

The Nature Strip: An Environmental and Social Resource for Local Communities

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Abstract: The humble nature strip is a characteristic of many, if not, most Australian streetscapes. Nature strips are owned by the local council and generally divide private land from the public vehicular carriageway. Varying in design and appearance, nature strips reflect the character of the local area and its residents, providing spaces for social interaction and gardens of ornamental and edible plants. Nature strips form an important part of residential streetscapes, yet there is limited understanding of their function, nor an appreciation of the important role that they can play in an aesthetic, environmental or social sense. This paper presents research on the role and potential of local nature strips. Focusing on the Sydney metropolitan region, we start by examining the nature strip – its functionality, aesthetics and potential as a public environmental and community resource. Against this background, the varied quality and character of nature strips is investigated. Views of residents regarding the maintenance and management of nature strips are explored. Together with observational field surveys of different local streetscapes and local policy analysis, different options for the maintenance and management of nature strips are presented. The emphasis here is on how the potential of this undervalued and often overlooked public resource can be built upon, thereby enhancing contemporary Australian cities – their appearance, environmental sustainability and health of their communities.

Introduction

Nature strips are an iconic feature of the streetscape of all Australian cities and smaller urban areas. Despite their dominance of the local residential environment, there is scant understanding about their function and character. Neither are there well developed policies about the role or management of the nature strip in the urban streetscape. Nature strips differ widely – from clearly defined grassed areas, planted with mature street trees, to undefined barriers between public and private spaces. They accommodate infrastructure for utilities such as telegraph poles for electrical cabling and street furniture including seats, rubbish bins and lighting. Nature strips can be lush areas where attractive trees, shrubs and gardens provide those who use the street with amenity and shade. Alternatively, they can be barren wastelands with no vegetation, littered with rubbish, poorly managed and unattractive to users. They can reflect the character of a local area and the residents who live there, providing opportunities for social interaction, as well as play spaces for children. Legally the property of local governments, nature strips are closely associated with residential properties and their inhabitants, who are often required by their local councils to maintain them. There are few studies about nature strips – possibly a reflection of their humble quality in the local residential landscape.

This paper reports the findings of our research which explores the current function and purpose of nature strips.¹ Issues of local authority maintenance and management are also investigated. Policy options for maximising the potential of the nature strip as an environmental, aesthetic and social resource for local residential areas are suggested.

Having set the broad context for the research, we now turn to an examination of the nature strip in Australian cities – their different functions and how they are typically managed. We then present our research on nature strips which focuses on a selection of Sydney suburbs representing inner, middle and outer locations. The study findings are grouped under two main headings:

- Physical Qualities of Nature Strips; and
- Maintenance and Management of Nature Strips.

¹ This study was undertaken in 2005 as a final year thesis project for the Bachelor of Town Planning Degree at UNSW by then student, now town planner, Dharini Meenachi-Sunderam, supervised by Planning Program academic, Susan Thompson.

The paper concludes with a discussion of the future potential of the nature strip in the Australian residential landscape.

Nature Strips in Australian Cities: Function, aesthetics and management

Nature strips form an important part of residential streetscapes. They accommodate street trees that provide shade and amenity. They are the “threshold space that divides and mediates private and public space” (Hogan 2003:55). They provide a buffer between the private residential allotment and the public roadway, as well as a “...physical and visual separator between road and pedestrian” (Southworth and Ben-Joseph, 1995:2). This allows both the pedestrian and the vehicle their own space with a significant buffer for safety between the two. Further, the nature strip is council owned land that accommodates public amenities - the telegraph poles for the overhead electricity wires, the manholes for the underground cabling and access points for water and sewer easements. Nature strips are publicly accessible spaces where a telephone booth or post box may be found, as well as the verge for a public crossing. The nature strip is multi-functional and its role within the residential neighbourhood needs to be considered as an integral part of local decision making and planning.

Aesthetics of the Nature Strip

In Australia the nature strip is an iconic part of the suburban residential landscape. The style and character of nature strips can both mirror the progression of land development of residential areas and reflect the planning ideals of that time. In some neighbourhoods little thought is given to the nature strip, whereas in planned localities – both historically and more recently – the nature strip features as an important detail of the streetscape design. The act of combining the front yard of a residential allotment into the nature strip is a common practice in modern subdivisions in Australian cities (East, 2003). This is indicative of how planning ideals have come to centre around the automobile, particularly within residential streets where pedestrian needs have been subjugated to those of the car. This blurring of the public and private space has adverse implications for the functionality of the nature strip as a place of social interaction as well as its role as a readily negotiable pathway to encourage healthy activities such as walking in local areas.

The aesthetics of a streetscape influences the character of an area. The Design Council and Royal Town Planning Institute (1979) acknowledged that streets form an essential part of living space for people and that they need to be functional as well as aesthetically pleasing. Poor quality housing and street design can, to a certain extent, be redeemed by landscaping to create an aesthetically pleasing streetscape (East, 2003). Street planting, as an adjunct to the nature strip, is an important component of the residential precinct. Together with the road itself, associated services, parking provisions, street furniture and pedestrian and cycle paths, the nature strip performs an important function in enhancing both the aesthetics and functionality of a local area.

A Social and Cultural Space

The physical qualities of the nature strip contribute to the social and cultural conditions of a community (Lillebye, 2001:35). The nature strip can reflect the residents of an area, being “...a key element of the moral order of suburbia [as]... residents colonise the land to make it an expression of their own gardens and lifestyles, and a measure of their tastes and social status” (Hogan, 2003:55). In this way the nature strip provides opportunities for community involvement and social interaction in that part of the public sphere between private space (Gehl, 1987). This is where spontaneous interaction among community members occurs (Hayden, 1997), building informal networks within the neighbourhood (Engwicht, 1999). Community interaction, and indeed peaceful co-existence, may be realised through effective management strategies to ensure the functionality, structure and appeal of the nature strip as part of the streetscape.

Management of the Nature Strip

The responsibility of the maintenance of nature strips has long been a contentious issue for suburban residents. Councils and residents frequently disagree over who is responsible for appropriate maintenance and planning of nature strips (Wilken and Olsen, 2002). While the land is council owned, in many cases the onus for maintenance is placed on residents. However, if streetscapes are unattractive, then residents do not tend to feel proud of, or have a sense of ownership over this space. Accordingly there can be a reluctance to play an ongoing role in maintenance (East 2003). This is particularly

problematic in new subdivisions if street trees are damaged during construction and residents are left to re-plant them (East, 2003, p. 43).

Much of the problem associated with maintenance is associated with uncertainties around definitions of the nature strip as public land. Although legally designated as public property, "...in everyday terms [the nature strip] is the responsibility of the residents to maintain..." (Hogan, 2003, p. 55). Misunderstandings about the difference between street plantings and nature strips also add to the confusion about roles and responsibilities. In most cases the vegetation identified as part of the streetscape refers to street plantings – not the nature strip (Salt 2001; Lillebye 2001; Southworth and Ben-Joseph, 1995). This may be because in other parts of the world, where much of the relevant literature is found, the nature strip is not viewed as an integral part of the streetscape – rather a verge, green stripe or even a parkway (Salt, 2001).

In Australia, both street plantings and the nature strip need to be considered and managed as a whole if local amenity is to be enhanced. If mature trees, for example, are haphazardly pruned to accommodate telegraph poles and electrical cabling, what may have been an attractive streetscape, with a well maintained nature strip, becomes an eyesore. In turn this is likely to be detrimental to the residential character and good neighbourly relations. There is a need for an interdisciplinary approach to the design and planning of Australian streets so that all elements are properly considered. This will provide the opportunity to develop standards that are both adaptive and responsive to the diverse nature of carriageways and those who use them (Southworth and Ben-Joseph, 1995). Flexibility, care, and an awareness of people and their daily functioning within the neighbourhood are critical in local planning if the potential of the nature strip is to be realised.

Understanding the Nature Strip

We now turn to discuss the specific findings of our research.

Research Methodology

The methodology involved three distinct phases. First, a detailed observational field survey of a sample of nature strips across the Sydney metropolitan area. Inner, middle and outer localities were selected and within each of these, a north-west, western and south-western sector identified to ensure that the survey sample provided a cross section of typical nature strips. A specific suburb was then picked from each sector. Table One and Map One below indicate the suburbs surveyed and their respective geographic locations in Sydney.

Within each of the nine suburbs surveyed, the following types of streets were selected for further analysis:

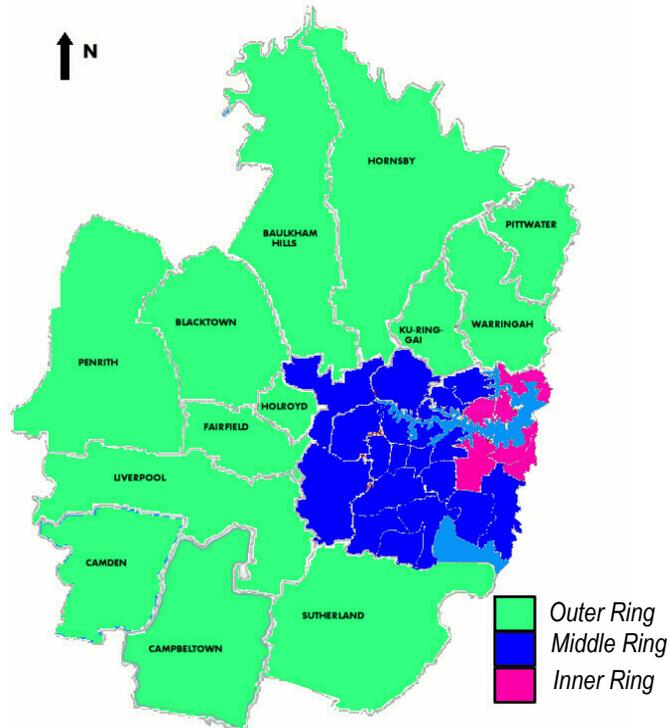
- One street consisting primarily of detached dwellings; and
- One street consisting primarily of medium-high density.

Observations regarding the general characteristics of the suburb, its housing type, nature strip design and maintenance, landscaping and overall streetscape were recorded using an 'Observational Field Notes Sheet' specifically designed for the study. This is attached as an Appendix. The field observations were meticulously recorded and later consolidated into a detailed text and visual inventory of nature strips across the study area (for specific details see Meenachi-Sunderam, 2005).

Table One
Surveyed suburbs

Ring	Sectors		
	North-West	West	South-West
Inner	Mosman <i>Mosman</i>	Glebe <i>City of Sydney</i>	Double Bay <i>Woollahra</i>
Middle	West Ryde <i>Ryde</i>	Auburn <i>Auburn</i>	Belmore <i>Canterbury</i>
Outer	Mona Vale <i>Pittwater</i>	Doonside <i>Blacktown</i>	Caringbah <i>Sutherland</i>

Map One
Location of surveyed areas within the Sydney Metropolitan Area



Source: After, DLG 2004

The second phase of the methodology involved a questionnaire to gain insights of residents' current practices and views towards nature strip maintenance and management. A short questionnaire was distributed randomly to people living within the study areas (as defined above). Questions covered the following issues:

- Area of residence and dwelling type
- Nature strip type
- Nature strip maintenance habits
- Views on the influence of the nature strip to an area
- Views on nature strip maintenance and management

A total of 120 questionnaires were distributed. One hundred were completed and used for analysis (representing a response rate of just over 83 per cent). The majority of respondents resided in middle ring suburbs (48 per cent) with 13 per cent and 39 per cent respectively, in inner and outer ring areas. Just over sixty per cent lived in detached houses with others accommodated in medium density housing (residential flats – approximately 24 per cent; villas and townhouses – 10 per cent). The full spectrum of nature strips were represented – nature strips with both grass and a footpath were in the majority (54 per cent of respondents), then grass only (28 per cent) and footpath only (11 per cent).²

While the results of the survey were used to create a dataset in SPSS, the survey sample of 100 is not representative across the Sydney metropolitan area – a region of some four million people. Nevertheless,

² Percentages do not always add up to 100 due to some non responses.

the survey, particularly the final open-ended question requesting general comments on nature strips, yielded informative and qualitative responses. Accordingly, the results are particularly useful in understanding resident attitudes to nature strips, as well as their concerns about management and maintenance.

The final research phase was an analysis of local government documents on nature strip management and maintenance. We located few such policies but managed to find some sort of statement from an inner, middle and outer region council in the study area. In total we examined four policies which provided an understanding of the attitude and policy response of these Sydney local councils to nature strips in their areas.

In the following section we discuss the results of the three research phases, synthesising data collection and analysis under the following headings:

- Physical Qualities of Nature Strips; and
- Maintenance and Management of Nature Strips.

Physical Qualities of Nature Strips

Across the study region, 86 per cent of questionnaire respondents agreed that the physical qualities of nature strips are very important if they are to contribute positively to local streetscape and neighbourhood amenity. As one middle ring resident stated, "I think nature strips with a certain character and planting improves the amenity of a neighbourhood". There was consensus that the appearance of the nature strip should retain a degree of uniformity to complement and enhance the character of the area. "The symmetry and space that nature strips create in a streetscape is a positive addition to a street and it adds value to the area. They break up the continuous concrete massing between long roads and multiple houses, also providing car park shade and a security buffer zone" (middle ring respondent). Each of the council policies examined recognised that nature strips play an important role in streetscape and residential amenity. The field observations revealed that most nature strips were being used for traditional grass and street tree planting purposes. Examples of innovative or unusual uses were not found, nor did respondents or council policies suggest social or cultural benefits arising from the use of their nature strip, despite this being a site for neighbours to meet and interact spontaneously.

The bulk of data on the physical qualities of the nature strips was taken from the field survey. A suburb profile (much of the data from the census) provided a context for the detailed observations of the two selected streets (low and medium residential density) from each of the nine localities. The different elements recorded on each observational field note sheet, together with the suburb's overview, were synthesised for the summaries provided below.

Nature strips in inner city suburbs

The inner ring of Sydney is characterised by older, well established suburbs intermixed with medium to high density residential developments amidst commercial precincts. The older parts of the inner city are commonly heritage conservation areas. Socio-economic status is generally mid to high (ABS, 2005). In the main, the inner ring areas tend to forgo the grass portion of the nature strip. This is related to the dense nature of housing stock and the early haphazard subdivision patterns which did not provide for grassed nature strips. A positive feature of nature strips in the inner ring is the mature street trees that provide residents with improved amenity and generous shade. The suburb of Mosman deviated from the other two inner city examples in that there are grassed nature strips in many of the streets. This is mainly linked to lower housing densities.

Nature strips in middle suburban areas

The middle ring of Sydney was established to accommodate housing for a rapidly growing population, as well as in response to the construction of rail network (Ashton, 1993). The older and well established parts of the middle ring are characterised by detached dwellings. Newer development has tended to be medium density housing around transport nodes, with landowners capitalising on this trend resulting in a rise in residential subdivisions and the construction of dual occupancies. These middle ring suburbs have a high proportion of family households with generally lower median household incomes (ABS, 2005). West Ryde is slightly more affluent than Auburn and Belmore. Nature strips are generous, providing both grass and footpaths. The lack of mature street trees and uniformity in landscaping along each street was particularly prevalent.

Street trees tend to lack in this metropolitan ring, resulting in less shade and a more 'open' streetscape. The quality of maintenance was observed to be mediocre.

Nature strips in outer suburban areas

The outer ring consists of a highly contrasting mix of older established low density suburbs, primarily single storey detached houses on large allotments, to newly developed greenfields urban release areas. The latter are characterised by planned neighbourhoods and large multi-storey dwellings built to allotment boundaries. The three suburbs surveyed vary considerably in socio-economic status. Mona Vale and Caringbah are more affluent than Doonside, which has a relatively low median household income (ABS, 2005). The socio-economic status of the suburbs is reflected in housing quality with Caringbah and Mona Vale having larger two storey dwellings, compared to the more modest, older and single storey residences in Doonside.

Nature strips tend to be generously sized, complimenting the large allotments and wide carriageways. The majority is grassed only, and where a concrete path is provided, this is generally on one side of the road. Trees and associated landscaping tend to be limited, resulting in open and poorly shaded streetscapes.

Maintenance and Management of Nature Strips

Our research revealed that maintenance of nature strips concerns residents and councils alike. However, opinion is divided as to who should be responsible for this and how it should be managed. Some respondents felt that councils should maintain nature strips as they receive rate revenue; others felt that maintenance could be undertaken by adjoining residents to avoid further costs to council. As one said, "to keep cost of council fees down, each site/property owner should keep the nature strip clean and cut" (middle ring resident). Nevertheless, 60 per cent of the questionnaire respondents believed that nature strips should be maintained by the local council. As one middle ring respondent stated, "Blanket council maintenance would ensure consistent upkeep, remove uncertainty as to whose responsibility it is to maintain, and can be funded by rates". Confusion over just whose task this is can be seen in many of the comments from residents. For example, one said "I believe that if the public are willing to maintain these 'nature strips' they may, however in the end it is council land, council responsibility and we as rate payers should expect that these areas should be maintained by local government" (outer ring resident). And another, "Council should be more involved with neighbourhood community groups and contribute to keeping suburbs more green and clean" (outer ring resident).

And yet there is little uncertainty about maintenance responsibility in the council policies analysed. This is seen as a task for the resident. The policy rationale is that there are insufficient resources to undertake adequate maintenance. As one document states, "Council owns and controls these areas [nature strips] but does not have the physical or financial resources to maintain them" (Mosman Municipal Council, 2003, p. 1). There are exceptions and maintenance is undertaken by councils where:

- Residents are elderly or disabled and request council to maintain the strip;
- Nature strips are part of a sensitive environmental area – e.g. remnant bushland; and
- Nature strips are difficult to access or are located in non residential areas.

In terms of what actually happens in local streets, the survey revealed that just under 50 per cent of residents and their households undertake the maintenance. Only 19 per cent identified the local council as doing this.

And while maintenance practices indicated a private commitment – albeit reluctantly taken on at times – management was definitely considered to be the province of local government. This is related to the acknowledgment that the land is public and council owned.

"Nature strips are part of public land and should be included in council's streetscape design. Any changes to existing nature strips should be made through an application to council, with adjoining residents being notified" (inner ring resident).

Fifty eight per cent of respondents considered that residents should not be able to grow plants as they choose. There was a sentiment that landscaping needs to be appropriate to the locality and uniformity of nature strips benefits the amenity of the streetscape. "If the owner wants to improve his/her nature strip he/she should be able to with some sort of application/arrangement with council, but council should ensure

some sort of maintenance and cleanliness” (middle ring resident). Alternatively, if residents could use the nature strip as they pleased, this would enhance the chances of regular maintenance.

“Residents should be allowed to grow plants in the nature strips as this not only gives the area a distinct sense of identity they will be more likely to regularly maintain it as it becomes an extension of their property-ownership” (middle ring resident).

Some respondents recognised that nature strips might well take on more importance in the future as residential densities increase and there is less local private open space available.

“With increasing house density there should be renewed tree planting in nature strips” (outer ring resident).

“Expand nature strip areas to encourage a 'common area' for communities to come together (middle ring resident).

Most respondents felt that there should be more trees on nature strips.

“I would like to see more trees and more greenery on the sided of the roads” (outer ring resident).

Future Potential of the Nature Strip

Our research has shown that the nature strip is an important and valued part of the suburban streetscape. Much of the care and ongoing maintenance is undertaken by residents who value their nature strip and the resulting aesthetic benefits. This study has also revealed confusion and disagreement over who should be responsible for maintaining and managing the nature strip. There is a tendency for council policies to undervalue the nature strip, relegating its care to local residents and only stepping in when there is a problem or particular need. There is little proactive management of this local resource which we believe will increase in importance as cities become more densely populated and open space diminishes. Not only will the nature strip provide a much needed landscaped respite to an otherwise hard surfaced area, it will be a place for productive planting and a congregation point for local residents.

In this section of the paper we draw the study findings together, making recommendations for nature strips in different suburban localities, as well as suggesting how its future potential as an environmental and social resource might be realised.

The observational field survey found that nature strips vary across the Sydney metropolitan region, as well as within each local government area and suburb. Local policy needs to take such variation into account – considering the character and history of a particular vicinity. Nevertheless, some general issues are evident which can be considered by policy makers across all Australian cities.

1. The value of mature street trees in providing shading and amenity is undisputed. While often found in the older inner city, they are not so plentiful in newer and less affluent suburbs. Local policy needs to encourage street trees as well as being mindful of problems that can occur with their roots, particularly the tendency to crack and uproot concrete footpaths. This has a public liability connection requiring ongoing attention to ensure that exposed roots and uneven footpath surfaces are promptly diagnosed and fixed.
2. In inner areas where many inhabitants do not have private gardens, the desire for residents to plant out their nature strip needs to be recognised. Clear guidelines are essential so that individual planting conforms to a reasonable overall standard and design. This is also critical for the maintenance of good neighbourly relations. In some instances, council-community partnerships can be established so that residents can plant out the nature strip in concert with local policy guidelines. Incentives, such as reduced rates, for undertaking regular maintenance can also be considered, especially if there is little initial motivation to be involved. Such a system could act as a catalyst for residential pride in the local area, with flow on effects of enhanced local amenity and reduced demand on council resources.

3. Inner city councils should be mindful that apartment dwellers may not have garden tools to maintain grassed or landscaped nature strips. Accordingly, different management and maintenance strategies may have to be negotiated with the local community.
4. The quality of nature strips is undeniably important. This is particularly so in areas of lower socio economic status where, as noted in the observational survey, nature strips were found to be poorly maintained and littered with rubbish. Both management and maintenance strategies need to be in place. Community-council partnerships, as discussed above, may assist here, but the local circumstances need to be taken into account to ensure that the best solution is found.
5. Footpaths encourage walking – a healthy pursuit for both human well-being and local sustainability – as well as providing a place for social interaction between neighbours. Children can also play on the footpath provided that it is safe from traffic. Considering the provision, design and maintenance of the footpath as an integral aspect of the nature strip needs to be incorporated at the policy level.
6. Nature strips can also be used to promote local environmental sustainability. This can be done in different ways such as promoting the planting of native species and drought resistant plants, as well as ensuring that street trees are well looked after so that they continue to provide adequate shade. Heavily vegetated areas also assist in cooling, reduce run off in urban areas and combat greenhouse gases and pollution. Broken Hill City Council, for example, has developed a demonstration nature strip to showcase a variety of vegetative treatments, together with water saving technologies and techniques, to assist community members in developing environmentally appropriate gardens (Broken Hill City Council, 2006).
7. While the Australian nature strip is highly valued for its environmental and aesthetic qualities, we believe that it has considerable potential as a social and cultural resource. This needs to be both recognised by policy and encouraged through local council and community initiatives. As cities densify the space afforded by the nature strip will become more important in providing a useable open space area for different activities – both temporary and permanent. A communal garden patch, for example, would bring neighbours together in a healthy pursuit – growing fresh food for consumption and undertaking physical activity. This might have a cultural benefit as different foods and ways of cooking are compared by neighbours from different cultural backgrounds. In turn such a project could foster the initiation of a street festival or party where the garden harvest is celebrated and eaten, enlivening the neighbourhood both socially and culturally.

Conclusion

This paper has presented an overview of nature strips across the Sydney metropolitan region. It has established and implemented a systematic method for observing nature strips in the field which can be used by other researchers and practitioners wanting to determine the character and environmental status of nature strips in an area. The research has found that nature strips play a vital role in local streetscapes and can influence the character of a locality. Residents value the nature strip and many householders play a significant role in ongoing maintenance. However, the management of nature strips is failing local communities. Clear policies that provide guidance and support for residents, as well as a management plan, are needed. The nature strip is an overlooked resource which will be ever more important in the dense Australian city of the very near future.

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Appendix - Observational Field Notes Sheet

Area	
LGA:	
Suburb:	
Street:	
<i>Housing</i>	
Dwelling Type	
Housing Style	
General Condition	
Other uses in street?	
<i>Nature Strip</i>	
Layout	
Landscaping	
Footpath	
General Condition Of Nature Strip	
Comments	
<i>Overall Streetscape</i>	
Comments	