

# The Heritage Values of the Cowra Japanese Garden

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## Abstract

Japanese artisans produced and refined a set of pre-conceived images of Japanese landscapes that includes a particular cultural vision and spatial typology that is unique to this culture.<sup>1</sup>

This thesis will examine the Cowra Japanese Garden, NSW, during 1972–2014 through an Australian heritage framework, applying a set of values to determine significance.

In order to view the ‘Japanese Garden fabric’ through an Australian/Western lens, cultural significance is crucial to bridge the cultural East/West gap and interpret the Cowra Japanese Garden with a greater depth of recognition, meaning and appreciation.

The garden is situated high above the town of Cowra on Bellevue Hill. This is in propinquity to the only Japanese War Cemetery outside of Japan, and geographically located next to the old Prisoner of War (POW) Camp (NSW Heritage Listed), offering a landscape sprinkled with remnants of wartime state-controlled relics.

The objective to conserve places of heritage significance, identifying key values in a culturally rich landscape with contrasting social inputs and fabric. Exploring how WWII captured Japanese soldiers dealt with stigma, shame and regaining honour through death, contrasts the social conflicts that underlie historical markers. The Japanese garden itself, constructed as a commemorative garden resulting from the ‘Cowra Breakout’ (1944) event, provides a persistent impact on Cowra, and Australia.

Reciprocal social gestures of good will, peace, and reconciliation symbolise the Garden fabric. The dichotomy of treatment of inmates from Cowra POW camp and those at Featherston, New Zealand, to the trauma Australian POW survivors suffered under the Japanese military at Naoetsu POW camp highlights issues of equality and respect.

The thesis will document and interpret the cultural heritage significance of the Cowra Japanese Garden in order to disclose how this landscape was ‘reproduced’. It will do this from interviewing the local initiator, visionary and Garden Chairman, Don Kibbler, who saw the

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<sup>1</sup> In reference to Katsushika Hokusai’s (1760–1849) internationally successful set of ‘thirty-six views’ woodblock prints of Mount Fuji (Hiroshige) completed from 1826 to 1833, refer to James King, *Beyond the Great Wave: The Japanese Landscape Print 1727–1960* (2010), Peter Lang International Academic Publishers, NY.

concept of a Japanese Garden to reality, and studying the designer, celebrated Japanese Landscape Architect, Ken Nakajima (1914–2000). By pursuing the transformation of a landscape tradition, from bonsai to stroll garden, and in turn revealing how a culture is shaped, and how an Australian town's identity has grown because of the intercultural exchange with Japan.

Compared to other stroll gardens in Australia, the Cowra Japanese Garden represents an outstanding, authentic Japanese stroll garden, inclusive of an emerging Australian East/West cultural perspective.

## **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this thesis to several deserving people who assisted me through the process.

Don Kibbler – Cowra Japanese Garden

Justin Smith – Cowra Japanese Garden

Lawrance Ryan – Cowra Shire Council, Chairperson - Cowra POW Breakout 70th Anniversary Committee

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