

## FROM PRIVATE RETREAT TO PUBLIC REALM:

### The gardens of:

- **Russell and Mary Mathews at Tupare, Mangorei Road New Plymouth, and**
- **Bernie and Rose Hollard near Kaponga, South Taranaki**

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This is the story of two gardens that were developed by private individuals but are now under public management and development. What was initially personal property is now publicly owned and managed, with visitor entry being free of charge.

This presentation relates to work that Boffa Miskell has recently done at two historic gardens in the Taranaki region. Initially we reviewed the Taranaki Regional Gardens project that determined the overall thrust of future development and maintenance of Tupare and Hollard Gardens. More recently, our role has been the project management of various contract packages for the rejuvenation of both properties. This initiative has been programmed and financed by the Taranaki Regional Council as part of their asset management plan. As regional reserves managed with public funds, the gardens are intended to be presented so that they are of interest to the local people for return visits, as well as be an attraction for tourists visiting the region.

### **Hollard Gardens**

Hollard Gardens began as a dairy farm purchased in 1926, near Kaponga in South Taranaki. It was the home of Bernie and Rose Hollard who brought up two children there. A 2 acre area was fenced off from the farm. This included a patch of remnant bush beside a knoll on which the house was built. It was the start of a garden which developed into a maze of intimate winding paths through complex groups of planting. In a naturalised layout, the garden has every plantable area taken up with trees and herbaceous underplanting. Bernie was a plantsman. He took keen interest in new plant species and varieties, particularly those of the

rhododendron family. He trialled imported plants, propagated and exchanged them with fellow gardeners, including local nurserymen Duncan and Davies. (*He bred Rhododendron 'Kaponga' which took 12 years to flower.*) This interest was so keen, that the gardens outgrew the original farmstead area and an adjoining hay paddock was retired from farming and developed into the 'new garden'.

For Hollard Gardens the character is the intimate paths. It is the random, naturalised plantings. It is the individual specimens of quirky plant varieties. It is the contrast between the 'old garden' and the 'new garden'. There wasn't a lot of planning that went into the garden layout and structure but Bernie had a passion for planting that got fine tuned as he went. His interest in plants has left a legacy of a complex, horticultural garden.

## **Tupare**

Tupare in New Plymouth was purchased in 1931 and developed by Russell and Mary Matthews. The steeply sloping bare site with river flats of 9 acres had a driveway, tennis court and house constructed and planted with many trees. What was originally a tin shed that Russell and Mary lived in while the house was being built, was developed into the Gardener's Cottage. This will now be used to house visitor information. The house, built in the Arts and Crafts style, was designed by Chapman-Taylor and is a distinctive building both inside and out. The large tennis court beside the house, with its pergola covered terrace, provided recreation for the family of 6 as well as being the site of many social events.

For Tupare the character is the topography and plantings. It is the Chapman-Taylor house, gardener's cottage and tennis court. It is the water cascade and boundary river. It is the distinctive walls, structures and buildings. It is the structured arrangement of the walks and vegetation. Garden visits, open days and events have been a feature of the site over a long period and it is this cultural aspect that makes the garden distinctive.

Russell Matthews, being involved in the road and construction industry, has left a legacy of a garden that has asphalt roads and paths, a house constructed of concrete, with railway irons used for reinforcing, and a cultured genteel air about the place. Mary Matthews part of the garden, that included the glasshouse and flower garden, is the domain of another personality. The Chapman-Taylor house has a distinctive architectural style and a story of its own. It can be the setting in which visitors can immerse themselves and imagine how others lived in an earlier period.

The elements that make up this garden create a character that reflects the cultural period of the 30s and 40s.

It is these individuals and their attitudes at the time that give direction as to how the garden can be developed and maintained. Their interests, idiosyncrasies and life experiences are reflected in the buildings, paths and plantings. On occasions they were opened to the public but generally they were private retreats for the families.

### **Public ownership / regional gardens**

The gardens were under the stewardship of the Queen Elizabeth II National Trust (Hollard Gardens gifted 1982, Tupare gifted 1985) but were vested and transferred to the Taranaki Regional Council in 2001 as regional reserves. Tupare and Hollard Gardens, together with Pukeiti and Pukekura Park, are seen as the 'Four jewels in the crown' for the Taranaki Region that can be promoted as tourist destinations as well as catering for local needs.

For me, the challenge in the conservation development of established gardens is how to retain the essential character of a garden that is dynamic and which has been created by strong individuals, but is now managed and developed by others, with changes happening over time. The gardens now have a public rather than a private function and need to be managed and planned accordingly.

Even though there was limited access while the families were present, the public do have fond memories of those visits and take a keen interest in the gardens wellbeing. On one visit to New Plymouth, my host demanded of me, *'What are you doing at Tupare? There used to be so many trees around the place but now they are gone. I remember going for picnics on the lawns under the trees there.'* What she didn't know was that tree removal has been part of a process that is based on a full arboriculture review but this process may not have been evident to the general public. Posting regular updates in local newsletters could be one way of involving the public in anticipation of a rejuvenated site.

### **Process**

In taking a coordination role for the rejuvenation work, it has been clear that for long term development and maintenance, key strategies need to be confirmed. These will then give guidelines over the long term to ensure the original character or 'genius loci' of the garden is retained.

The rejuvenation process includes areas of:

- **Historical research**
- **Conservation Plan**, in the case of the house at Tupare
- **Interpretation**
- **Identity** and group brand
- **Plant management**

Threads from each of these headings often interweave.

The initial work identified potential areas of development. How a garden's character is presented and interpreted can determine if visitors will return or recommend to others that they should go there. Often we rely on interpretation panels and written literature to give information, thinking that it will educate and make the visit a memorable one. Hard copy can be a useful tool but a lot of text can be off-putting and boring.

In this project, the garden interpretation is being developed in a way that may not be obvious initially but leaves a seed in the visitor's mind, a memory marker, an added dimension to an otherwise horticultural visit. Elements that give 'signs of life' will be used to enliven. Within the gardens, the memory triggers will be discrete and hopefully interesting that will give the visitor a memorable experience.

### **Historical research**

Susette Goldsmith, a local historian, researched the garden development and families of both properties. As a result, one gets an insight that is both interesting and fascinating. When this is expressed in the garden, it will add another layer to the visitor's experience.

Historical research has given important cues to the interpretation and development strategy. It has been useful in that it:

- provides important **background information** that gives better understanding on why or how the garden has developed in its present form.
- identifies what **elements of the garden** that could be interpreted or brought to the visitor's attention.
- is a **collective record** and a start for further investigation. New Zealand gardens have had a relatively short period of development in this country and historical research is a valuable resource.
- **extends knowledge** of the garden to a wider range of individuals rather than vesting this knowledge in a limited number of family descendants.

Some interesting points that were uncovered include:

- *The bell in the house porch, was used in a type of morse code to communicate with gardeners or those in earshot, as well as rung continuously to farewell visitors.*
- *Railway irons form part of Tupare house construction because they were readily available through Russell Matthew's construction business.*
- *The tennis court was excavated using the Russell Matthews' earthmoving equipment. The clay pips were used as the formwork for the pergola posts.*
- *The dining room was too small for the dining table so a cantilevered extension was added to the house to accommodate it.*

## Conservation Plan

In addition, the house at Tupare required a Conservation Plan. This was prepared by Ian Bowman, an architect and conservator, who undertook a survey of the structure as well as including some of the historical research. He made recommendations on what maintenance work was required and what elements could be removed or added to ensure the building's architectural integrity is retained. Modifications and changes of use over time have resulted in changes to rooms and spaces that are no longer appropriate. This will be rectified in a phased maintenance programme.

Designed by Chapman-Taylor, the house is a focal point for the garden and a valuable historic resource. Chapman-Taylor designed a number of houses in the region and pioneered the use of reinforced concrete in housing (which has stood the test of time and earthquakes).

Designed in the Arts and Crafts style, the house at Tupare has a distinctive look that has had furniture and fittings added by the owners to create the features of today. This has been a cue for the development of outside furniture and fittings which are missing or needed.

As part of the Conservation Plan, the work will;

- acknowledge that **reconstructed elements** are not the original but are in scale and form of what was there ( *for example a new glasshouse is being rebuilt on the old site but will be of new materials and have to meet new building codes*)
- use **materials that are similar** to the original, wherever possible.
- **refurbish rooms** back to a state that is appropriate. *For instance, the commercial kitchen elements that were put in for large functions will be removed.*
- **refurbish and dress the living areas** to reflect the family home that it used to function as.

- **reconstruct key garden structures** in the original style and finishes
- **design and manufacture garden furniture** in the style that is appropriate. The Arts and Crafts period gives useful clues for adding new furniture. *For instance, seats will be hand adzed and in larger dimensions that isn't common in modern manufacture.*

This can also present some dilemmas. For instance,

*The eclectic collection of exterior lighting where each light standard along the driveway has a different number of light spheres on it, one, two or three. – do you leave them, change all the light fittings to have the same number of spheres or replace them all with something completely different but consistent?*

### **Interpretation strategy**

The interpretation strategy is still being developed through 3D Creative, a consultancy specialising in communication and interpretation. As background, the process uses the historical research and the conservation plan assessment.

The Interpretation development objectives seek to

- create a character snapshot that is '**Frozen in time**' but allows for changes in the future.
- use the **opportunity to inform** visitors by creating an environment that they experience
- use props such as garden elements, tools and items of clothing to give '**Signs of life**' that can trigger the memory or give a hint of what was previously there as well as illustrate original intent, without being 'in your face'. This may include sound devices.
- use '**Encounter and experience**', rather than be fed information.
- keep **graphic text** to a minimum. Text has its place and will be used in brochures, information boards and orientation maps. Brochures will be available to give detail and be a memento to take home and pass on.

*As an example, the tin shed that Russell and Mary Matthews initially lived in for 5 years and later developed into a gardener's cottage, is being refurbished as a Visitor Information Centre. The old corrugated iron structure has been exposed as part of the renovations. Some of the original construction will be left exposed when the walls are reclad, as part of the interpretation strategy.*

## Identity

It has been an established policy that under the Taranaki Regional Council stewardship, that Tupare and Hollard Gardens would be part of a larger collection of gardens in the Taranaki area and be promoted under an umbrella group with a recognisable identity or 'brand'.

Taranaki is well known for its gardens with the Taranaki Rhododendron Festival being a notable event in the gardener's calendar.

DNA, an advertising consultancy who developed the identity strategy, recognised that each of these gardens has a personal character as a result of an individual which is their 'signature'; an indelible mark that is left behind. This should be clearly seen, but for promotion purposes, there also needs to be an umbrella identity for the collective group.

The identity strategy has been developed to

- create an over-arching, collective umbrella that establishes **a recognisable group** or 'brand'. A logo device incorporates the mountain (Mt Taranaki) and the organic soft shape of a leaf as this grouping.
- show the **personality of individuals** through hand script for the place names.
- include a by-line for **Tupare – relive the splendour** (*a reflection of the social climate, personality of the individuals and times of the garden development*)
- include a by-line for **Hollard – tread the soils** (*a reflection of the plantsman*)
- show each garden individually through signs of a different colour but under the group banner.

Where new buildings or elements are needed **local materials and building vernacular** will be used. *For instance, at Hollard Gardens, the proposed entry structure primarily will use local stone, rural materials and forms.*

## Planting management

At Tupare, Brian Gould, a local arborist, researched and developed a comprehensive strategy for tree maintenance and replacement. This has now been implemented.

Greg Rine, TRC Regional Gardens Manager, who has been closely involved in both gardens over a considerable length of time, has established a strong team of experienced gardeners. Their skill in plant management is critical but their presence in the garden will also be a resource for visitor information and help to enliven the place.

### The planting management

- includes setting up a **computer database** to record the names and locations of plants. This is particularly important for Hollard Gardens which has an immense number of different varieties and cultivars.
- uses the Tupare **arboriculture report** to phase out trees that are reaching the end of a useful life or do not contribute to the original character of the garden.
- involves **skilled gardeners** who recognise the style and purpose of the garden in its maintenance and replanting.

*At Tupare in particular, there is a programme of tree removal as well as re-establishing the character of some areas. The glasshouse is being reconstructed and the flowers and vegetables that Mary Matthews grew will be grown again in this area.*

### Conclusion

For ongoing development and maintenance of these historic gardens, it is important to recognise the inter-relationship between the history, site attributes and visitor experience. It has been through careful research and recognition of the past that has generated the design philosophy and direction for the ongoing interpretation, development and maintenance. While the gardens were once private retreats, they are now in the public domain but the past influences will always be what make them different from other gardens. It is recognition of this and applying techniques that will immerse the visitor, that is the challenge. I hope that you will visit these gardens one day soon to test this.

As an aside,.....

A local church has employed a clever device that puts the message across in their car park. Instead of the standard sign, as shown in the left image, they have applied a message on the garage roller door in a font, wording and writing style that reflects the churches age and basic principles, as well as a touch of humour, in the right hand image.

‘Commandment 11 – Thou shalt not park’

It is this multi-layering of the message that enriches the site and the experience which will be applied at the Tupare and Hollard Gardens to engage the public.

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