

2008

# Conserving Calgary's Cultural Landscapes: Preservation, Restoration and Adaptive Reuse

Reid, Michelle

---

Reid, M. "Conserving Calgary's Cultural Landscapes: Preservation, Restoration and Adaptive Reuse". Contributed paper for the Canadian Parks for Tomorrow: 40th Anniversary Conference, May 8 to 11, 2008, University of Calgary, Calgary, AB.

<http://hdl.handle.net/1880/46946>

*Downloaded from PRISM Repository, University of Calgary*

# Conserving Calgary's Cultural Landscapes: Preservation, Restoration and Adaptive Reuse

Paper presented at the Parks 2008 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Conference - *Canadian Parks for Tomorrow*, May 13  
Michelle Reid, BLArch, MEdes, CSLA

The conservation of cultural landscapes<sup>1</sup> has recently become an important focus within the City of Calgary Parks. Reader Rock Garden, an Edwardian era arts and style rockery, was restored in 2005 and immediately became a city wide attraction. After the success of Reader, there was desire to celebrate other historic parks within the Calgary Parks inventory. The rehabilitation of Central Memorial Park, a formal Victorian era carpet bed designed park, is currently underway and Century Gardens, an expressionism designed park with associated brutalism elements, is now in the design development stage with the intention of retaining historic significance.

These three parks have varying degrees of existing historic material and pressure from contemporary use. A key tool for conservation of all three of the landscapes is the *Standards and Guidelines for the Conservation of Historic Places in Canada*. This paper will use examples from the three projects to illustrate how the Standards and Guidelines can provide a continuum of approach for cultural landscape conservation, from pure restoration through to an adaptive reuse approach.

## Cultural Landscapes *Reader Rock Garden*

Reader Rock Garden is an Edwardian era, arts and craft style rockery that consists of a matrix of rock paths, steps, and walls that form numerous planting beds. The 1.2 ha (3 acres) Garden dates from 1913 and was historically used as a private residence and accompanying garden for William Roland Reader, Calgary's most influential Park Superintendent. Reader used the Garden to test a wide variety of plant material and under Reader's care the Garden held over 4000 different plant species (Graham, 1989). Reader wrote an unpublished book, *The Hardy Herbaceous Perennial Garden*, which lists, bed by bed, the



House through the Garden, ca. 1930's

plants in the Garden. Historically, the Garden was viewed as one of the few significant gardens in western Canada, known internationally for its botanical diversity (McNally, 1990). The quality of Reader's plants and seedlings were recognized by Kew Gardens in London, the Botanical Gardens at Harvard, and the Royal Botanical Gardens in Edinburgh (Novak and Simpson, 2004). Reader continued collecting and experimenting with plant material until his death in 1943. After his death the Garden was opened to the public as a City park and was named in his honour.

<sup>1</sup> UNESCO defined Cultural Landscapes at the 1992 World Heritage Convention as the *combined works of nature and of man and are illustrative of the evolution of human society and settlement over time, under the influence of the physical constraints and/or opportunities presented by their natural environment and of successive social, economic and cultural forces, both external and internal.*

## **Central Memorial Park**

Central Memorial Park is Calgary's oldest surviving park and was typical of civic parks and squares in both Canada and Britain during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The existing design dates from 1912 when Calgary's first library was built on the site. The park is a Victorian era inspired park encompassing an entire city block (2 ha - 5 acres). The formal layout is designed around a central oval of symmetrical lawns, flower beds and paths. It is described as a design elaboration of geometric carpet beds (Graham, 1989) and is still intact today. To emphasise the



Historic Post Card of Central Memorial Park, ca. 1930's

formal character of the garden, plantings included showy exotics, brilliantly coloured annuals, and topiaries. The park originally had a bandstand at the west end but in 1928 the Cenotaph and Plaza were constructed to memorialize the soldiers who were lost in WWI.

Central Memorial Park assisted in the establishment of Calgary as a civilized urban city - the park was a social and cultural centre of Calgary. Reading and music were considered essential within society, as was the ritual of the Sunday afternoon promenade (Saunders, 2004). The library, music pavilion, and intersecting formal path system all contributed to that society. Over time the historic paths were paved with asphalt that failed and the historic plantings became overgrown, providing hiding spaces for drug use and prostitution.

### **Century Gardens**

Century Gardens is located in downtown Calgary and can be defined as an expressionism designed park with associated brutalism elements. The 0.5 ha (1.25 acres) park dates from 1975 and was donated to the City of Calgary by the Devonian Foundation as a way to celebrate Calgary's Centennial. The park design was a symbol of Calgary's growth and maturity - the modern form expressed the forward and innovative thinking of Calgary's citizens (Calgary Herald, 1974). The design of Century Gardens was inspired by the nearby Rocky Mountains. The concrete work represents the mountains and, along with the



Century Gardens, 2007

heavy use of flowing water and spruce trees, combine to create an abstract expression of Calgary's surrounding landscape.

Century Gardens is a significant landmark in the City of Calgary because of its distinctive character and design, and its prominent location at the western end of

downtown. Unfortunately the design (the portion elevated from the street and the variety of hidden respites), along with the location (within the downtown core of a major Canadian city), also makes the park attractive to drug users and for other deviant behaviour.

**The Redevelopment of Cultural Landscapes**

Cultural landscape conservation includes understanding why a landscape is significant, and managing the landscape in a way that retains the historic significance of the site. The redevelopment of cultural landscapes include a review of the existing historic material to ensure the landscape and landscape elements are authentic and to ensure that the site is able to convey the significance of the cultural landscape. While cultural landscape conservation may identify a point in history that is associated with the significance of the site, there must also be the acknowledgement that the landscape has evolved and is now functioning in the present day. As a result, the conservation approach must also accommodate the needs of the contemporary users. The three parks discussed here have varying degrees of existing historic material and pressure from contemporary use. The differences are summarized here:

<i>Historic Material</i>	
Reader Rock Garden	<p>The structures of Reader Rock Garden – the rock paths, steps and retaining walls - were essentially intact prior to the 2005 redevelopment, and still exist as they did during Reader’s time.</p> <p>The planting material has been lost over the years. At the beginning of the redevelopment it was estimated that only 5% - 20% of the original plant material remained (Novak and Simpson, 2004).</p> <p>The redevelopment team did have access to key historic material – Reader’s historic planting lists. This allowed the planting beds to be replanted using plant material that was present historically.</p> <p>The historic cottage had been demolished in 1944 when the Garden was opened to public as a City of Calgary park. The original house plans and a variety of historic photographs were used to reconstruct the cottage.</p>

Central Memorial Park

The primary elements of Central Memorial Park were intact at the start of the redevelopment process.

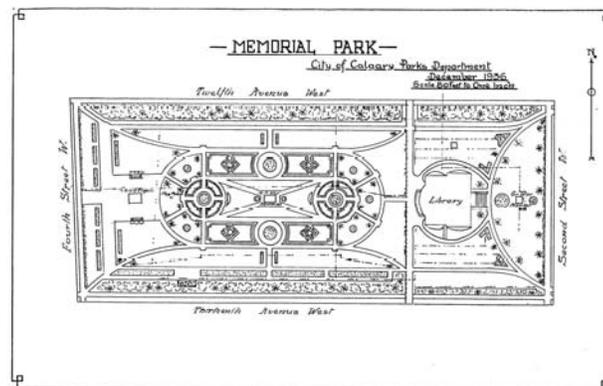
The central oval with the intricate pattern of paths, planting beds and lawn has evolved slightly over the years. The original granular paths were replaced with asphalt that is now failing.

The cenotaph and plaza area were redeveloped in 1993 and the concrete was replaced, but the layout was essentially kept intact.

The library, Boer War and WWI memorials exist as they did historically.

The planting strips along the north and south edges of the Park have been altered over time and, in general, the plant material within the Park had become overgrown.

Historic plant lists and historic photos captured what plant material had existed historically.



1936 Plan of Central Memorial Park

Century Gardens

Century Gardens has not been altered significantly since it was built in 1975. The concrete work, water channels and plantings on the southwest and north fountain structures remain intact.

The central bowl and surrounding landscape berms still essentially exist as originally designed.

Bowl at Century Gardens, 2007

The +15 connection was removed from the southwest structure and impacts from adjacent developments have minimally altered the site.

The spruce trees have become overgrown and the park infrastructure has deteriorated over the 33 years.

***Contemporary Use***

Reader  
Rock  
Garden

Reader Rock Garden had essentially become a forgotten landscape. The park was used minimally by cemetery visitors (the park is located immediately adjacent to Union Cemetery).

Calgary Parks identified it as an important piece of green space near downtown Calgary and felt the park required a new use that would attract a wider group of users.

The reconstructed cottage was designed to house a small restaurant and classroom space for school and adult programs.

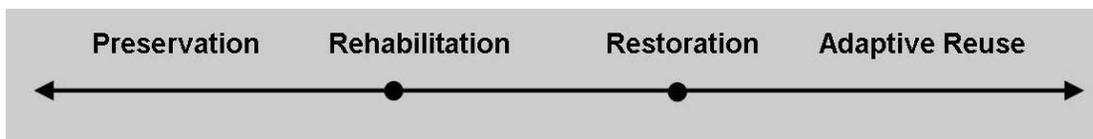


Foundation for reconstructed Cottage at Reader Rock Garden, 2004

Central Memorial Park	<p>Central Memorial Park is located in the Beltline Community of Calgary, immediately south of downtown. There is increasing pressure on the existing green space in and close to downtown Calgary to better accommodate the growing population in that area.</p> <p>Central Memorial Park is the location for three city wide events – the Lilac Festival, the Mosaic Festival, and Remembrance Day Ceremonies. There was a desire to redevelop the Park to better accommodate the festival and ceremony activities.</p> <p>Central Memorial Park was a place where drug use and prostitution regularly occurred. There was a desire to increase more positive behaviour during the day and night at the park.</p>
Century Gardens	<p>Century Gardens is located in downtown Calgary, where there is presence of drug users and other illicit activity. There is the perception that the design of the park is filled with places for the illicit activity to occur. This includes the elevated portion from street level and the creation of places originally designed for retreat and respite.</p> <p>There has been pressure to eliminate the fountain structures in order to eliminate the hidden spaces.</p>

### Conservation Approaches for Cultural Landscapes

As part of the redevelopment process, there must be a conservation approach to ensure the retention of the historic significance of the cultural landscape. Conservation of historic resources can be understood as a continuum with a preservation approach on one end (protecting and maintaining an historic resource) and an adaptive reuse approach on the other (adaptive reuse involves the addition of contemporary elements to accommodate a new use that ensures the continuation of the historic resource). Rehabilitation and restoration fit along the continuum.



Reader Rock Garden was primarily a rehabilitation project, but included the preservation of the rock work and the recreation of numerous elements, including historic benches and the historic cottage. Central Memorial Park is further along the continuum because, while there was substantial historic material still existing, there was also the need to accommodate contemporary uses. Century Gardens will likely be even further along the continuum towards adaptive reuse because, while there is a commitment to retain the historic significance there is increased pressure to alter or remove the primary fountain in response to safety concerns.

Defining a specific conservation approach is rarely straightforward. It is ultimately the

collection of decisions that are made that define the conservation approach. *The Standards and Guidelines for the Conservation of Historic Places in Canada* is a tool that can assist in determining the appropriate conservation approach and specific conservation decisions. The Standards and Guidelines is a document that outlines “principles and practices that encourage long-term conservation of our country’s historic places” (Parks Canada, 2003). The document was designed to “offer results-oriented guidance for sound decision making when planning for, intervening and using an historic place.” (Parks Canada, 2003).

The guidelines are designed for four types of historic resources – archaeological sites, buildings, cultural landscapes, and engineering works. The cultural landscape section encourages the user to break the landscape down into eight differing components – Land Patterns, Landforms, Spatial Organization, Vegetation, Viewscapes, Circulation, Water Features, and Built Features – and offers guidance for each component. There is also an *other considerations* section that provides guidance with respect to New Additions, Health and Safety, Environmental Concerns, and Accessibility Requirements.

The Standards and Guidelines did provide assistance in the planning stages of Reader Rock Garden, Central Memorial Park and Century Gardens, but at times the document was also lacking direction. The following are specific examples:

### ***Reader Rock Garden***

The vegetation at Reader Rock Garden is an important element in establishing historic significance of the site – this includes a Russian Poplar allee. The allee had only two trees remaining and while the Standards and Guidelines encouraged the retention of these trees, following that recommendation would have resulted in not restoring the allee as a whole. Vegetation is a living element within a cultural landscape that has a natural lifecycle that is more complex than the lifecycle of built elements. The Standards and Guidelines need to better respond to the living, growing, dying aspect of vegetation.

The historic water features at Reader Rock Garden were designed as a way of irrigating the adjacent beds. The upper pond would be filled and water would continue down the slope to the lower pond to fill the lower pond. The water would continue to flow, saturating the soil and irrigating the surrounding beds. Historically the system was not recirculating and excess water would continue to flow down the slope and off the site. The Environmental Considerations in the Standards and Guidelines encouraged the repair of existing leaks and the installation of a new, recirculating system.



Pond Rehabilitation work, 2004

### ***Central Memorial Park***

The landscape at Central Memorial Park is very flat with elements, such as topiary

spruce and memorials rising from the flat plane. The landform section encouraged us to retain the historic landform. This resulted in the decision to eliminate the typical interpretive panels that are perched on a stand in favour of in-ground interpretation. Interpretation is an important tool in conveying a site's significance. The Standards and Guidelines do not have any guidelines relating to how interpretation should be done to minimize the impact on an historic resource.

The spatial organization of the central oval at Central Memorial Park, including the planting beds, lawn, and pathway configuration, is fundamental to illustrating the significance of the site. There was a desire from the stakeholder group to include water features within the park. The decision was made to retain the spatial organization of the oval and replace three historic planting beds with water features. The new additions section includes only six recommendations and two of those are specifically for buildings. Introducing new uses in a way that still retains the significance of an historic site is essential when contemporary pressures identify the site as no longer useful or appropriate. The introduction of new uses could potentially do the most damage to the historic material, so more detail should be offered in the new additions section.

### **Century Gardens**

The circulation system at Century Gardens includes a set of rock stepping stones that allow a park user to walk over the water. These rocks have been identified as unsafe but the safety consideration section is primarily about meeting codes and does not have any specific recommendations for landscapes. A decision has been made to chain the area, which does alter the circulation pattern, but still retains the historic material.

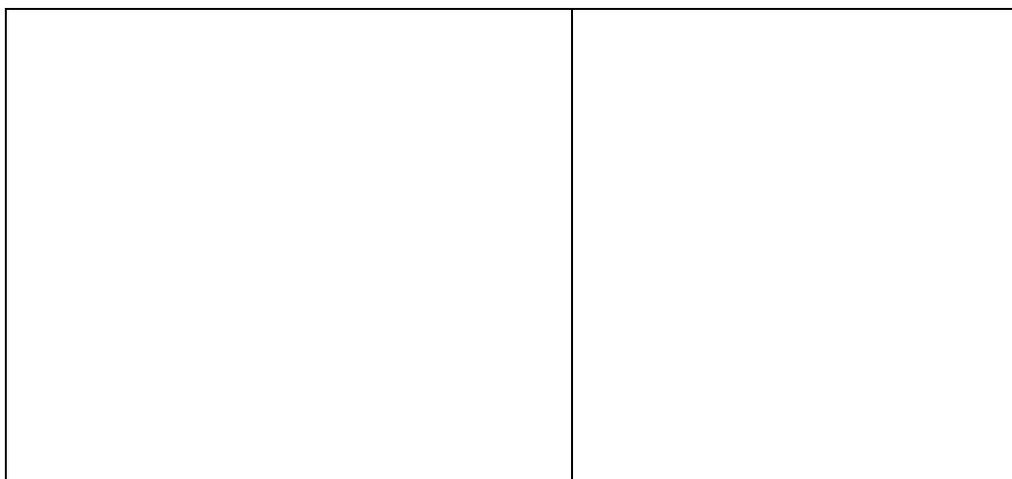


Stepping Stones at Century Gardens, 2007

The structure at the southwest corner of Century Gardens is viewed by some as a safety concern - the elevated portion from street level and the retreat/respice areas are seen as places where illicit activity can occur. The original impulse was to demolish the structure but referring back to the built features and new additions section within the Standards and Guidelines the decision has been made to alter to original structure to have more surveillance in the park. The Parks office will be opened to create a stronger relationship between the office, the park, and the street. Again the new additions section offered only minor guidance.



Door to Parks Office at Century Gardens, 2007



The Standards and Guidelines for the Conservation of Historic Places in Canada is a tool that assisted with the conservation of Reader Rock Garden, Central Memorial Park and Century Gardens. As a tool the Standards and Guidelines does have limitations and, while the intent of some of the sections seems clear and provides sound guidance, other sections are less developed and as a result offer less guidance.

Cultural landscapes are complex historic resources that often have numerous layer of historic material. While documents like the Standards and Guidelines and other best practices models can provide a framework in which to make conservation decisions, each landscape must be viewed as an original with unique circumstances and the conservation decisions must reflect that uniqueness.

### **Conclusions**

Cultural landscape conservation has recently become a focus within Calgary Parks. Reader Rock Garden, Central Memorial Park, and Century Gardens are three City of Calgary Parks that have been identified as cultural landscapes and are being managed in a way that retains the historic significance of the sites. Cultural landscape conservation is a process that includes reviewing significance of the site and understanding the contemporary uses of the site.

Conservation of historic resources can be viewed as a continuum with a preservation approach on one end and an adaptive reuse approach on the other. Defining a specific conservation approach is complex and includes making a series of related decisions. The Standards and Guidelines for the Conservation of Historic Places in Canada is a tool that can assist in making those decisions. However, there are limitations to the Standards and Guidelines. Since each cultural landscape is unique, the conservation approach used to retain the significance of the site should also be unique.

### **Sources Cited**

Buckle, Robert. 2006. Century Gardens Cultural Landscape Report. Heritage Collaborative Inc.

Calgary Herald, 1974. October 20.

Graham, Robert. 1989. Central Memorial Park and Reader Rock Garden: The British Landscape Tradition in Calgary.

McNally, Kathleen. 1990. *Calgary's Reader Rock Garden: An Historic Landscape Revisited. Landscape Architectural Review.*

Novak, Len; Simpson, Lorne. , 2004. Reader Rock Garden Rehabilitation Plan. Simpson Roberts Architecture - Interior Design Inc.

Parks Canada (1). 2003. *Standards and Guidelines for the Conservation of Historic Places in Canada.* Parks Canada.

Sanders, Harry. 2004. Central Memorial Park Historic Research Report.