

## Part of the Landscape

Lucy Treep

**ABSTRACT:** In 1969, Lincoln College (later University) opened a two-year postgraduate course in Landscape Architecture, the first of its kind in New Zealand. It was described as "for those who seek employment as professional landscape designers in private consulting practice or as members of planning teams in departments concerned with major engineering projects, highways, forestry, conservation and large-scale agricultural development." The college was seen to actively encourage women into the profession and from the first days of the course at Lincoln, women were part of the landscape. On March 3, 1969, Emily Mulligan was one of five founder students attending the first lecture of this new course. After Mulligan graduated in 1971, she was joined, in 1974, by Di Lucas, Diane Menzies and Esmée Sage, and not long after then, women started to regularly fill about half of each Landscape Architecture class.

In comparison, the first woman student at the Auckland College School of Architecture, Laura Cassels-Browne, enrolled in 1926, nine years after the establishment of the school. The first woman graduate of the School of Architecture was Merle Greenwood in 1933, 16 years after the school's establishment. Even in the 1960s and 70s women architecture students (who still made up small numbers) reported feeling uncertain of their welcome into the profession. Drawing on conversation with Emily Mulligan (now Williams), this paper will explore the nature of the landscape course at Lincoln, in what ways women students were encouraged in its early days, and the relationship of the course with the wider profession.

In this paper I look back at the end of the 1960s, and at two university institutions: the Department of Landscape Architecture, at Lincoln, and the School of Architecture at the University of Auckland. In 1969 one institution was brand new, and one was at a time of renewal; for both it was a time of exciting potential. As well, in 1969, both institutions had just one woman enrolled in first year studies. Discussions with these two women have helped shape this paper.

In March 1969, the first lectures of the first university course in landscape architecture in New Zealand were offered at Lincoln College, near Christchurch. Up till then, students of landscape architecture had travelled overseas

for their studies, for instance, Mary Lysaght, (1917-2005) who studied in London in 1948-49 before returning to practice as a landscape architect in Wellington, and, Harry Turbott, who is considered one of the earliest landscape designers in New Zealand (by those who don't know about Lysaght, and other early women practitioners), had completed his Masters in Landscape Architecture at Harvard, after graduating from the University of Auckland's School of Architecture. Much later, Frank Boffa was a recent graduate of the four-year Bachelor of Landscape Architecture at the University of Georgia when he returned to New Zealand to help teach the new course in Lincoln in 1969.

The School of Architecture at the University of Auckland was established in 1917, and in 1969 it was going through a time of significant change. Previous Head of School, professor Charles Light had retired in 1968. New Zealand architect and academic Maurice Smith had arrived on a sabbatical from Massachusetts Institute of Technology that same year to teach at the school, and test the waters for his possible appointment as the new Head of School. Despite strong student support, this didn't work out, and he returned to MIT after six months.<sup>1</sup> Various candidates for the position were proposed by staff and students, sometimes with vigour and in 1969

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<sup>1</sup> "Special Conditions Relating to 4th Chair in Architecture."

practicing architect, graduate of the school, and former member of the Group Architects movement, Allan Wild, took up a position as Head of School and Dean of the Faculty. Wild went on to lead the school for nearly 25 years.

Back in Lincoln, the head of the new landscape architecture department was Charlie Challenger. Appointed head of the Department of Horticulture at Lincoln in 1962, Challenger was quick to perceive the landscape architecture-shaped gap in New Zealand university courses. Following a sabbatical in Sweden in 1963, where he was "absolutely overwhelmed with this sight of what landscape could be," he persuaded Lincoln College to establish a landscape architecture course.<sup>2</sup> Challenger was the obvious choice for head of the future department. In order to bring the correct qualifications to the position, he took leave and enrolled with the University of Newcastle in Great Britain, graduating in landscape architecture with distinction in 1968. On his return to New Zealand, he contacted newly qualified landscape architect, Frank Boffa, offering him a role as teaching-assistant,

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<sup>2</sup> "Origins of the Diploma of Landscape Architecture-Charlie Challenger" np.

designed a two-year graduate diploma course, and within weeks, received the first students.

At Lincoln, the new course in landscape architecture attracted five students in its first year: Neil Aitken, Hedley Evans, Robin Gay, Tony Jackman and Emily Mulligan. Though Mulligan was the only woman student in the class, her enrolment that year ensured that women were part of the landscape from the beginning. Mulligan graduated with her cohort in 1971, and in 1974, she was joined by Di Lucas, Diane Menzies, and Esmae Sage, and it wasn't long before women filled about half of each landscape architecture class, and were actively encouraged into the profession.

Emily Mulligan, now Emily Williams, wasn't just the only woman in the year, she was by far the youngest. While the four male students had each decided to return to study after years in the work force, Williams was in her third year of a horticulture degree when she heard about the new course. In the landscape architecture classes she remembers that the other students sometimes joked with her about her relative youth, but there was no difference in her treatment, from either fellow students or staff, due to being a woman. When she graduated and moved into the

workforce, Williams experienced some sexual discrimination, typical of the times, but her time at the Department of Landscape Architecture was free of it.

The five students were a tight and mutually supportive group, but this sense of fellowship and equality was experienced beyond the small student cohort. Though Challenger was in his late 40s by 1969, Frank Boffa was still in his 20s, and very similar in age to most of the students. Williams' memory of the classes is that there was very little sense of hierarchy. Boffa agrees, remembering "we were all new to the game."<sup>3</sup> He says, "I almost felt we were all ... learning together. It was just that we [he and Challenger] happened to be the facilitators."<sup>4</sup>

Once a week the landscape students spent a day at Ilam School of Fine Arts, but the other days were spent together in a small L-shaped prefab, which held their drawing desks on one side and ordinary classroom desks on the other. The students would just move from one side of the room to the other depending on whether they were in a design studio class, or

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<sup>3</sup> Boffa. Pers Comm.

<sup>4</sup> "Teaching the new course – Frank Boffa" np.

in a lecture.<sup>5</sup> Certificate of Horticulture students shared the space. To both students and staff, the mix of design elements with science was exciting and fresh.<sup>6</sup>

Williams feels that the success of the diploma course was not only due to the strong mutual sense of engagement and focus by students and staff, but it was also partly due to a matter of timing, that it was a university course offered in the right place at the right time. Its situation, in Lincoln, with close connections to the natural landscape of the South island, was important at the time, and many of the students came from rural South Island backgrounds. The strong ecological concerns that Challenger brought back both from his visit to Sweden and from his time at the University of Newcastle were important to the students, who would mainly be later working on rural landscapes, and often on large-scale government projects. Williams says that when she was working for the Ministry of Works, a few years after graduation, she felt the engineers were glad to hand over landscape design to her, and that the new stream of landscape architecture graduates

had no trouble justifying their professional existence. As a professional, she was often given respect by the men in the office though female secretarial staff were not always so lucky.<sup>7</sup>

In Auckland, at the School of Architecture in 1969, there was a similar awareness of new opportunities, and the potential for the school to shift in tune with the zeitgeist. At the school, there had long been student and staff disquiet, and even protest about the curriculum. Professor Charles Light, the previous Head of School, had a deep commitment to classicism and the Beaux Arts system of education. This had been considered conservative even at the time of his appointment in 1947.<sup>8</sup> The Beaux Arts focus had been overhauled by the early 1960s, but the student body was restless and many felt that the school had become moribund, out of touch with modern teaching practices and with the profession.<sup>9</sup>

The arrival of Maurice Smith from MIT offered the students hope. During his short

time at the school in 1968, he taught studio, and, in keeping with his focus back at MIT, encouraged his students to build a structure out of demolition materials, which survived for 10 years, and was commonly called the Experimental Building. Lecturer David Mitchell described it as "a measure of the tolerance of the times, and of its widespread energy."<sup>10</sup> Bill McKay says that Smith, with his energy and international reputation "embodied the spirit of the times."<sup>11</sup> However, perhaps seen as too wild and provoking by the university hierarchy, Smith returned to the United States without being offered the position as Head of School.

When Allan Wild was made Head, in 1969, his appointment was met with cautious optimism. An editorial in student magazine *It* commented: "At last, possibly a leader for a stagnant insitution ... His record indicates dashes of progressiveness within both the school and the profession."<sup>12</sup> Unlike Charles Light, or Maurice Smith, Wild didn't have an academic background. There was speculation that this was a deliberate repositioning of the

<sup>5</sup> "Origins of the Diploma of Landscape Architecture-Charlie Challenger" np.

<sup>6</sup>Williams. Pers Comm.

<sup>7</sup> Williams. Pers Comm.

<sup>8</sup> See Penman, letter to the Auckland University College Registrar, September 13, 1948.

<sup>9</sup> See Gatley "After Knight comes Light (and Toy)" p 51.

<sup>10</sup> Mitchell. Pers Comm.

<sup>11</sup> McKay "The Counter-Culture and its Containment" p 78.

<sup>12</sup> Gillies "Editorial" p 2.

school. Professor Peter Bartlett recalls Wild was fully supported by the professional institute, the NZIA, amid hopes that he would bring sound management skills and strengthen links between the school and the profession.<sup>13</sup>

During Wild's tenure changes to the school were made at all levels. New buildings took the place of prefabs and temporary accommodation, and the curriculum was radically updated. The pace was slow, and students went on strike in 1972, suspending their studies and organising a series of workshops towards improving the programme of study, and more changes were made to the programme of study. Other shifts happened too. In 1972, 13 women started their first year of study at the school – the largest cohort of women in one year in the school's history. By 1976, one third of the first professional year students were women. This trajectory marked a permanent and long term shift in the School gender balance.<sup>14</sup>

In 1969, when Rosamund (Ros) Hancock, later Empson, started her first year at the school,

<sup>13</sup> Bartlett quoted, McKay "The Counter-Culture and its Containment" p 79.

<sup>14</sup> Matthewson "Take it to the Limit" np.

her classes were held in a series of old army prefabs and a few other buildings scattered around the site on Symonds Street and down to the street below in Grafton Gully. Some of the buildings had been built by students, and the environment suited the architect-as-builder ethos that was part of the background hum. Empson was the only woman in her class of 68 students.<sup>15</sup> Another woman, Caroline Hanan, started at the school that year, but she went straight into second year as she had completed her NZCD. Empson says she was aware of the few other women at the school, but didn't have a chance to meet them in her first year. The atmosphere was blokey, and the ability to drink copious amounts of beer was celebrated at school parties. Like Emily Mulligan down at Lincoln, Empson wasn't aware of direct discrimination from her fellow, male, students. She particularly remembers that the student at the drawing board next to hers, Tim Heath, was kind and helpful.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Records of class numbers in the School of Architecture are spotty at best. Ros Empson remembers there being 68 students in her first-year class. She is probably correct, but the University of Auckland Council Minutes note that enrolments in the first professional year were limited to 64 due to teaching space concerns. See "Limitations of Numbers" p 195.

<sup>16</sup> Empson. Pers Comm.

Unfortunately some of the staff were not so kind or helpful. Professor Wild was known to repeat a piece of research that apparently "proved" that women had difficulty with visualizing in 3D.<sup>17</sup> Woman students were still being informed of this at the end of the 1970s. In studio, Empson remembers one staff member would come up behind her when she was at work on her drawing board, sigh deeply and walk away. She found first year challenging, and by the end of the year knew she had probably failed the year. At the end-of-year party, another staff member approached her and asked "why don't you go nursing dear?"<sup>18</sup> Feeling uncertain about her skills, Empson had already enrolled in nursing school, but was prompted by the patronising comment to not give up architecture after all.

The following year, Empson repeated her first year studio, working for an architectural firm in the mornings and doing studio class in the afternoons. In the repeat year she was joined by new first-years, Marilyn Lusk, Stephanie Chung, and Sue Clark. An earlier student, Christine Rush-Munro also had to repeat a

<sup>17</sup> Civil "The Pioneer Class" np.

<sup>18</sup> Empson. Pers Comm.

year, so Empson ended up in the same year with her also. Empson recalls enjoying the school more in her following years, and working very hard, "which resulted in her emerging with a BArch (Hons) in 1973, and as the top student in her year."<sup>19</sup>

Both Emily Williams and Ros Empson registered early, and both worked for a time in the Ministry of Works, where they found support in their professional careers. Both have now moved on to other fields of endeavour, but you never lose your trained eye, and their studies continue to inform their lives. The two university institutions continue to thrive, and both now have a gender balance in staff and students which reflects the world at large.

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<sup>19</sup> Cox "Awful Trouble" p 119.

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