Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Schama, Simon. 1995. *Landscape and Memory*. London: HarperCollins.
- Way, Sir Samuel. 1905. Colonel Light Memorial. Lieut.-Governor's Address. The Topographical Instinct. *South Australian Register*, June 22.
- Williams, Michael. 1974. *The making of the South Australian landscape: a study in the historical geography of Australia*. London, New York: Academic Press.